

CHAPTER XXI: SHEDDING SOME LIGHT ON THINGS

For the most part the city ahead of them was dark. Only a few lights could be seen from some of the buildings, giving off a bluish light. At least in this city, there didn't seem to be much activity at night.

Red followed behind Ellengio as he walked down a sloping ravine, the only nearby cover on the otherwise featureless plain. Occasionally they would stop, and Ellengio would climb the slope and take a look around, but the night around them was peaceful. Nothing disturbed them as the city drew slowly closer.

They had been walking for almost an hour now since they had reached the plain, mostly in silence. They saw no sign of any Chadara, and indeed, even creatures of the night would have had difficulty detecting them. Ellengio moved with the natural ease of a Cetra, his footfall sure due to the superior night vision of his race. Even so, of the entire group, his footfall was the easiest detected. Red and Nipala followed him on their own padded feet, their natural hunting talents and ability to blend into the desert making them impossible to see in the darkness from more than a foot or two away. Cait came next, the Mog walking softly on his own padded feet, and Vincent last, his movement completely silent, not even the stirring of the wind marking his passage, like a ghost in the night.

Red sniffed the air, intrigued by the night smells. He could detect many scents, but could not identify any of them. In the distance he could hear the sound of buzzing insects, or what he took for buzzing insects. He had to keep reminding himself this was another planet, the sounds and smells could mean something completely different from his assumptions.

They crested a small rise, where runoff from a dry riverbed had long ago filled in the ravine. They could see the city clearly now, the closest buildings not far away. Ellengio paused and they waited while he studied the town in front of them. Then without a word he continued on, walking softly back down into the ravine.

Red was about to follow when he looked up, his ears trying to zero in on the faint sound he had detected.

"Get down," he heard Vincent say, softly but with an obvious urgency.

Red flattened himself against the cool earth. He felt Nipala right beside him, although motionless, even his keen eyesight could barely make her out. He felt rather than heard the flapping in the air above them. Lifting his head, he saw dark figures racing across the night sky overhead.

He didn't know how many passed by, but it seemed to last a long time, all of them flying south, into the mountains. Eventually, however, the sky above them was clear once more, and Vincent stood up again, staring off after them.

"What was that all about?" Cait was the first to break the silence.

No one answered for a moment, finally Vincent's voice floated through the darkness.

"They're headed up into the mountains," he said, as if that explained it all.

"Ummm," Ellengio commented. "Something's going on. We better get a move on."

They proceeded on their way, walking as swiftly as they dared through the darkness. The bright silver sphere of Shinialyn had not yet risen in the sky, and the only light they had was the faint glow of stars above their heads.

Eventually the dark outlines of the first buildings rose up around them. They proceeded more cautiously. Once in the city itself, the chances of running into a Chadara increased greatly. They walked slowly and kept their eyes open, but the night was quiet around them, and the ground was empty. All the buildings nearby were dark. Red took this as a good sign, hoping they were either empty, or, if inhabited, the Chadara were sleeping soundly inside, if Chadara slept at all, that was.

"These buildings seem to have no entrance from ground level," Vincent observed.

Red nodded.

"It's probably done for defensive purposes," he said, keeping his voice down. "No ground entrance means that nothing that can't fly can get in easily."

"That may be good for us though," Vincent mused. "Knowing they have little to fear from anyone or anything on the ground, they may not keep anyone on guard."

None of the others replied, but they continued to work their way stealthily through the town. Red kept his eyes on each building as they passed, watching the pits of darkness that signified the openings above them, but nothing stirred, and they were not challenged.

They made their way slowly through the city. There didn't seem to be any organization. The buildings seemed to be scattered about at random, not appearing in any greater concentration in any one place. There didn't seem to be any city 'center'. They continued to move cautiously, and Red kept his eyes open. It seemed hard for him to believe that they could just walk through the entire city without someone spotting them, but all was quiet.

They stopped, and Red saw Vincent staring off to the right.

"See something?" Ellengio asked.

"Over that way," Vincent said. "See that building?"

They all looked in the direction he indicated. At first Red saw nothing out of the ordinary. But then he noticed one building, almost invisible in the darkness. It was smaller than the others, and only a single story high. It was the first single story building they had seen.

They walked over to it. It was circular, the rounded stone made of the same material as the other buildings. They could see no entrance.

Red looked at it carefully.

"This seems to be out of character for the Chadara," he spoke. "All the other buildings are multi storied, with the entrances high above the ground. Where's the entrance to this one?"

Cait looked up at it.

"On the roof?" he suggested.

"Perhaps," Ellengio replied. "But none of their other buildings are like that. Come, let's look around it."

They circled slowly around the building. It seemed completely unmarked, but as they walked they saw a darker area on the wall of the building ahead of them. As they approached, it became clearer.

"A door!" Nipala said in surprise.

They stopped in front of it, looking at it curiously, the others obviously as surprised as Nipala. The only entrances they had seen to any of the buildings were the openings in the walls. They had seen no sign that the Chadara had any need of doors, had even, in fact, established the concept.

"This is interesting," Red said slowly.

Vincent walked up to the door and examined it closely.

"It's old," he said. "Very old. It doesn't look like it's been used in a long time."

He looked at Ellengio, his hand poised above the handle.

"Might as well see what's inside," the Ancient said.

Vincent grabbed hold of the handle and pushed. The door creaked, and a bit of dust fell from the corners, but it did not open.

"It's locked," Vincent said. He stepped back, his eyes still on the door. "It's old, and rotted. It would be a simple matter to kick it down, but I don't know how much noise that will make."

Again all eyes turned to Ellengio. He stood there for a moment in silence. Finally he nodded.

"We can't go stumbling around in the dark here forever," the Ancient stated. "It's going to get light again in an hour or two. We'll take the chance."

Vincent stepped forward again, kicking at the door. There was the crack of timbers. The door collapsed to the ground, breaking apart and sending up a cloud of dust.

Vincent coughed, then threw his cape over his face to shield it, and walked unhesitatingly into the building. The others waited a moment for the dust to settle down a little, then followed.

Even with his keen eyes, Red could see little inside the building. He could barely make out the forms of the others, and the bulk of some large dark objects.

Suddenly light flared as Ellengio turned on a flashlight.

The dark objects were shelves, shelves that seemed to be filled with books. They looked around silently for a moment.

"Looks like we hit the jackpot," Cait muttered.

Ellengio walked over and plucked up one of the books. He blew the dust off of it and opened it up. The pages were yellow and brittle in his hand, some of them flaking to pieces at his touch. He shined the flashlight on it.

"I can't read it," he said. "It must be in Chadaran."

"Great," Cait said.

"Shine that light over here a moment," came Vincent's voice.

Ellengio obliged. Vincent was examining some kind of object on the wall. He pushed something, and suddenly the entire room was illuminated in a soft blue light.

The others looked around, but they could not see the source of the light.

"Much better," Ellengio said.

There were four long shelves in the room, running the length of it, but most of them were empty. Of the books that were there, some of them had long ago crumpled to dust, or had just bits and pieces of the covers remaining.

Ellengio went about methodically examining the one's that remained. The others stood around, or paced back and forth slowly. They didn't know Chadaran or Cetra, they could be of no help. Red walked along a row of books, trying to see the titles on the sidebar. He didn't know the languages, but he thought he might be able to tell if one was in a different language from the rest. But the dust and damage defeated him in all but a handful of cases. The books were just too old to be seen clearly, and, unfortunately, his paws were not designed to let him take a closer look.

"Hurry it up," Vincent stated. He stood motionless by the switch that had turned on the lights, his eyes focused on the door they had come through, the death penalty held loosely in his hands.

Ellengio just grunted in response, absorbed in what he was doing. Red reached the end of the row and gave up. The books were just too damaged. He could make out the titles to a few of them, and none of them seemed any different from the others.

"They don't seem to be much interested in reading anymore," Nipala commented.

"No they don't," Red agreed. He wondered just how old these books were. Obviously the place had been undisturbed for a long time, centuries, perhaps. The building was right in the middle of the city, yet it was ignored. That wasn't something a growing civilization would do without good reason. He had a feeling that this was somehow tied in with Jenova. Quite often a dominant race would destroy the books and records of the conquered. After all, knowledge was power, and having access to these books could cause more thinking than Jenova was interested in seeing from the Chadara.

Suddenly Vincent blurted out a warning, raising his gun toward the door. They all turned to see a Chadara standing in the entrance way. He wore silver armor and held some kind of rod in his hand.

"Domechu!" the creature commanded, raising the rod and pointing it at Cait, who was closest to the door.

Ellengio raised his hand, cautioning Vincent not to fire. He looked calmly at the Chadara.

"Gimoaha tu Cetarala?" he said.

"Chartoke, domechu!" the creature said harshly. He stepped to the side and six more of the creatures, identically dressed and carrying the same rods, entered as well.

Ellengio looked at the others.

"I take it you're not getting through to him," Cait observed.

"Cetarala?" Ellengio said again.

The creature motioned with his rod toward the door.

"Domechu!"

"Whatever that means, I'm getting tired of it," Cait said.

"What should we do?" Vincent questioned, his gun still pointed directly at the Chadara who had spoken.

"They don't speak Cetra," Ellengio said, sounding just a shade disappointed. "Looks like they want us to go with them. I'd rather not fight now, not if there's any chance at all we can still get them to understand us. I guess we better just go with them."

"Think now might be a good time for Vincent to do that transformation thing?" Cait suggested.

Ellengio looked over at Vincent.

"Let's just see where they're going to take us first," he said.

"They could be taking us right to Jenova," Vincent said ominously.

"Possible. Unfortunately, I don't think we have much of a choice at this point. Those rods they have are obviously weapons of some kind. Vincent, I don't think you could shoot them all before they got you."

"I could get most of them," Vincent replied.

"Domechu!" the Chadara commanded.

"Whatever we're going to do, I think you should make up your mind," Cait said. "Looks like they're running out of patience."

"I don't want to be the first to open hostilities," Ellengio said. "Not if we have any other option. For all we know this could be a big misunderstanding."

"They've already got Cloud and the others," Vincent said stubbornly. "If they capture us too, they'll have half the team in their hands. And what will we have to show for it?"

"We don't know what they did with Cloud. We don't even know for sure that they are prisoners."

"If they're not prisoners, how come they haven't contacted us yet?" Vincent asked.

"Could be any number of reasons," Ellengio replied.

"Can we argue about this later?" Red asked, looking from then to the Chadara.

"Yes, let's," Ellengio responded. He walked toward the door. The Chadara stepped out of his way. Ellengio turned to look at the others. "C'mon."

The others filed out behind him, until only Vincent was left. He stood there for a moment, then sighed, lowered his gun, and followed as well.

Outside the Chadara led them off to the south, walking silently between the towering buildings. After spending so much time in the light, it seemed darker outside than ever, and they walked slowly while their eyes adjusted.

But they hadn't gone very far when suddenly dark figures rushed out of the darkness around them.

There were cries from the Chadara, and flashes of blue light as the weapons they held discharged. Red couldn't tell much about their attackers, but he could see in the light from the weapons that they were Chadara as well, and he could also see that the prisoners did not seem to be the object of the attack. The Chadara were fighting among themselves.

Red and the others gathered together in a defensive position, but they did not attack. No one seemed interested in fighting with them, and there was no way for them to tell who was on who's side, or more importantly, who might be on their side, if anyone was at all.

He did note with interest every time one of the weapons was used. The rods seemed to fire a blast of blue light that immediately dropped whomever it hit. The damage was not fatal, for he saw some of the victims twitching and moving feebly after they had been struck, but he could not tell in the darkness just how bad the damage was to each individual.

But there were only a few blasts. Their captives had been taken by surprise, and the darkness had allowed the other faction to close without being seen. The Chadara guarding them only had time to fire once or twice before their opponents were too close to use the weapon effectively.

At first the battle seemed roughly even. The Chadara that was attacking did not have any of the rods, but there seemed to be many more of them, and eventually their numbers began to tell. Slowly the Chadara in the silver armor began to fall, dragged down and overwhelmed by their opponents numbers. Eventually the sounds of battle faded away as the last of

them went down. Red noted that even when the battle had no longer been in doubt, none of the Chadara in the silver armor had given up, or turned and fled. All had fought until they had fallen.

A dark figure came up to them, and Red saw a Chadara staring at them.

"Hooman?" it said, looking at Ellengio.

They looked at it in surprise.

"Human, yes, or rather, Cetra," Ellengio replied.

"Cetarala?" the Chadara said.

"Cetarala, yes!" Ellengio exclaimed. "Gimoaha tu Cetarala?"

The Chadara suddenly started speaking excitedly to the others of his kind. The conversation went on for quite some time.

"Did they understand you?" Nipala asked.

"They seemed to recognize the word Cetra," Ellengio replied. "But I don't think they understood the language."

The Chadara turned toward him once more.

"Domenchu."

"Isn't that what the other one said?" Nipala asked.

"Yes, but it seems more like a request than a command this time," Ellengio replied.

"They do seem a bit friendlier than the others," Cait said.

"Domenchu," the Chadara repeated. "Lensighe, hooman."

"They seem to be in a hurry," Vincent stated.

Ellengio looked down at the slain Chadara.

"Yes, I suppose it would be best if we departed here with all haste."

The Chadara led them quickly into the darkness. Red wasn't sure they were any better off than they had been a moment ago. It was obvious, however, that not all the Chadara were of like mind. This is the first time they had proof that there were different factions among the race, and if that were true, it was likely that some of them would be opposed to Jenova.

Red wasn't sure how long they walked, but it didn't take long before they stopped at the base of one building. The Chadara that was leading them looked at them and pointed up.

"Looks like we have to go up there," Cait said, looking up at the dark opening in the building above them.

The Chadara who had spoken grabbed hold of Ellengio. His wings spread behind him, and a moment later they were in the air. Red felt uncomfortable when another Chadara grabbed hold of him, but he knew this was the only way up. The Chadara flapped its wings, and they rose slowly up, but didn't get more than a few feet off the ground, when they stopped. The Chadara continued to flap its wings, obviously straining, the sound loud in Red's ears, but they ascended no higher until another Chadara came up beside the first and lent a hand.

Together they lifted Red up and into the building. The others were quickly brought up as well, all of them being lighter than Red, and requiring only one Chadara to do so, with Cait, light in spite of his size, the easiest of all.

Red looked around, blinking in the darkness. His eyes had adjusted now. He could see the room they were in was mostly empty, but there were some darker objects along one wall. The Chadara that had brought them up were all gravitating in that direction.

Suddenly a bluish light flared. For a moment Red thought of the weapons the Chadara in armor had used, but then realized this was different. One of the Chadara was holding a short length of what looked like a piece of wood. The end of it was glowing with the bluish light. The Chadara was shielding it, as if to hide it from anyone outside.

The object Red has seen in the dark looked like giant bean bags. There were three of them, spaced evenly along one wall. Even as he looked he saw a Chadara sitting up in the middle of one of them. Although Red was not an expert on Chadara anatomy, if the aging process in these creatures was at all similar to that of those on earth, and he had no reason to assume any differently, then this particular one seemed to be very old.

The Chadara that seemed to be the spokesperson engaged in a rapid conversation with the old one, who, after a moment, turned to Ellengio.

"Dones em...embaik ton, tontone," he said hesitantly.

"Piraltu chun kaltek," Ellengio said quickly. He turned to the others excitedly. "He knows Cetra!"

"All right!" Cait said. "Now we're getting somewhere."

The old Chadara continued talking, slowly, often groping for words. Ellengio spoke with him for a few minutes, while the others stood there looking at them impatiently. The other Chadara, the one that had spoken to them, seemed to be talking a lot, with the old Chadara translating for Ellengio.

"What's he saying?" Nipala asked when there was a pause in the conversation.

"He's kind of hard to understand," Ellengio said without looking at her. "He learned the language as a boy, and hasn't used it in many years. He's forgotten a lot. He's been explaining what happened to the others of our kind, Cloud and the others, when they were brought here."

The Chadara continued to talk.

"The old one here is Rono," Ellengio said. "And the other one Donalis, was the one who first found them," Ellengio said, indicating the younger Chadara who was talking. "He was out looking for herbs on the mountainside when he spotted Cloud's group. He flew closer, coming up from below. He saw one of them fall. He caught...Elena!"

"What?" Vincent said, eyes flashing in the dim light.

"Elena's alive!" Ellengio said, turning to look at him. "Donalis caught her and brought her here."

"I can't believe it," Cait muttered.

Vincent stepped forward.

"Is it true?"

Ellengio spoke with the other two for a few moments more.

"It was her," he said finally. "She's alive."

"Where...where is she?" Vincent said, and for the first time they could recall, they heard genuine shock in his voice.

"She's not here," Ellengio replied. "Hold on."

He talked for a while longer with the other two.

"She's been taken to Daris, a city north of here. They were all taken by Jenova."

"Jenova?" Nipala hissed.

Ellengio nodded.

"Donalis says it's his fault. He didn't know who or what we were. The Chadara are under orders to report anything out of the ordinary to Jenova, especially any strange people or creatures. The punishment for disobeying is severe. He did so, before he realized just what we were. But he asked around and heard some stories, stories about the Cetra, stories from a times long ago, almost forgotten now, that he had never heard before, and he began to regret his action. The Chadara have never been happy being dominated by Jenova, but they never thought they had any chance of fighting back. He thought maybe these people could help them."

"Unfortunately, as I said, he had already reported them, and the next day a Jenova came to get them. He had stayed with them up to that point, trying to find a way to communicate, but hadn't had much success. When Jenova's guards came to take them, there was nothing he could do."

"Still, he gathered together those of like mind, to keep an eye on things. He hadn't been prepared the first time, but he was determined that he would be if by some chance he was given another opportunity. When he heard that the Jenova guard was returning to search the hills above the city, he kept a close eye on them. So when the guard was alerted to intruders in the city itself, he and the others were nearby. They intercepted the guard, and we all know the rest."

"Lucky for us they were there," Red mused.

"Indeed," Vincent said. "How far is it to Daris?"

Ellengio looked at him.

"Elena?"

Vincent nodded.

"I have to find her. I must talk to her."

"Don't tell me you're going to go running off by yourself again?" Cait questioned.

Ellengio spoke to the others.

"It's about a days march by chendu to the north," he said.

"Chendu?" Cait said.

"I know what he means," Vincent stated.

"Vincent, please stay with us," Ellengio said. "It doesn't seem likely you can do anything for Elena by yourself. From what I understand, Daris is a large city, much bigger than this one. If you're going to try to rescue her, wouldn't it be better if we all did it together?"

"I suppose," Vincent said slowly. "But are you going straight to Daris?"

"Let's just find out what they have to say first," Ellengio said. "Then we can decide."

Vincent did not reply.

Ellengio spoke again in the other language. This time he only talked to the older Chadara. After a minute he looked at the others.

"I asked him why it was that only he seems to know Cetra. He told me the language hasn't been used since before he was born. He never met a Cetra himself, although he had heard rumors of their existence in his youth, but now even those have faded. As far as he knows, there are none left."

Ellengio looked obviously disappointed.

"I'm sorry," Nipala said.

The Ancient shook his head.

"It's a big planet," he said. "Just because there are none around here doesn't mean there aren't any at all. I'm not ready to give up yet."

"You said the Jenova guards were searching the hills," Vincent said. "Could it be they're looking for our ship?"

Ellengio put the question to the Chadara.

"They don't know," he replied.

Red looked at Cait.

"Can you contact Cid?" he asked.

Cait stood motionless for a few moments.

"I'm not getting any answer," he said.

"No answer from the ship?" Nipala said in surprise.

Cait shook his head.

"No."

"That's not good," Red said.

The others were silent for a moment.

"Not good at all," Ellengio agreed, looking not at all pleased with this information. Just when things seemed to have finally started to go their way.

"What about the generator?" Cait questioned.

Ellengio talked with the Chadara once again.

"They've never heard of it," he said. "But, Rono had heard rumors, in his youth. It all happened two thousand years ago, and there are no records, but there are legends, among them a poem handed down through the generations. It was said to have been taught to the Chadara by the Cetra, and was supposed to be very important, though no one seemed to know exactly what it meant. It was taught to every Chadara as a child, almost like a tradition."

Rono recited the words, while Ellengio translated.

To close the circle

Take the sunlight stone

to the eye of Aramus

in the Valley of Everlasting Longing

Rono fell silent.

"That's it?" Cait questioned.

Ellengio did not reply.

"The sunlight stone," Red mused. "Could that be the crystal materia?"

"Then what's the eye of Aramus? And the Valley of Everlasting Longing?" Nipala questioned.

"Ellengio?" Cait said.

The Ancient seemed to be staring off into space, caught up in his own thoughts.

"I need a map," he said suddenly.

"What?" Cait said.

"A map, I need a map," he repeated. Then he started talking rapidly in Chadara.

Rono said something to Donalis, who started talking loudly to the other Chadara. Eventually one stepped forward. Donalis and the new Chadara spoke for a few moments, then looked at Rono, who talked to Ellengio.

"Damn," Ellengio said. "They don't have maps. They must find there way somehow."

He started off again in Cetra, talking excitedly and gesturing with his hands for emphasis. For a long time they seemed to be discussing things, then the Chadara who Donalis had spoken to turned and flew out of the building. He came back a few minutes later, with something in his hands. He stooped down beside Ellengio and dropped a pile of sand onto the floor.

Ellengio smoothed it out. He drew a line and a circle. Then he pointed to them and spoke to Rono, who spoke to the other Chadara. The Chadara nodded and a few moments later was adding features of his own. A few minutes later Ellengio turned to the others.

"They don't have maps," he repeated, "So we've had to come up with our own makeshift one." He pointed to the circle he had made. "This is Taltir, the city we are now in. The mountain range where we landed it called Yarmool." He pointed to another circle. "This is Daris. There are many other features here, but they are all unimportant, except for this."

He pointed to a jagged line the Chadara had drawn east of the city of Daris.

"What's that?" Cait asked.

Ellengio tapped the sand for emphasis. "That is where the field generator is located."