

IC HAPTER XV: CHAOS ROUND ONE

"So what's the plan?"

"Whaddya mean what's the plan. Isn't it obvious? We have to find Vincent."

"And then what?"

"And then we stop him."

"How?"

"How? Why, we ask him politely to come back with us to the lab so we can turn him back into a human, that's how" Reno said impatiently.

Yuffie glared at him.

"Don't you think it would be a good idea to have a plan before we run into him?" Yuffie asked, undeterred.

"Yes I do. Got any suggestions? I'm kind of curious as to exactly how I ended up being the plan guy all of a sudden. He's your friend, why don't you think of something?"

"We should have a net," Ichiero said helpfully.

"A net," Reno snorted. "Do you know what kind of claws Chaos has? You saw what he did to Lucrecia. He'd shred a net in two seconds flat."

"Well, maybe something steel reinforced then," Yuffie tried.

"And where are we supposed to find something like that?" Reno retorted. "They don't sell things like in the item store in Nibelheim."

"You're not being helpful!" Yuffie snapped.

"Well neither are you with your stupid ideas," Reno shot back.

"You insult Miss. Yuffie again?" Ichiero protested.

Reno made a great show of pondering this for a moment.

"Why yes, I believe I did," he finally said.

Ichiero glowered at him, his hand reaching for his sword.

Reno fingered his nightstick.

"What, is it time to play fry the samurai?"

"We don't have time for this," Rude stated, the voice of reason.

"You're right, we don't," Reno agreed. "Yuffie, do you have anything useful to tell us about Vincent?"

"Useful, like what?"

"I don't know. Except for the fact that he's a vampire with bad fashion sense, I don't really know much about him."

"And what makes you think I do? And he's not a vampire!"

"He's a member of Avalanche, you're a member of Avalanche..."

"So what? Just because we're both members of Avalanche doesn't mean we're bosom buddies. Frankly, the guy always freaked me out a little. Why don't you ask Elena?"

"Uh, I hate to point out the obvious, but Elena stayed back at the mansion with Red and Lai Li."

"Yeah, and I still don't understand that. Why'd she stay behind? It's her boyfriend we're after."

"Leave her alone," Reno retorted. "She's messed up enough as it is. We're better off without her. In the condition she was in do you really think she would be of any help to us anyway?"

Yuffie had to admit Reno was probably right, not that she was about to admit that.

"She could have answered your questions."

"Maybe," Reno replied.

They were high on a mountain trail, not far from the old Nibelheim mako reactor. They had been following Vincent's trail most of the day. It wasn't difficult, he hadn't exactly covered his tracks. The Chaos beast he had turned into didn't seem all that concerned about being tracked.

Rude was in the lead. He stooped down to examine some tracks.

"I don't think we're too far behind him," he proclaimed. "We may catch up any time now."

"Any time now, great," Reno replied with little enthusiasm. They had left with the simple edict from Red to try to bring Vincent back, or at least to stop him from killing anyone else. Of course, Red hadn't given them any hints on just how they were supposed to accomplish that.

"Do you think he knows we're following him?" Ichiero asked.

"How should I know?" Reno replied irritably. "I don't know how he thinks. I don't even know *if* he thinks. Can he think when he's doing that monster thing?"

"I told you I don't know," Yuffie replied.

"Big help you are," Reno muttered.

"So you've said," Yuffie snapped. "I never said I had all the answers. I'm not the brains of the organization."

"That's apparent," Reno cut in.

"Oh shut up! All I can tell you is I've seen him fight when he transformed and he's ridiculously strong."

"Isn't that reassuring," Reno muttered.

Yuffie was silent for a moment.

"He *must* think," she said eventually. "When he's transformed in battle, he's always fought the enemy, never with us. He knows who's on who's side, so he must think *some*."

"Yeah, but that was before Lucrecia performed her little magic trick on him," Reno pointed out. "Maybe he can't tell anymore. He did kill Lucrecia, after all."

Yuffie fell silent. She didn't have an answer for that.

Reno didn't say anything either, tired of talking in circles. He wasn't happy about this little mission, he wasn't happy at all. He'd seen Vincent fight when transformed too, and he wasn't anxious to confront the guy. Yuffie wasn't kidding when she said he was strong. They weren't allowed to hurt him. Well, maybe they could hurt him a *little*, but they couldn't do too much damage. They couldn't *kill* him. So what could they do? Beat the guy senseless? That was pretty much the only battle option they had, but Reno didn't like it at all. One, they couldn't be sure they could beat him senseless without killing him, and two, while they were handling Vincent with kids gloves, Vincent would be under no such constraint. He had a feeling a lot of *them* would be beat senseless, or worse, before Vincent succumbed.

The only other option he could think of would be to reason with the guy. He had no idea if that would work, if they could get through to Vincent at all. Maybe they should have brought Elena along just for that reason. If anyone could get through to him she was the most likely.

Then again, she might just freak out completely if they confronted him. She wasn't the most emotionally stable person he had ever met, and this had all been pretty tough on her.

At any rate, he could see no viable options. As far as he was concerned, they had been given an impossible task. Hell, if it wasn't for Elena, he wouldn't even be here. This wasn't his problem. Vincent was a member of Avalanche, they were his friends, it should be up to them to save him. Elena sure knew how to pick 'em, didn't she?

As long as Vincent stayed in the mountains they were okay. No one lived up here. There wasn't any danger of him killing anyone. Still, there was no way to predict where he'd go next. Rocket town was just over the mountains, and he seemed to be heading in that direction. If Vincent reached the town, they'd have to do something to stop him.

And that was the problem. Vincent seemed headed for Rocket Town, but was that his destination, or would he turn off somewhere along the way? Did he have some purpose in mind, or was he just moving at random? These were the things they needed to know. If they knew his capabilities, if they understood him, they could predict where he might go. If he was really headed for Rocket Town they might be able to get there ahead of him but if they went there and he wasn't headed there, they might lose him completely.

They were making their way slowly down the mountain now. Looking back Reno could see the top of the Nibelheim reactor sticking out over the peaks. He glanced over at each of his companions. Ichiero had a sword, but what good would that be against Vincent? They couldn't slice him up. Elena wouldn't be too happy about that. Besides, Reno wasn't even sure if that joker could use the thing. Yuffie had her shuriken, and he knew she was at least competent with that, but still, that could only be used to wound Vincent and that wasn't their objective. By the same token Rude's gun was out, but his friend still had his fists. Against an ordinary foe that would be a very useful weapon if you wanted to beat someone senseless. In this case however, he didn't think even Rude's fists would do much damage to the monster they were chasing.

That left only himself. Of all of them, he was the only one who had a weapon that *might* be effective. He fingered the end of his nightstick. The electric shock it produced could be used to stun as well as kill, and the pyramid force field might be better than any net they could find. Still, both were designed for use against a normal human. He didn't know how much effect they might have against the Chaos beast.

The only way to find out was to catch up with Vincent. Right now his mind was just going in circles. There was no sense in worrying about it. They'd find out soon enough, one way or the other.

Rude was a little ahead of them now, walking slowly, looking at the ground. The land around them was filled with tumbled rocks and small stands of thin-trunked pine trees. Suddenly he stopped, looking up.

"What is it?" Reno questioned.

Even before he had finished the question, however, Reno saw what had stopped him. Perched on a boulder off to their left, no more than ten meters away, the Chaos beast crouched, staring at them.

They stopped in their tracks. Reno slowly readied his nightstick, trying not to draw attention to himself. He'd seen Vincent in action before as the Chaos beast, he knew the creature could cover the distance between them in seconds. Again he wondered what was going on in Vincent's head. Would he recognize the threat the nightstick might be to him?

Reno saw Yuffie take a slow step back beside him. Rude, who was closest to the beast, held his ground, but Reno could see from the serious look on his face that he wasn't too happy being that close to their potential opponent. Only Ichiero, who had never faced the Chaos beast, seemed unconcerned. Well, it was his tough luck if he did something stupid, Reno thought. Who knows, maybe he could draw attention to himself and take the pressure off them. Reno wouldn't consider it too much of a loss if the Chaos beast turned Ichiero into hamburger.

They braced themselves for an onslaught, but the Chaos beast did not move, just remained where it was, looking at them. Reno stared, trying to discern the creature's expression, trying to decide if there was some spark of Vincent still in there.

"Yuffie, talk to him," Reno said finally.

"Wha? Me? Why me?" Yuffie questioned, obviously not at all thrilled with the idea. "Why don't you do it?"

"Vincent, even when he was himself, wasn't all that happy to talk to me," Reno replied. "You're both members of Avalanche. He knows you better than any of us."

"Lucky me," Yuffie muttered. "Why didn't we bring Elena along again?"

"Just do it!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, all right!"

She looked at the Chaos beast.

"Hey Vincent, you in there?"

"Yuffie."

"What?"

"You in there?" Reno repeated. "Can't you come up with anything better than that?"

"Well, what would you like me to say?"

"I don't know. Just talk like you normally would to him."

"Hey, I told you, I never talked to him all that much to begin with."

"And get closer."

"Closer? No way!"

"C'mon Yuffie, quite playing around. This is serious!" Reno told her.

"You don't think I know that? I've seen what those claws can do! I'm not playing around!"

"Get closer," Reno repeated. "Don't worry, we'll cover you."

"Gee thanks. Why does that not reassure me?"

Reluctantly she took a tiny step forward.

"No, Miss. Yuffie, it's too dangerous," Ichiero interjected.

"Oh shut up," Reno snapped.

Yuffie glared at the both of them for a moment, then settled her gaze on the samurai.

"Stay out of this."

She looked up at Vincent again. He hadn't moved. She took a few more slow steps then stopped when she saw the Chaos beast stare at her.

"Vincent! Vincent, it's me, Yuffie. You remember me don't you, your buddy from Avalanche? You know, the irresistibly cute little ninja girl?"

"Let's not get carried away," she heard Reno mutter.

She didn't bother to glare at him, she was too afraid to take her eyes off Vincent.

"We're here to help you," she continued. "We're your friends, you know that right? We're not going to hurt you and we'd like very very much if you don't hurt us either. We need you to come back to the lab where you'll be safe. Red's there and he's trying to work on a cure. Do you hear me Vincent? Come back with us and we may be able to cure you."

Yuffie stopped, waiting to see if her words would evoke some kind of reaction. Nothing happened, however. Vincent still didn't move.

"C'mon Vincent," Yuffie cajoled. "You want to go back don't you? And be with all your friends? Elena's there. You want to see Elena, don't you?"

The Chaos beast glared at her. He let out a low growl.

Yuffie took a step back and turned toward Reno.

"I don't think..."

The Chaos beast suddenly launched itself at her.

"Yuffie!" Ichiero shouted.

His shout was unneeded. She had caught the movement out of the corner of her eye. She turned back and saw the Chaos beast would be on her in an instant. She knew that all her ninja speed wouldn't avail here here. The creature was just too big and too fast. There was no way she could avoid the claws that swept through the air. In the split second she had before they raked through her, she raised her hands to cover her head.

"Eep!"

It was all she had time for before she was suddenly surrounded by a golden pyramid of light.

Vincent's claws slashed out, but instead of slashing across Yuffie's neck they raked across the pyramid. There was a flash of light, and just as quickly as it appeared the pyramid vanished

Reno cursed and instantly readjusted his aim. He had been shooting for Vincent!

Given the unexpected reprieve Yuffie's wits suddenly returned to her. She ducked and leaped out of the way as Vincent's claws lashed out a second time.

A moment later light shot out again from Reno's nightstick, and this time it was true to his mark, and the pyramid formed around the Chaos beast. Finding itself suddenly encased, it roared and lashed out at the pyramid force field around it.

Yuffie quickly scuttled out of the way, running back to the others and hiding behind Reno.

"Is that going to hold it?" she asked.

Reno stood there. The Chaos beast was slashing its claws in a furious frenzy, but the pyramid seemed to be remaining intact.

"Looks that way," he said slowly, lowering his nightstick.

Yuffie tentatively came out from behind Reno. She glared at him suddenly.

"What did you put the pyramid around me for?" she questioned.

"I was aiming for him," Reno replied, nodding toward Vincent. "You just got in the way."

"Nice shot you are."

"Hey, don't be so ungrateful. If I hadn't done that, we'd be picking pieces of you up off the ground."

"You would not," Yuffie replied. "I could've dodged him easy."

"Yeah right."

"So what now?" Rude questioned.

"Now we wait," Reno replied.

"Wait, wait for what?" Yuffie asked. "Those pyramids don't last forever, right? What happens when it wears off?"

"They last long enough for him to run out of air," Reno replied. "We just wait for that. When he falls unconscious, we take him out and bring him back to the lab."

"Back to the lab? And just how are we supposed to get him there?" Yuffie protested.

"We'll have to carry him, I guess," Reno replied.

"Carry that big lug?"

"You got a better idea?"

"This was a well thought out plan, now wasn't it?"

"Hey, this whole thing wasn't my idea," Reno reminded her.

"Well, what if he wakes up while we're carrying him?" Yuffie wanted to know. "He's not going to stay unconscious forever and it will take us hours to get him back."

"That's what we brought some rope for," Reno told her.

"You think rope is going to hold him?"

Yuffie might be a pest but he had to admit she was making some good points. This whole thing seemed half assed to Reno right from the beginning. They didn't know they'd be able to capture Vincent, and what were they supposed to do with him now that they had? The Chaos beast was nearly as large as all four of them put together. It would be a major pain to carry Vincent all the way to the lab, if they could do it at all. On top of that, he didn't know if rope would hold the Chaos beast and even if it did, once Vincent woke up, would they be able to carry him while he was struggling against them? They could always put him in a pyramid again until he fell unconscious a second time, then keep doing that until they got him back, but that might take days.

Yuffie was obviously beginning to feel her oats again, for she walked closer to Vincent, looking at him curiously. The Chaos beast roared and slashed its claws in her direction, causing her to pause in her tracks, but the claws only raked harmlessly against the pyramid, reassuring her.

"Nyah nyah!" she chortled.

Reno gave her a look.

"Yuffie, don't provoke..."

The Chaos beast let out a hideous roar and threw itself at the pyramid, and suddenly, with a flash of light, the pyramid was gone.

"Shit!" Reno shouted.

Yuffie, her face white as a sheet, tore ass in the other direction. Reno raised his nightstick again, but when he pressed the activation button nothing happened. Creating a pyramid took a lot of power, and the nightstick only had a limited amount. It would have to recharge before he could use it again.

The Chaos beast let out another roar, then turned toward Rude, who was now the closest person to him. Rude raised his fists in defiance. They all knew he wouldn't stand a chance, but, knowing the speed of the Chaos beast, running wasn't really an option either.

Reno frantically readjusted the setting on his nightstick. The electrical bolts it fired took a lot less power than the pyramid.

The Chaos beast crouched to spring, and was suddenly hit with the full force of Reno's electrical attack.

The beast shuddered for a moment as the bolt hit him, but seemed to shrug it off almost immediately and turned to face Reno, who stared at Vincent looking for any sign that the bolt had done anything more than draw the Chaos's beasts attention to him.

It didn't look like it had.

The Chaos beast leaped, lunging toward Reno, who quickly dodged to the side. He never found out if his dodge would have saved him for suddenly Yuffie's shuriken flew through the air, striking the beast on the side, making it roar again and turn in this new direction.

With the beast's back toward him, Reno cut loose with another blast from his nightstick.

Being attacked from all directions, the Chaos beast seemed to decide suddenly that discretion was the better part of valor, for suddenly its wings snapped open and it launched itself into the air.

"Stop him!" Yuffie shouted.

Reno aimed another blast from his nightstick at the beast. When it struck Vincent shuddered again and momentarily lost altitude, but a moment later his wings beat fiercely and he continued his ascent.

Reno turned to look at Yuffie.

"Got any ideas on how we might do that?"

Yuffie didn't reply. She stood there for a moment, weighing her shuriken in her hand, staring up at Vincent who was rapidly fading into the distance now. Finally she lowered her weapon and shook her head.

"Great. What do we do now?"

Reno watched Vincent until he faded from view.

"This whole thing was badly planned from the beginning," he announced. "How can we follow something that can fly when we're on the ground? We need an airplane."

"And just where are we supposed to get one?" Yuffie questioned.

"Hey, you're the one who has a friend who's a pilot," Reno reminded her.

"Oh, and this is all up to me again?" Yuffie said disgustedly. "The Slipstream is being repaired, remember?"

"Yes, but doesn't Cid have another plane?"

"The Tiny Bronco?"

"That would be the one."

"C'mon, you guys are Turks. Don't you have access to a helicopter or something?" Yuffie questioned.

"It could be arranged but it would take time and gil," Reno replied.

Yuffie just looked at him for a moment.

"Sheesh," she said finally and pulled out her PHS.

Reno waited impatiently while she dialed.

"Cid? Yeah, Cid, it's me Yuffie. How's it going with the Slipstream? Oh? Well, I'm sure you'll have it together soon enough. Hey, we have a little problem here that maybe you can help us out with. We're trying to track down Vincent and we had a little run in with him and he flew away. Kinda hard to track the guy while he's flying and we're not you know? Yeah, how'd you guess? We want to know if you or Shera can get the Tiny Bronco over here."

Yuffie was silent for a bit, then she looked at Reno.

"There's a little problem," she proclaimed.

"A little problem. Why doesn't that surprise me," Reno retorted. "There's always a little problem, isn't there? What is it this time?"

"Cid said that Tifa thought Cloud and Aeris had gone off to Round Island, so she and Reeve took off in a helicopter to go there, but the chopper doesn't have enough fuel to get back, so they're waiting for Shera to get there so she can go pick them up."

"Great, so we have to wait while Shera goes off to get Tifa and Reeve because they were stupid enough to fly off without enough fuel?"

"Uh, yeah, well, that's pretty much it."

"And did you tell him that Vincent seems to be headed straight for Rocket Town and God knows what kind of havoc he could wreak if he gets there?" Reno asked. "I think that might be a bit more important than chasing after Tifa and Reeve."

Yuffie repeated what Reno had said for Cid's benefit. Then listened for a bit more.

"Cid says he should be able to fix the Slipstream once Shera gets there with the parts. He said that perhaps he send Shera back with the Tiny Bronco and go get Tifa and Reeve himself."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Reno agreed.

"Okay, that sounds like a plan," Yuffie said into the PHS. "All right. Good luck. See ya later."

She hung up and looked around.

"So what do we do now?" she questioned.

Reno looked around for a moment. Spotting a convenient sized rock not far away he walked over to it and plopped himself down on it. He looked up in the sky but there was no sign of Vincent. He didn't think the beast would come back.

"Now we wait."

~*~

"My name is Temerico."

The man in front of her was younger than the others she had met. He looked to be in his early twenties. His black hair was close cropped on his head and his gray eyes looked at her from behind boyish features.

"Aeris."

"Yes, I know," Temerico replied. "You've caused quite a stir here. Frankly I was a bit curious to meet you."

Aeris didn't reply to that. She had been here a day already and this man was the first one who had entered her prison since she had arrived.

Seeing that she wasn't going to respond the man continued.

"You must be bored sitting in this room. Is there anything you'd like to do?"

"Yes, go home," she replied.

The man smiled ruefully.

"I'm sorry about that, but of course I can't let you do that."

"Why not?"

Temerico just looked at her for a moment.

"You know why not," he replied. "Believe me, I'm not all that happy with what we're doing here either."

"So then why don't you do something about it?"

"I tried," Temerico replied. "We debated this move for a long time. I was against it, I told them this was the wrong way to go about things, it but in the end I was outvoted."

"And so that's it?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were outvoted, so you just go along with them?"

"It is what the majority wants."

"So what? That doesn't make it right."

Temerico was silent for quite some time.

"Yes, I go along with them," he said finally. "That's the way a democratic society works. You debate, you vote, and the decision is made. Once that happens you go along with it, even if lost the vote, even if you feel your way would be better. Otherwise there would be chaos."

Aeris looked around for a moment.

"Maybe you could use a little chaos around here," she mused.

Temerico looked thoughtful.

"You are a very unusual girl," he said eventually.

Again Aeris made no reply.

"You still do not understand though," Temerico continued. "There are few Cetra left. We can't afford to fight amongst ourselves. We can't afford strife. It would destroy us. I realize the necessity to speak out for what I believe, but I also must go along with the wishes of the others for the sake of our race. Sometimes it is necessary to suborn your own beliefs for those of the majority in order to survive."

"Very noble of you, but totally wrong," Aeris replied, obviously not very impressed.

Temerico tried to hide his frustration, but she could see it on his face.

"You are a very hard person to argue with," he commented.

Aeris didn't respond to that.

"What would you like me to do?" Temerico questioned. "Yonsin has been voted in as our leader. This is the way he wants to do it and the majority of the others support him. Even if I think they're wrong, what right do I have to go against the majority? Wouldn't that be putting my opinion above everyone else's? What right do I have to do that?"

"The fact that they are wrong gives you the right," Aeris replied.

"But who am I to decide what's right and wrong?" Temerico countered. "People disagree all the time, even about something as basic as what's right and wrong. There are plenty of cultures that have rights or traditions that you or I may consider to be wrong, yet to the people involved it's not wrong at all, it's the way they do things. Who are we to judge whether they are right or not?"

"We're not talking about different cultures here," Aeris pointed out. "I'm a Cetra too."

"Half Cetra," Temerico reminded her. "And you've grown up among humans. Of course you're going to be sympathetic to them, but humans do not encompass the entire world. You have no right to judge us by human standards."

"I'm not judging you by human standards, I'm judging you by basic moral values that are universal," Aeris retorted.

"How can you say that? Surely you must have come into contact on your travels with other cultures that had different rules from you, some which you might have found distasteful. Are you trying to tell me that they're all wrong? Are you only going to look at things from your own narrow human-centric view?"

"Nice try," Aeris replied. "But you can't blur the lines between right and wrong that easily. You can't hide behind your culture to justify this. I'm not looking at this from a human viewpoint, I'm looking at it from a universally common view of right and wrong."

"How can you say that? How can you be so sure of what's right and wrong?" Temerico persisted.

"It's not all that complicated," Aeris replied impatiently. "Right and wrong isn't that hard to figure out. If the voice in your head says it's wrong, then it probably is. And no, I'm not talking about the little voice that's telling you to kill your neighbors, I'm talking about the other voice, the one that tells you to *be nice*."

Temerico just stared at her. She could see he was having a hard time with that one.

"That's a rather simplistic view, don't you think?"

"No I don't," she replied. "Who said things have to be complicated? All you have to do is listen to your conscience, and yes, everyone has one, no matter how much they might try to deny it."

She looked hard at Temerico.

"Tell me, what does your conscience tell you now about what you're doing now?"

Temerico paused for a long time before replying.

"You are very clever," he said finally, "but I don't think there is anything I can do."

Aeris said nothing for a moment. The impression she got of Temerico was that he was basically an honest person. She had a feeling everything he had told her about himself was true. She could see he had doubts about what the others were doing, doubts she hadn't seen in Yonsin or Grem. This man had the potential to be a friend. She didn't want to take the chance of alienating him by arguing with him too much.

"There is something you can do," she said eventually. "I'm kind of hungry. Can you take me someplace to get some food?"

Temerico smiled.

"Of course," he replied.

They left the room, and Temerico led her down the street to another building. Inside was a large cafeteria. They sat down to eat. Temerico asked her about herself, and seeing no harm in it, she told him a little bit. The atmosphere seemed relaxed, and to tell the truth, she didn't think Temerico was much of a threat to her, but she couldn't help but notice the figure of Grem walking by the doorway to the cafeteria every few minutes. It was obvious the man was keeping a close eye on her.

She wondered if he had sent Temerico to her on purpose, to try to gain her trust by letting her talk to someone who was sympathetic. It was an obvious ploy, but one that could backfire, since their views were similar it was quite possible that she might convince Temerico to see things her way instead of the other way around. She was sure this must have occurred to Grem as well, but maybe he was willing to take the chance.

When they were done eating Aeris expressed an interest in taking a walk. It was boring cooped up in that little room all day, and it honestly felt better to get out, but she also wanted to take a better look around than the short tour she had been given by Yonsin on her first day here. She figured the better she knew the place the better her chances of escape would be.

Temerico readily agreed. He showed her a number of buildings that Yonsin hadn't, but nothing that really caught her attention. As they walked around she noticed a number of streets that were blocked off by rubble. She asked Temerico about these.

"This is an old city," Temerico replied. "The oldest city the Cetra built, and also the greatest. At one time it held millions of Cetra. There are only a handful of us left now. Most of the city had to be abandoned, and eventually the uninhabited portions were overrun by vermin and other creatures. We've had to block off those areas to protect ourselves from them."

Aeris nodding, wondering if escaping into the uninhabited portion of the city was a viable way of escape. She couldn't see how at the moment. She wouldn't know where she was going, or how to get out, and she was unarmed. If there were dangerous creatures in there it might be a desperate gamble to go that route. On the other hand, she might just be desperate enough some time in the future.

"What's that building over there?" she asked, pointing to one of the largest buildings in the city she had seen, and one that no one had mentioned.

"Ah that, that's where the mako reactor is," Temerico replied.

"Mako reactor?"

"Yes, the one that's used to power the Amplifier."

Aeris just looked at him for a moment. It didn't seem like it would be fruitful to start in with him about the dangers of Mako reactors. He'd probably just give her the same line he had told her about everything else the Cetra were doing here. So instead she just asked; "can I see it?"

"Well, we're really not supposed to go in there.." Temerico said hesitantly.

Aeris just smiled sweetly.

"C'mon," she prodded.

"Ah what the hell," Temerico gave in.

They walked over to the building. Aeris half expected Grem to appear and tell them they couldn't enter. She had caught glimpses of him behind them as they had walked around, but he didn't make an appearance. Did he think she was harmless enough to let her go inside? Well, she had to admit he was right.

At the moment anyway.

They entered the building. The reactor was huge. Larger than anything she had ever seen. It dwarfed the ones in Midgar.

"Does it need to be so big?" she questioned, looking up at it towering above them.

"I guess," Temerico replied. "I'm not an expert on such things. I know the Amplifier needs a lot of power to work. After all, it's transmitting it's message all over the planet."

Aeris just shrugged. True, it was only one reactor and Shinra had had eight in Midgar alone. Even with it's size, it still couldn't be as bad as all those, but it was bad enough. Just one more reason for her to stop them somehow.

They walked down a narrow flight of steps and into another room. Machinery filled the room here. Aeris was no expert but it looked like some kind of refining center. At the far end of the room a small conveyor belt exited the machinery. On it she could see rows of different colored small orbs.

"This is where the materia is processed," Temerico explained. "This mako reactor runs cleaner than anything that the humans possessed. As a result the materia it produces is much higher grade. These materia orbs are quite powerful."

As he spoke they walked over by the conveyor. The orbs were right in front of her now. They didn't look any different from any other materia orbs she had seen, but then again, you really couldn't tell until you used them. A long tray of orbs was on a table beside the conveyor belt.

"How many of these does the reactor produce?" Aeris asked.

"Not as many as you might think," Temerico replied. "Like I said, this reactor is highly refined, and we use only the best mako ore we can find. As a result there is little by product."

"There seems to be quite a few materia orbs here," Aeris pointed out.

"Well, this is pretty much all that's been produced since we've been running it," Temerico replied. "It isn't stored anywhere else."

Aeris nodded slowly, looking at the table, which they now stood beside. She turned and looked across the room.

"And what does that do?" she asked.

Temerico turned to look where she was pointing.

"That's a vat filled with chemicals that used to purify the materia once it's created," Temerico replied. "That's another thing that makes this materia so powerful. The humans didn't..."

He stopped as Aeris suddenly clutched her head. She tried to take a step, but then staggered. With a cry she fell forward, knocking over the tray of materia orbs and sending both them and her crashing to the floor.

"What's wrong!" Temerico cried out in surprise.

He stooped down beside her. She had fallen face down. For a moment she made no move whatsoever. He reached out and grabbed hold of her, turning her toward him. As he did so her eyes fluttered open and she moaned.

"What is it? What happened?" he questioned.

For a moment she didn't reply, just lay there. Then she reached up and held her forehead.

"I... I don't know," she said slowly. "I suddenly... I suddenly got dizzy."

She looked around for a moment, blinking. Temerico looked at her closely.

"Are you all right?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"Yes, yes, I... think so."

She let him help her to her feet.

"That was strange," she said. "I felt just like I did when Grem knocked me out when he captured me."

"Oh?" Temerico responded. "Maybe you're feeling some after affects. Grem can be a little rough at times. Not many of us like him."

Aeris nodded without replying, but she'd keep that in mind for future use.

"I think I better go back to my room."

"Is everything okay in here? I heard a crash."

They looked up to see a woman with long red hair standing in the doorway. She looked to be about the same age as Temerico.

"We're fine Dalliana," Temerico said. "Aeris just had a little fainting spell. Can you clean up all these materia while I take her back to her room?"

"Sure," Dalliana replied.

Dalliana bent down to pick up the materia while Temerico led Aeris out of the room. Aeris followed silently, wanting to get back to her room as fast as possible, and hoping that no one would notice the small green orb she had snatched from the tray as she fell.