

## CHAPTER XIX: VIOLATION

Cloud sat sullenly on the back of the great beast as it plodded northward. He was not confined in any way. A Chadara sat behind him, but it didn't seem particularly wary. He thought he could easily toss it off. But what then? He didn't know how to control the beast they were riding. He couldn't possibly get away from the others in the caravan. He had no weapon and the other Chadara could quickly come to this one's aid. He couldn't fight all of them.

He looked around at the barren plain surrounding them. The city had long since faded away behind them. Nothing broke the open plain for miles around except for some scraggly looking trees. There was no place to go, no place for him to hide. And besides, even if there was, he couldn't leave the others.

He looked ahead. He could see Reno, four beasts in front of his own. Too far away to talk, or pass any signals. The girls were even farther up in the long line. He couldn't see them at all. No, there was nothing he could do at the moment. He would just have to bide his time and wait for the right moment.

The Chadara behind him kept smacking the beast with a long stick. Cloud could see the others riders doing the same. They seemed to be urging the beasts on, but it appeared to be having little effect. The creatures plodded on with a steady pace, not very fast, and seemed reluctant to move even that fast. A number of times one would start to break ranks, headed for a clump of grass growing near the line of travel, and the rider had to prod it, most of the times with great difficulty, to get back in line.

But even though they were barely moving faster than a man could walk, and even with the waywardness of the creatures, they made slow but steady progress. The sun slowly sank into the sky, and night fell. The heat of the day slowly dissipated, replaced by a pleasant coolness. Cloud hoped they would stop and make camp, figuring that might give them an opportunity to escape. If they got away, at least in the darkness they'd have a chance. But the caravan showed no sign of stopping. They rode on through the night, moving ever northward.

Things hadn't turned out at all like they'd planned. First they had lost Elena, then Vincent had vanished, and now he and the others with him were captured. All in a matter of two days! Hadn't taken them long to totally mess things up.

He wondered what the others were doing. It didn't seem likely he would be getting any assistance from them. They probably didn't even know what had happened, didn't even know he and the others were far from the ship, far from the city. Even if they did know, there wasn't much they could do about it. They couldn't follow the caravan on foot. And besides, they didn't have time to spend starting a rescue mission. They had to get the crystal materia to the shield generator. That was their primary mission. What happened beyond that didn't matter. Cloud and the others were expendable.

In the darkness around them, he began to notice hills looming up on either side of them. They seemed to be traveling through a wide valley. He wondered just how far they had gone.

A light up ahead caught his attention. The caravan had been traveling in darkness, the beasts they rode seeming as much at ease in the night as they had been in the day. The light was on a hill ahead of them. At first he could not determine the source, but as they proceeded he saw the dim outline of a building up on the hill. The first one he had seen since leaving the city behind them.

Past the building the hills curved away to the left. They came around the turn and their pathway dropped down. Ahead of them, nestled at the bottom of a line of hills, stood another city.

It was much larger than the first one, and he immediately noticed some rather obvious differences. The first thing he saw, the thing that stood out immediately, was that this one appeared to have roads. There was organization to this city, no like the other, that just appeared to have been put together willy-nilly. But there were similarities as well. It was well lit, and he could see that the buildings were the same design as the one's in the other city, with the same odd shapes and gaping holes in the sides. But then he noticed a group of buildings, right in the center of the city, that didn't conform. They were larger than the others, and were built more squarely, more like he was used to seeing, and although they were far away, he could not make out any holes in the sides.

The caravan rode into the city, heading straight for the out of place buildings, which he now saw had doors and windows, real windows. There were many Chadara in the streets, and Cloud could see that these were clothed in often brightly colored garments. They filled the streets around them, going about their business, stepping out of the way of the caravan as it passed but otherwise not paying it much attention at all. The entire place gave the impression of a bustling and active city.

Finally they came to a halt in a large square. There was a lot of yelling and shouting as they Chadara halted the beasts, which now seemed as reluctant to stop as they had to proceed not long ago. The Chadara behind Cloud slipped to the ground, and Cloud followed. Immediately a group of Chadara surrounded him, and he was ushered quickly into the nearest building.

The building itself reminded him of a castle. The walls were of stone, though finely cut. Inside there was a long hallway, the ceiling high above their heads. This was no Chadara building. It was obviously meant to house others, and to Cloud others could only be Jenova.

His friends were brought into the building as well, and for the first time since their capture reunited. He saw only Chadara as they were led down the hall. Of the Jenova creature that had brought them here there was no sign. Nor did Cloud see any others. But he sensed they were nearby.

They turned left and walked down another hall, then stopped in front of a room closed off by a heavy wooden door. The door was opened and they entered a sparsely furnished room, with two cots and a small table. As soon as they entered the door was closed behind them.

"Is everyone all right?" Cloud asked.

Reno was trying unsuccessfully to brush the dirt off his suit.

"Yeah, fine," he said gruffly. "But my nose will never be the same. Those creatures smelled disgusting."

"They probably thought the same about you," Elena shot back.

Reno just glared at her.

"So what are we going to do now?" Aeris asked.

"Not much we can do," Reno replied. "Looks like our brave leader has led us straight to into a trap."

"You know it wasn't Cloud's fault," Tifa snapped.

Reno did not pursue the subject.

Nor did Cloud. Even he realized this was no time to get distracted by Reno.

"At least they didn't kill us outright," he said. "They've never seen humans before, they don't know what we are, what they're dealing with. That gives us an edge, not much, but something."

Reno snorted, obviously not impressed.

"What do you think they're going to do with us?" Elena asked, sounding just a bit nervous.

"I don't know," Cloud replied. There wasn't really much they could do. They had no allies, their friends didn't know they were here, and the Chadara now appeared to be in league with Jenova. They couldn't accomplish their mission with the entire planet aligned against them. Even if they escaped, they were far from their ship, with no way back, in a city full of enemies. Things looked pretty bleak.

"We'll just have to bide our time and hope for some kind of break," he said. "If one of us manages to escape, try to get back to the others. I know, it sounds impossible, but I don't see what else we can do. I don't know whether we can get out of here on our own, and it's not likely we're going to get any help from anyone here."

"I don't know," Aeris stated. "The Chadara are helping Jenova, but that may be because they are being forced to. Or even if most are willing, there may still be some who might be sympathetic to our cause."

"Even if that's so," Reno said. "How would we find them? And how would we plead our case when we don't speak their language?"

"I don't know," Aeris replied. "But I don't think you should dismiss the Chadara out of hand."

"Well, whether there are any out there who might help us or not, it won't do us much good while we're cooped up in this room," Tifa observed. "Nothing is going to happen unless at least one of us gets out of here."

"True," Cloud muttered.

He walked over to the door and inspected it. It was solidly bolted, and much too heavy to break down. He saw Reno walking about the room inspecting the walls. Reno looked toward him and shook his head when he had finished.

"Well," Cloud said with a sigh. "I guess all we can do now is wait."

Waiting was something that Cloud did not tolerate very well. He soon found himself pacing back and forth in front of the door. Reno had plopped down against the far wall, looking thoroughly unhappy. Tifa and Aeris sat down next to one another on one of the cots. Elena remained standing, leaning against the wall, a thoughtful expression on her face.

Cloud wasn't sure how long he paced. There was no window in the room, no way to distinguish the passage of time. It seemed like hours before there was a scraping sound and the door opened again.

Three Chadara stepped in, all wearing the silver armor and carrying the peculiar rods Cloud had seen earlier. They stood there looking at the captives for a moment, then one pointed at Tifa.

"Shogo!" it said.

The others walked over to her and grabbed her arms. Tifa looked surprised, and a little frightened.

"What are you doing with her?" Cloud demanded, stepping in front of them.

The one that had spoken stepped over to him and attempted to push him aside, but he stepped out of the way and shoved back. The Chadara stumbled away, barely keeping it's balance. It steadied itself, then turned toward him and lifted it's rod.

There was a flash of blue light. Cloud grunted and fell to the floor.

"Cloud!" Tifa exclaimed.

She tried to pull free, but the two holding her had her arms. She struggled for a moment, until the one with the rod pointed it at her.

Aeris had stooped down beside Cloud. She looked up at Tifa.

"He's alright," she said. Even as she spoke Tifa could see Cloud moving feebly. "Just stunned."

The Chadara who had used the weapon spoke again, and they dragged Tifa out of the room. She saw the door slam behind her as they pulled her down the hall, and she felt a coldness in the pit of her stomach. Why had they separated them, why had they chosen her? And what were they going to do with her?

They walked down a flight of steps, deeper into the building. Tifa no longer resisted, there didn't seem much point to it at the moment. She was scared, but she didn't let it show. She found it best to just not think about what might happen to her, about what Jenova could do. Perhaps they just wanted to look her over, perhaps they were just curious. She clung to that thought, and tried to ignore the doubts gnawing at the back of her mind.

Finally they reached a room at the end of a long hallway. The Chadara opened the door and led her in. She looked around found that her throat was suddenly dry. The room looked like some kind of laboratory. It was filled with machinery and tables covered with odd instruments. Near the back was a row of cages that contained small oddly shaped animals.

Near the center of the room stood a chair, with many types of what she considered very evil looking devices hanging beside it and attached to it. As they led her toward it she found herself resisting without even thinking about it. It certainly didn't look like they were just curious about her. She felt panic begin to rise up inside her.

"No!" she yelled, and jerked one arm back. The Chadara was holding her tightly but had not expected the vehemence of her resistance, and she managed to pull her arm free.

She twisted round, pivoting on the arm still held by the other Chadara, and struck that one in the back of the head with her elbow. It cried out and let go. Finding herself suddenly free, she turned toward the door, but didn't even get to take a step before there was a flash of blue light.

She collapsed to the floor, every muscle in her body seeming to go numb. She tried to get up, but none of her limbs would obey her. She felt herself being picked up roughly and carried toward the chair. She tried to struggle, but her body refused to obey, only making feeble random movements. As they placed her in the chair she tried to cry out her rage, but even her voice was not working right, and all that came out was a choking sound.

There were restraints on the chair, and they were placed on her arms and legs, thick leather straps that were pulled tightly around her wrists and ankles. Her head was pulled back, and another strap was placed around her neck. She couldn't let this happen, she had to do something. Her worst nightmares about this seemed to be coming true. She felt them attaching something to her forehead, some kind of electrodes. She tried to pull her head away, but it was useless, she was still too

weak, and even if she hadn't been, the strap would have held her in place. Inwardly she was screaming with rage. They were going to perform some horrible experiment on her, she was sure of that now, and she was helpless to fight it.

Satisfied with their work, the Chadara retreated. Slowly they filed out of the room, until she was alone. She looked around desperately, looking for something she could use, something she could do to get her out of this. Slowly she could feel her strength returning. Even now she found she could move her hands and feet with some semblance of control. But the straps that held her wrists and ankles were pulled so tightly that she could not budge them. There was no way she was going to escape on her own.

She had faced a lot in her life, been in many dangerous situations. She had been scared before, in the battles with Shinra and Sephiroth. But in all those times she had been able to fight back, had been able to do something about it. The mere fact that one could take action, that one had a choice, reduced the fear. But now she had no options. She was completely helpless. She hadn't felt like this since she had been captured by Kendal on the southern continent. No, this was even worse. No matter how twisted Kendal had been, he had still been human. Though his mind was warped she had still understood it. But Jenova was completely alien. She couldn't comprehend what it might do to her. She had seen some of the twisted creatures Jenova had made from humans, seen the monsters that had been created. She didn't want that to happen. She didn't want to be turned into something twisted, some mindless horror. She would rather die.

But there was nothing she could do. There was no way out. She found her breath coming in short gasps, and suddenly she realized that she was more scared than she had ever been in her entire life.

"I've got to calm down, I've got to calm down," she found herself whispering, repeating over and over. Panic wasn't going to help the situation. There may not be anything she could do now, but in the unlikely event that something happened and she was given the opportunity to get out of this somehow, it wouldn't help if she was frozen with fear.

She deliberately tried to relax, forcing herself to breathe slowly and regularly. As long as she had her wits about her, there was still a chance.

A movement caught her eye. She looked up to see that there was some sort of balcony above her. Another room that looked down on this one from above. The room was dark, but she could make out a figure moving up there. It was not a Chadara.

Even in the dim light she could see the figure sit down. Although she couldn't make out the details, the chair the figure was sitting in appeared similar to hers. She could see the dim shapes of some type of devices around that one too.

Suddenly she was startled as the machinery around her, which had been silent to this point, suddenly hummed to life. Lights flickered. For a moment she looked around, then turned back toward the figure above. She was certain it was one of the Jenova, and she was also certain that whatever was going to happen to her, it would be responsible.

Lights flashed in the room above her as well, and she saw that the chair above her was in fact quite similar to the one she was in. She could see the Jenova's outline clearly now, but she could not tell whether it was the same Jenova that had captured them. She could see, however, that the creature seemed to have electrodes identical to her's attached to its head as well.

The sound of the machines increased, and with it she felt panic rising up inside her again.

She felt a tingling sensation in her head. Not painful, but not at all pleasant. She looked up at the creature above her wildly.

"What are you doing to me?" she cried out.

There was no answer, but the sounds around her continued to grow. The unpleasant tingling sensation increased. She tried to shake her head, but the strap around her neck did not allow much movement. She found herself straining at the straps on her limbs, even though she knew it was useless.

Suddenly she felt as if something exploded inside her head, and she screamed as wave after wave of pain shot through her.

But it was more than pain. There was something there. Some alien force, something that didn't belong. She could feel it, crawling around inside her head like a living thing, touching things that weren't meant to be touched, seeing things that weren't meant to be seen. In all her life she had never felt anything like it, nor ever imagined anything that could feel so horrible. The creature was inside her head. It could see her thoughts, everything she had ever known was laid bare before it. There was no hiding, no concealing anything, not one little detail about her, about her life. It was like she was naked before it, but worse than that, much worse. For it was not her physical body that was exposed, but her soul.

She screamed inwardly, trying to force it out, to get it away from her, but it's grip on her mind was numbing. It's force was relentless, and nothing she could do could stop it, nothing she could do seemed to have even the slightest effect on it. It moved through her mind at will, leaving nothing hidden. Methodically, without thought, without any concern at all for her, for what she was, it stripped away her thoughts.

Fighting uselessly against it, she felt her strength begin to fail. And even as it did she felt it's grip becoming tighter, squeezing her own mind, wrapping around it and breaking it down. No longer was it just observing anymore, but trying to impose it's own will. Now that it had laid bare her essence, it seemed intent on destroying it.

She tried to fight back, but she had no weapons in this battle. Her fists were useless here, hanging limply by her sides. This was a war fought on Jenova's turf, and she didn't know the rules, nor have any knowledge of the weapons involved. She desperately tried to pull her mind away, to see an object in her mind, to concentrate on it, to shut out all else, but it was useless. The other mind in her head was too strong. Each time she tried to block it out, it broke through, and each time a little more ground was given up. She sought desperately for something she could do, something she could use to fight this, and abruptly she remembered her headaches, and the voice.

The voice...the voice that had given her the instructions to perform the mental steps to block out the pain. How long ago had that been? She couldn't even remember. Anything that had happened before they arrived on this planet seemed like ancient history now. She hadn't had any headaches since then, she hadn't had to use it. Could she still remember what she had done?

She tried to think, forcing herself to hurry. She could feel the presence growing inside her. The horrible, disgusting feeling of having it inside her, of being one with it. How could she think under that kind of assault? How could she concentrate, when even now it was plundering her consciousnesses, examining in front of her all the parts of her mind that were never meant to see the light of day. To remember something from that long ago, something she had nearly forgotten, it was impossible!

Abruptly she realized that she was becoming hysterical. She had to remain calm, just like she had told herself. Panic wouldn't do any good now, and this might be her only hope. She had to calm down and think!

She tried as best she could once again to ignore the presence inside her. In spite of how she felt, in spite of how it was making her skin crawl, she had to try to calm herself. She thought back to the day she had heard the voice, trying to remember every detail. One step at a time, that was how she had to do it, calmly, rationally, in spite of what she felt, in spite of the urgency.

It was difficult. At first she could only remember the first one or two steps, the rest of it slipping away, seemingly lost. But she kept at it. She knew she had no choice. And eventually more steps came to her. Slowly, slowly she followed them, running through them again and again, each step she remembered bringing hints of the next. It hadn't been that difficult. She had gone over it until it had become familiar. It all had to be there, still in her memory. All she had to do was concentrate.

And abruptly it fell together. The last step fell into place, and instantly Jenova detected it. The assault on her mind suddenly doubled, tripled. It was tearing at her, not trying to overpower her anymore, not trying to control her, but trying to destroy, trying to tear her apart.

A moment before the attack would have been devastating, and instantly fatal. But she held on, clinging to a part of herself that could no longer be invaded, holding onto it like a staunch tree standing against the floodwaters.

But still the attack increased. Like pincers into her mind it stuck now, and the pain was nearly unbearable. She felt as if she were surrounded by white hot fire, the forces inside her feeling like they could not be contained, that they would tear her apart. How long could she stand this, how long could she go on? Jenova was trying to crush her now, and even with her shield, could she stand against it's full might?

Her mind screaming in agony, she held on. She didn't know how long it lasted. Time seemed to have stopped altogether, and she thought this must be hell, and she was trapped here forever, doomed to suffer this torment through all eternity.

And then abruptly, it stopped.

For a moment she didn't realize it. She remained motionless, her muscles clenched, her knuckles white, her whole body taunt. And then relief, relief like she had never felt before flooded through her. She opened her eyes to find that she was soaked in sweat. She felt completely spent, yet even in her exhaustion she felt a strange euphoria. In spite of the odds, in

spite of all Jenova's strength, she had won. She had beaten it off, had kept that which made her everything she was. No victory had ever felt as sweet.

She did not protest when the Chadara reentered the room to take her away.

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Tierlok entered the room and looked around, at first thinking it was empty, But then saw Dujin was sitting in the control chair overlooking the laboratory below. The light in the room was dim, but as he came up beside the Prime, he could sense something was amiss.

"The procedure did not go as planned?" he questioned hesitantly. If something had gone wrong Dujin might be in a bad mood, and if that were true, there was no telling who he might take it out on.

For a moment Dujin did not reply.

"Not exactly," he said slowly, the words measured, but not particularly angry.

Tierlok waited for enlightenment.

Dujin turned to face him fully.

"The creature was not as weak as it looked. I could not control it. It had some kind of resistance..."

Dujin fell silent. Tierlok still did not speak, but he realized this did not bode well.

"This is very strange," Dujin muttered.

It was an invitation to speak.

"Should we try again with another one?" Tierlok suggested.

Dujin mulled this over for a few moments.

"No," he said finally. "Whatever these creatures are, they may all have this resistance. But it doesn't matter. I could not control the creature, but it could not prevent me from seeing inside it. I know all we need to know. I know their purpose. These creatures are exceeding dangerous. In fact, they pose the greatest threat to us since the war with the Destroyers."

Tierlok looked at Dujin nervously.

"Shall I have them put to death then?" he questioned.

"No!" Dujin said firmly. "There is more to it than that. They pose a great threat, but they also bring us a great opportunity. An opportunity that has not occurred here in two thousand years. No, they must not be harmed. I know what to do."

He stood up.

"But there are others. Back where we found these. Up in the hills, in some kind of ship. You must go back there at once and apprehend them. They must not be allowed to move about on their own. That could ruin everything. Take the best Chadara you have, and bring them back to me and you will be richly rewarded. I command it!"

"Yes, Prime," Tierlok said, backing away. He had no choice, it was the only response possible. He quickly walked out the door, not all that pleased, but knowing there was no arguing. The last thing he wanted to do was go back to the outer regions, back to that mangy hellhole of a city. He had thought that bringing back the Destroyer would be enough, that it would insure his prominence, but now the Prime had more demands of him, when all he really wanted to do was relax at his home and bath in his new found fame.

But he quickly stifled his grumbling. The Prime himself had told him he would be richly rewarded, and was obviously pleased with what he had done. Just one more trip, one little short period of suffering, and then it would all be over. Then he could come back to the city and reap the benefits he so richly deserved.

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The sound was pleasant. He wasn't sure how long he had been aware of it. It seemed to him that he had been listening to it for a long time. At first it had seemed far away, just a vague undercurrent running in the background of his mind, but slowly, as he had regained his senses, it had become clearer. And the more he heard the more closely he listened. It was not just a sound, it was a voice. Yes, it was the voice of someone singing, softly, as if to themselves. But it was not a voice like any he had ever known. There was some other quality to it. Although he could not understand any of the words, he somehow knew that it was more than just a song. There was something incredibly soothing about it. It seemed to almost almost have some kind of healing power. Like a drink of water given to a man dying of thirst, the song seemed to suffuse him, to fill him with rejuvenating energy. There was something intoxicating about it, and beautiful.

Zack opened his eyes. He found himself staring up at the cavern ceiling, dimly lit by an orange light. His recollection of the events after he had been bit were still groggy, and he barely remembered Reeve helping him into cave, yet even so he was pretty sure this was not the same cavern.

He turned his head and saw the source of the singing. Her back was toward him. She was sitting on the floor only a few paces away, in front of the fire, or whatever it was that was giving off the light. It was not a fire, surely, for it was steady and not flickering, but her body blocked his view of it.

At first he thought she was a Chadara. Yet though her back was to him he could tell immediately that she was strikingly dissimilar to any Chadara he had seen so far. Though her skin was dark, it was not as gray as that of the others. She had long silver hair, falling to the midway point on her back, neatly lying between her folded wings, braided at the end.

For a long time he did not move, just lay there, captivated by the sound of her voice. But slowly reality started to seep back into his mind. He still didn't remember much. He had been ill, Bitten by that creature. They had tried to get to the city, but he hadn't been able to make it. Reeve had been with him. What had happened? Where was Reeve now? He vaguely remembered Reeve dragging him into a cave somewhere. To what purpose?

He sat up. He had felt fine, completely recovered from whatever had happened to him. But as soon as he got up he felt a wave of dizziness and nausea. He put out his hand to steady himself and groaned.

Immediately the singing stopped. The woman turned toward him, then got up and swiftly came over to him. She was wearing a garment of some kind of semi-transparent material that shimmered and flickered in the light. It was like nothing he had seen before. He looked up at her as she reached his bed, and saw her blue eyes, bigger than any he had ever seen. She seemed to have an expression of concern on her face.

"Shadu, mei sento lagorati"

Her words meant nothing to him. He looked at her, puzzled. But then she reached out her hand and slowly but firmly forced him to lie down.

"Shadu," she repeated. She reached down and ran her hand lightly over his arm, the one that had been bitten, and even her touch upon it seemed to somehow relax him. She looked back at him again and smiled reassuringly.

"I guess you want me to rest, eh?" Zack said.

She looked at him, the smile still on her face.

"My name is Zack."

She did not respond.

He pointed to himself.

"Zack," he said slowly.

She stood there motionless. He had no idea what she was thinking.

He pressed his finger against his chest.

"Zack," he said once again. Then he pointed at her.

He looked at her, trying to prompt her with his expression, but for all he knew, his expression was meaningless to her.

She cocked her head to one side, looking contemplative.

"Roshnialu," she said finally.

Zack wasn't sure how to respond. Roshnialu. That could be her name, or it could be her way of saying 'shut the hell up'.

He lay back, resting once more on what he now realized was some type of thick yet very comfortable padding. She stood over him for a moment more, then, apparently satisfied that he would make no more attempts to rise, she stepped away from him, back toward the light, which Zack could see now was some kind of glowing log. It almost seemed to be some kind of fire, for the log seemed as if it were being consumed, but the light it gave off was steady.

"Roshnialu," he called out.

She turned and looked at him, a look of surprise showing on her face, but instantly turning into a broad smile.

It seemed probable that whatever Roshnialu meant, it wasn't shut the hell up.

She stepped back over to stand beside him. She looked at him for a moment.

"Zack," she said.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, startling her into taking a step back.

"Teirmon falchara et donchese," she said, and laughed, the sound of her voice like a clear bell tinkling.

"You can say that again, whatever the hell it meant," he said.

She looked at him a moment more, almost a look of admonishment in her eyes, almost as if she could understand what he was saying. Then she turned away again.

Zack watched her walk past the fire log to the other side of the cavern. He could see now that the walls were smooth, and the floor was much too level to be natural. This room had been carved out of the rock, built by human, or not so human, hand. There was a basin carved out of the far wall, with clear water running in it. Roshnialu picked up a hollowed out gourd and filled it with the clear fluid, then came back over to him, holding it out.

He started to lift himself up, but then thought better of it. He took the drink and slowly tipped it up, lifting just his head so he could sip the fluid. Immediately he realized it was not just water. It had a slight sweet taste to it, something he had never tasted before, and it was delicious.

He quickly drank down the rest, only spilling a bit on his chest.

"Thank you," he said when he was done.

She glanced at him for a moment, then went and sat back down by the fire. He lay there in silence for a while, hoping she would start singing again, but she remained silent. He wondered how long he was going to be holed up here. It was obvious that Roshnialu had probably saved his life, but he had no idea how long the recovery process would take. He still wasn't exactly sure what had happened, and it was bothering him a little. What had happened to the others? What had happened to Reeve? They had been together, but he obviously wasn't around now. Zack seemed to remember him saying something...apologizing? Why would he do that?

They had been heading for the city. There would have been no turning back. Reeve could not possibly have brought him all the way back to the ship. Reeve must have gone on without him, or back without him.

*Did he leave me to die?*

No, he probably went to get help. They had been in the middle of nowhere. Reeve couldn't have carried him far. He would have been able to go much faster on his own. That would have been the logical thing to do.

*Logical, yes. That was probably exactly what Reeve was telling the others now. How it was the logical thing to do, how he really had no choice at all. They were rivals, standing in each other's way. No matter how they treated each other there was no getting around that, or that fact that neither one of them would be all that upset to see something happen to the other. And here Zack had given Reeve the perfect opportunity. Through his own stupidity he had gotten himself in deadly trouble, with only his rival to help him. Reeve wouldn't have to lift a finger, just head back to the ship. He could take his time. No one would know. If he even remembered where he left Zack he could return using a round about route. No one would question it, no one would be the wiser.*

Zack shook his head to clear it, abruptly realizing he was thinking too much like the Swordsman. They were rivals, yes, but that didn't mean they wanted to see each other dead. Even when Zack had been less than friendly Reeve had never seemed to bear him any malice. These were a different sort of people than he was used to dealing with, he had to keep reminding himself.



Just then Roshnialu stood up, looking to the left, toward a narrow tunnel. Zack followed her gaze and saw a figure emerge from it.

This one was definitely a Chadara. He walked over to Roshnialu without giving Zack a glance and started talking rapidly. Of course, Zack had no idea what they were saying, but it didn't take a genius to figure it had something to do with him, not when they both kept glancing over to him and the Chadara pointed at him twice.

The raising of their voices also made it clear that the conversation was turning into an argument. The expressions on their faces was quite similar to humans, very unhappy humans, in fact. Zack slowly lifted himself up experimentally. The nausea he felt the last time he tried to sit up did not return. It seemed he was getting better. He had a feeling the drink she had given him had played a part in that.

"Leave her alone!" he exclaimed.

The two looked over at him, startled. Roshnialu blurted something out, then pushed past the Chadara to hurry over to him.

She said something and looked at him for a moment. Then she turned to the Chadara once more and barked out a statement.

The Chadara yelled back at her, taking a step toward her. She stood her ground, and suddenly it seemed as if the two might come to blows. Zack looked around, seeing if his sword were somewhere nearby, but there was no sign of it.

For a moment the two antagonists stood facing one another, then the Chadara muttered something and quickly turned and stalked away.

Roshnialu stood motionless until he had disappeared from sight. Then she turned toward Zack and starting talking rapidly.

Zack just shook his head.

"Slow down, honey, you're going way too fast for me."

Abruptly she took his hand. He looked up at her, into her enormous blue eyes. He could see compassion there, and something else. Something more urgent. She was desperately trying to convey something to him.

"What is it?" he questioned. "What did he tell you?"

She continued talking, not that it did much good. But the tug on his arm became more insistent. It seemed she wanted him to get up.

He let her pull him to his feet, and stood for a moment a bit unsteadily. He felt a twinge of dizziness. She seemed to sense this, for she suddenly let go and walked over to the basin. She came back with the gourd and he took another drink.

"Hmm, good stuff," he commented.

She started talking again, grabbing hold of his arm once more. He did not resist as she led him swiftly toward the tunnel the Chadara had disappeared down.

The floor was smooth and they walked steadily uphill for about twenty meters. The tunnel twisted quite a bit, but finally they came around one turn and he saw daylight ahead.

He followed her out of the tunnel, and even though the sun had already dropped below the horizon, and twilight was upon them, he still had to pause for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the light.

When he looked up he saw they were not far from the mountains. They loomed up just to the south of them. He looked around and spotted the city off in the distance to the west.

Roshnialu pointed up to the mountains.

"Germasi dec du remas," she said.

Zack just looked at her blankly.

"Du remas!" she repeated, pointing up at the mountains.

Zack looked up. The mountains rose up steeply here, but he could see nothing unusual.

"I don't understand," he said.

She stamped her foot. There was no mistaking that one.

She grabbed hold of his hand and starting walking, straight at the mountains. Then she stopped and ushered him to go forward, then pointed ahead once more.

"Germasi dec du remas!"

Zack stood there, feeling almost as frustrated as she must. She was obviously trying to tell him something, something urgent. She seemed to want him to lead. But where could he lead her except...back to the ship?

"You want me lead you back where I came from?" he asked pointlessly.

She just looked at him.

If she wanted him to lead, it had to be someplace that he knew of that she didn't. What else could it be but back to the ship? But how could she know about the ship? Was that what they had been arguing about? And why would she want him to take her back there? Was he in some kind of danger, or was the ship in danger? Or was it something else entirely. He didn't know. There was no way to know. But whatever the reason, if she wanted to go, and so urgently, there had to be a very good reason. She had already saved his life once, and he felt somehow that he could trust her, even after only being with her for this short time. If she wanted to go to the ship, then the ship it was.

"C'mon," he said, taking her hand. "Let's get going!"