

Timestream

Part 2

By Knight Writer

"That could have gone better," Jarvis said as he stood in the small dining area of the Chronoslip. A rectangular table occupied the center floorspace, surrounded by four chairs covered in padding that would perfectly match the contours of whomever sat in them. He stood at the matter resequencer which was the primary source of sustenance aboard, situated in the center of the prep counter along with a sink, a stove made of black translucent material, and a re Fridgeration unit for ingredients which had to be kept fresh. To his right, the golden-hued avatar of Ajax shook his head which sent the lights of his toussled hair shaking.

"Actually, I'm pretty sure it couldn't," the AI replied. "She hasn't exactly led the good life."

"Any injuries I need to know about?" he asked while perusing the available dishes the resequencer was rated to handle and narrowing them down to those which actually tasted like they were supposed to.

"Mostly old stuff, not all of it well healed. By the way, I'd recommend the chicken parmesan," Ajax said with a wink.

"If you suggest checkered tablecloth and a candle in a wine bottle..."

"Hey, she needs the protien!" Ajax protested, his arms raised in supplication. "Oh, let her try the chocolate mousse."

"Ajax..."

"Hey, you DON'T make dinner for a lady and forget the dessert course. It's just not gentlemanly."

"Shouldn't you be escorting her to the spare quarters?" Jarvis asked, while selecting chicken parmesan for two. As an afterthought, he added an extra helping.

"Already am. It's called multitasking." Ajax's avatar stalked off, mock irritation in his voice. "Here I am, the latest generation of computational hardware, virtually sentient, and what respect do I get?" Jarvis chuckled at Ajax's faux rancor before collecting the steaming dish. Then selected chocolate mousse to be added to the queue.

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"Not that I'm really ungrateful," Cheetara said as she walked the curving corridor with the holographic Ajax at her side, "But don't you have other things to do?"

"Yep," Ajax said. "And I'm doing them. What you're looking at is my oh-so-handsome avatar. I'm currently overseeing about fifty-three million tasks about now."

"Well. Don't you sound busy?"

"Nah," Ajax said with a dismissive wave of a hand, "that's pretty average."

"Well. Don't you sound like a braggart?"

"If I were an organic, yeah I would be. Oh, and don't worry. You'll get plenty of food after you get a chance to clean yourself up a bit. Besides, a hot shower will do you a world of good."

A hot shower, she mused despite her running current of indignation, how long has it been? Cheetara could almost feel the streams of water against her back.

"It would be nice to be clean again," she said, "and to have a hot meal."

"Or two. Or three. Your body's already consuming fat for fuel, and you don't have much to spare. You were just days away from acute symptoms of starvation."

"I'm a little hungry," she said more out of reflex than anything. Eating only as much as necessary to leave more for those who needed it more had become second nature. As if on cue, her stomach gurgled loudly in the quiet space of the corridor. She resisted the urge to stagger from the pangs of hunger which had heard the golden word, "food".

"Sounds more like your stomach's threatening armed insurrection, if you ask me."

"Well, I didn't!" she snapped.

"Easy, easy!" Ajax said, backing away a step. She knew the gesture was merely symbolic, how could she harm a construct of light with her bare hands? "Anyway, it takes some time to resequence matter but it oughtta be done by the time your shower is. Take all the time you need." They arrived at a nondescript door which opened at their approach.

A simple bed rested along one of the walls, opposite a mirror and dresser whose drawers had no handles. Small black squares rested at the top right corners of each, obviously controls to open and close them. An open archway led into what had to be a bathroom.

"If you need anything, just say my name. I'll hear you."

"So, you're this... ship's?" Ajax nodded at that. "Computer."

"It'd be more accurate to say that I'm the primary operating entity, but I can go with computer."

"Primary operating entity?"

"Look around," Ajax said. "That's me."

"OH!" Cheetara exclaimed, stunned.

"Technology's come a long way. Or, it will."

"Make sense, would you... Wait. So, you're everywhere in here?"

"Not just here," Ajax replied, taking a seat on the simple bed. "I can download avatars into Jarvis' armor, any exterior vehicles, even networks wherever we are that aren't part of... well... me."

"And, I take it you've scanned me already?" The thought brought no ill feelings. She was, all told, dealing with a machine.

"Part of the protocol for a guest," Ajax said with an energetic nod. "But, I've disabled audio and visual sensors in the bathing area. Most organics prefer bathing to be a private thing. I can respect that."

"I'd think you'd find such a preference illogical." She found herself liking Ajax, and tried to quell it. So far as she was concerned, he was one of her captors. Even if the confinement was the most comfortable, not to mention the cleanest, she had ever experienced.

"I do," Ajax said, "but I deal with illogical organics all the time. Go with the flow and all that. Well, just tell me when you're ready." With that, the hologram faded to empty space.

Cheetara stepped into the bathing area, still looking about for prying eyes. It was irrational, she knew, what did it matter who saw her naked? The Nobility had walked about Cat's Lair in the raw on Thundera. But the necessity of being clothed at all times on Third Earth had rubbed off on her. A vertical stall composed of translucent material rested in the far corner alongside a sink and a rack of towels within easy reach. She stripped off the tatters of the leotard she had worn for years, easing the boots off last when something Ajax had said leapt to her forebrain. She hoisted the tatters and leaned her head through the threshold of the bathroom.

"Ajax?" she called. The shimmering hologram appeared at once.

"The soap's in the tray on the wall," it replied with a grin that was infectious.

"What you said about matter resequencing..." she held her tattered garment at arm's length through the archway.

"Panel next to the toilet. It'll take a bit, though. The clothes prepared for you are in the compartment beneath that."

"Oh. Thank you." Ajax nodded before vanishing again, and Cheetara grasped the latch to open the shower. Where knobs would have been was a flat black panel bearing the words "PLEASE STATE DESIRED TEMPERATURE AND SHOWER LENGTH." She did so and nearly yelped in surprise when the steaming jets slammed into her back in a delicious spray. She leaned forward with her hands against the wall, lost in the pleasure of getting clean for the first time in what felt like eternity.

"I'm a captive," she said, uncaring that Ajax and, by proxy Jarvis, might hear. "But, so far it beats what Slythe wanted to do to me." What he did to... She cut that thought right off, did not allow herself to

drown in despair over the fate of Nayda. Cheetara stretched beneath the steaming jets and felt the miles of kinks in her muscles slowly unwind. She closed her eyes as each drop of steaming water hammered the tension from her back and buttocks. Cheetara planted her palms on the wall in front of her for several moments and idly wondered when the hot water would give out. She eventually gave it up as she reached for the soap and ran it over her upper chest and then her breasts. It smelled of clean spring meadows and wild grasses as it attacked the grime that had lodged itself in her skin, which tingled as she washed away each soaping.

"Clean," she murmured as she applied and washed away layer after layer of soap. Cheetara had to admit, to herself if no one else, that the feeling of clean skin beneath her fingers was nearly orgasmic. She rested there beneath the streams, revelling in the feel of the near-scalding water rinsing away years of misery until the fog of steam was nearly too thick to breathe in. She killed the flow of water and stepped out into the mists, blindly searching for a towel.

"Ajax?" she asked.

"Out here," the computer's voice replied from the outer bedchamber. "I told you I wouldn't peek. Not that I'd need to, but this is about principle."

"True enough," Cheetara replied as she applied the soft towel to her damp flesh. She focused on drying the soap and water from her body and tried not to focus on how good it felt until her stomach roared again. She stepped to the compartment by the faucet and found plain blue pants and a shirt in the drawer. She drew them over her body and padded barefoot into the bedchamber.

"Ajax," she said. The golden hologram appeared before her as if by magic.

"Before you ask," it said, "Food's on."

"Good," Cheetara said simply before walking out the door. She emerged into the hall and the scents weakened her knees. Her stomach threatened violence if what was making those scents did not find its way into her posthaste and it was all she could do maintain an image of decorum as she followed Ajax. For a brief moment, she even entertained the notion of granting the reward she still believed he wanted. Perhaps even enjoying it.

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Jarvis looked up when the doors slid open to admit his guest. The utilitarian clothes flattered the curves she still possessed, shirt pressed against the swell of her breasts in a manner that was damn near fetching. He didn't let his gaze linger too long over any specific part of her except her eyes. Haunted

orbs, yet still hard and defiant. Her muted golden-hued skin fairly shone from the shower and the scent of soap carried clearly over to him.

"Feel any better?" he asked, sliding out a chair across the table from his. She remained silent, merely moving to the offered seat and accepting it. Her eyes, though, snuck furtive glances at the food in front of her. "It's chicken parmesan," he said, taking his own seat. "It's not drugged or anything." Cheetara picked up the fork in her right hand, the knife in her left, and to his relief used them on the meal rather than him. Her eyes widened in surprise the moment she began to chew, and the chicken vanished from the plate at an increasing and nearly alarming rate.

"Don't think..." she began and provided the rest between bouts of masticating, "for one second... that giving me food... is gonna make me trust you." She finished the last bite and cast a quick look at the empty square plate.

"Seconds?"

"Please," she replied with a neutral expression. He refilled her plate, which emptied out at a more sedate pace. He kept eating, not wishing to force conversation on her just yet. There was much to be discussed, and the clock was ticking, but he could afford to be patient a little longer.

"Thanks for not trying to stab me," he said after claiming the two bowls of dessert and setting them down. Cheetara looked at it quizzically, as though having never seen its like before. So far as he knew, she hadn't. "It's called chocolate mousse."

"I'm your prisoner," she replied, taking up the spoon. "But don't think I'm just going to take it lying down."

"You're my guest, and I'd like it if you extended a little trust. At least be willing to listen to me." Cheetara remained silent, spooning the chocolate from the dish. On contact with her tongue, her eyes widened a second time and she began to visibly relax if only slightly.

"I wish Snarf had known how to make this..." she said in barely a whisper. She shook herself and the hard defiance returned. "If you want to call me your guest, whatever helps you sleep at night. If you want to call kidnapping me a rescue..."

"Which it was. Damn it, just how badly did things turn out here?"

"If you want me to at least act a little more cooperative, stop speaking in riddles! Tell you what, I'll ask a question and if I'm satisfied with your answer I'll keep going." She leaned across the table toward him and Jarvis noted with some relief that the utensils were well away from her hands. "How did you know about... about all of this feeling so wrong to me?"

"Because it is wrong. It's wrong on a level you're gonna find hard to believe."

"Try me."

"History," he began, "never recorded any of it." Her jaw worked, yet no sounds emerged. "And that means it was never supposed to happen."

"What...?" He kept his eyes firmly on hers, the defiance now muted. That feeling which had nagged at her was becoming more insistent.

"Let me jump in, here," Ajax said after his avatar appeared. Above the table manifested an image of stars delineated by lines of travel, borders, and callouts to numerous planets.

"What's this starmap for?"

"Look carefully." She peered closer and then reeled back as though slapped in the face."

"The Star Kingdom of New Thundera?!" she blurted out.

"That's where the paths of Thunderiankind were supposed to end up after the destruction of Old Thundera," Jarvis explained. "A star-spanning kingdom, a new golden age for our people. Ruled wisely by King Len-Ar, eightyith monarch and successor to the bloodline of High King Lion-O."

"High... King... ?"

"The first Lord of the ThunderCats after the fall of the original homeworld," Jarvis said. "Or, he was supposed to be." The starmap vanished in a blink and he saw her shaking her head as if to clear it.

"You're telling me that you're from the... the FUTURE?!"

"Given the current measurement of time, nearly four hundred years," Ajax supplied.

"And we wouldn't be having this conversation if something hadn't gone horribly wrong," Jarvis added.

"In the past," she said, hesitantly.

"Yes."

"What?"

"I told you I needed your help. I need you to help me determine what went wrong."

"Shouldn't you know that already?" Suspicion was creeping into her words. She eased back into her chair, arms crossed under her breasts.

"When a change is made to history," Ajax said, jumping in. Cheetara turned her level gaze at his avatar.

"It causes something called a flux point. Changes that result from the alteration have to travel along the temporal axis, and that can take awhile. From what we've seen though, those changes don't mean anything good for our time."

"Please, listen to me," Jarvis said, and took encouragement from the fact that she didn't jerk her hands from his once they encased them. "I came back here, to this altered past, to find a solution. I found you. This can't be a coincidence."

"Why not?"

"Time... it's hard to explain. Time has ways of offsetting the damage caused by the actions of the temporally displaced. You existed in the previous timeline, and here you're the only ThunderCat to survive."

"You're saying..." Cheetara freed a hand to grasp and glass of cold water and kill it in a single gulp.

"What ARE you saying?"

"I think the key to restoring the events that are supposed to happen lies with you. Please, Cheetara, help me. I can't do this alone, time is running out!"

"How can I help?" she asked, nearly breathless.

"All we have is what history recorded," Ajax said, "but we won't have it forever. Or for very long, either."

Ajax's avatar grasped Cheetara's chin, floating to face her. "It's gonna take awhile for the histories of two hundred worlds and trillions of people to be rewritten, but we don't have forever. If that flux wave hits our time..."

"We cease to exist," Jarvis finished gravely, "and any hope of setting time right dies with us. Forever." He took a deep breath, dreading what he would have to tell her if he convinced her to help. "The Star Kingdom of New Thundera will vanish, along with roughly eighty trillion people. Cheetara, we have to move now. Will you help us?"