

IC HAPTER XXII: THE DARING ESCAPE

Reeve lay at the edge of a rocky crag, inspecting the city below him. It was much larger than the the pervious one, and seemed more organized. Though they were much fewer than in a city on his own planet, this one had roads winding through it, and the buildings seemed to be lined up in a more orderly fashion. The city was well lit, and he could see Chadara walking the streets, going about their business even at this late hour.

Which would make it that much more difficult for him.

The caravan he had been following had stopped in front of a group of buildings near the center of the city. Buildings which looked very different from what he had grown accustomed to seeing on this planet. He could only conclude that they were build, or at least designed, for Jenova.

He slowly shook his head. Things didn't look good at all. For the millionth time he wondered what the hell he was doing here. What had Vincent expected him to do, rush in and rescue the others all by himself? He had learned a lot since he had first joined Avalanche in their adventures, but he wasn't going to kid himself into thinking he was some kind of hero. He couldn't just go busting into that city and expect to survive. Maybe that was something Cloud or Zack might do, but they had been in SOLDIER, they had been trained to fight since they were kids. He knew he couldn't match that.

No, there was nothing he could do by force. He would have to depend on his wits and luck. He smiled ruefully. In other words, he was in big trouble.

He slid back down the slope to his waiting chendu. He pulled everything off it that he thought might be useful. The chendu did not protest, being content to chew on the sparse vegetation that grew here beside the road, ignoring him once again. He couldn't ride the beast into the city. He would be spotted immediately. He had seen that to the west the buildings came right up to the foothills of the mountains around it. That part of town was far from the main roads, where most of the activity was taking place. It seemed likely he could slip in that way without being noticed.

It took him over an hour to reach the edge of town. The hills were trackless, and even in the dim light he felt it necessary to stay out of view as much as possible. It didn't hurt to be cautious. He didn't think there was any rush, it was better to move slowly and not risk being seen.

A number of times he considered going back. He now knew where Cloud and the others were, and wasn't that what Vincent had wanted him to find out? It might be wiser to head back and get help from the others.

But he kept moving forward. True, he knew where Cloud was now, but what was to say they wouldn't be moved again? If he went back and they were moved, he would lose track of them completely, and then what would they do? No, it was best to find out what he could while he was here. Maybe, by some miracle, he could come up with a way to help them. And if, on the other hand, it looked impossible, he could always go back then.

There were no streets in the section of town he had decided to enter. The buildings here were quite similar to the town they had seen earlier, just a bit more organized. It was dark here too. There were no lights in this section, but the glow from the streets filtered through, making it light enough to see, and be seen.

He heard voices. He flattened himself to the side of one building, slipping his shotgun into his hands. He stood there unmoving for many minutes, and eventually the voices faded away. With a sigh of relief he started on his way again. He looked down at the shotgun. He didn't think it would be very wise to fire it here. The sound would probably have the whole city down on top of him in minutes.

The lights were brighter now, and he could tell he was nearing a more populated section of the city. He moved more slowly still, and eventually he peered around one building to see the main road in front of him.

He couldn't see any Chadara, but he could hear voices not too far away. He looked up the road, trying to gauge exactly where he was. To the north he spotted the tall spire of one of the unusual buildings. He wasn't too far from them, but he would have to cross the road to reach them.

There had been a Chadara blanket on the chendu, and he had brought it along. Now he wrapped it around himself. Not likely that anyone would mistake him for a Chadara, but if he was spotted in the semi darkness, from farther away, the blanket might fool them.

He inched his way out a little further. He saw some Chadara standing further down the road, one of them on a chendu. They didn't seem to be paying much attention to the road around them.

He slipped back into the shadows. Even if they weren't paying much attention, it was foolish to expose himself, not unless all other possibilities had been exhausted. The blanket wouldn't hide him in the light in the streets. He would stick out like a sore thumb.

He waited. The Chadara couldn't stand there forever. They would have to move on eventually. The road wasn't all that crowded this late at night. Perhaps if he waited he could get across when no one was nearby.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there. It seemed like a long time. He kept looking around nervously. The longer he sat there the more chance there was that someone would happen by. It was still dark, but he knew the nights here didn't last that long. He looked to the east, but there was no telltale lightening of the sky in that direction that would signal the coming of dawn.

A number of other Chadara passed by, but none of them even glanced in his direction. He was just about to get fed up and attempt to cross anyway, when the Chadara he was waiting for finally moved on.

He watched them until they vanished around a turn down the road. He looked around one more time, making sure the way was clear, but saw no one. He hesitated a moment more, then wrapped a fold of the blanket over his head and started across the road.

He wanted to run, but he figured if any Chadara happened by and saw him, the fact that he was running would draw their immediate attention. If he walked, and they were far enough away, they might not pay any attention.

"Shodun."

He felt a and icy hand wrapping around his heart at the sound of the voice.

He looked back. A Chadara in silver armor was standing in front of one of the buildings. He was too close to have come down the road. He must have been standing there all the time. Some kind of guard, perhaps, and Reeve hadn't even seen him.

"Shodun," the Chadara said again, starting toward him.

The assessment took Reeve about a second. His shotgun was hidden by his side, under the blanket, but it would be a simple matter to bring it to bear. The blast was bound to cause a stir, however. The Chadara wasn't that close, and the buildings on the other side of the road provided some cover. He thought he could reach them before the Chadara had a chance to react.

He ran.

There was a flash of blue light behind him. He didn't hang around to see what had caused it. He plunged between two buildings, throwing the blanket off and pulling out his shotgun. He ran on blindly, turning in random directions. He could hear shouts behind him, and it was obviously the voices of more than one Chadara. He knew it wouldn't be long before they organized themselves, and what chance would he have then?

"So much for wits and luck," he muttered.

He stopped for a moment in the shadow of a doorway, trying to catch his breath. They had the advantage now. They knew the city, and he didn't. There were many of them, and under those circumstances it would be impossible to avoid them for very long. If he could, it would probably be best to get out of the city as quickly as possible, but now he wasn't even sure which way would be the fastest way out. He looked around, but saw no sign of the unusual buildings. He had no idea where he was.

He brought his shotgun up as he heard shouts to the left, but they passed without coming close to him. He saw dark shadows fly by in the sky above him, and crept further back into the shadows. He knew he couldn't stand there much longer. He had to do something.

Where could he go. He couldn't get out of town, and he couldn't remain on the streets. Eventually they would be sure to find him. He needed someplace to hide, but where? He looked up at the dark openings in the buildings around him. He couldn't even reach them.

C'mon, he admonished himself. There had to be something he could do. Think!

He heard more shouts.

It was a big city, he thought. And all big cities had things in common. Food, water and power all had to be brought in. Wastes and runoff had to be removed.

Sewers.

He couldn't get into any of the buildings, but if they had sewers, there had to be some access to them.

He looked around. There was no one nearby. He ran again, heading back toward the lights. He knew it was more risky that way, but the lights were by the streets, and if they had a sewer system, that would be under the streets as well.

He came out onto a road, looking around quickly. There were no Chadara in sight at the moment, but he could hear yelling very close by. He looked up and down the road and was rewarded to see a dark grate near the edge of the street not far from him. He ran over to it. It looked very similar to the sewer covers on his own planet, just a little smaller, and with a handle built into the center of it. He grabbed hold of it and pulled, but it didn't budge. He heard a shout, and looked up to see two Chadara running toward him.

He pulled frantically on the cover, but it did not move. He looked at it. It had strange markings on it, probably instructions, but he couldn't understand any of it. He pulled again, and felt the handle move a bit. He twisted it, first to the right and then left. When he twisted to the left it moved easily, stopping after it had rotated forty five degrees. He pulled again and it came up easily in his hand.

The hole below was narrow and pitch black. He could not see any ladder or other device that he could climb down. He glanced up again and saw the Chadara closing fast. He hesitated a second, but he knew he had no choice. He jumped in.

It seemed like a long drop, though it only took a moment. For a split second he thought he was dead, but then he hit the water with a splash. It hadn't been that far at all. He stood up, for the water was only a few inches deep. He was unhurt. He could hear shouts above. He got up and stumbled away from the hole above him. Surprisingly, he found he could see. There seemed to be some kind of fungus or mold covering the walls that gave off a dim glow. It wasn't very bright, but it was enough to see by. He found he was in a narrow tunnel, barely high enough to stand. He couldn't see very far in either direction.

He heard a splash in the water behind him. The Chadara had come down as well. He turned and fired his shotgun blindly behind him. The blast sounding like an explosion in the narrow confines of the sewer. He didn't look back to inspect the damage, if he had caused any at all, but ran down the tunnel, around a turn.

He didn't know where he was going. Like he had up above, he just ran to get away. Hopefully the shotgun blast would make them a bit leery of following him and give him some time.

He slowed down a little. Time to do what? It didn't seem like he was much better off than before. The threat of capture was a little less imminent now, but that wasn't all that reassuring. He still had no plan, no way to find the others. He had no idea where he was, or which direction he had to go in. And down here there were no landmarks at all. He could wander around down here for months, going in circles.

But he didn't think they'd give him that much time. There had to be some Chadara here who knew the layout of the sewers. Eventually they would organize a search down here as well. He didn't have much time.

He pressed on, realizing there was little else he could do. At worst, he could just go back up somewhere along the line. The Chadara would not know where he would come out, and if he got lucky, it might be near the edge of town and he could slip away. At any rate, he felt he had a better chance down here than he had on the surface. At least here, they couldn't sneak up on him.

But as he progressed he realized there were some holes in his plan. For one thing, the sewer openings above him were extremely hard to spot. The fungus seemed to grow only near the water than ran along the bottom of the tunnels. Its light did not reach up to the ceiling, which he could barely make out. If he wasn't careful, he could walk right past the openings without even noticing them.

Even so, if he were careful and kept his eyes open, he could make them out. But there was an even bigger problem. The exits were in the middle of the ceiling, with no ladder, no way up. The Chadara undoubtedly used their wings to fly up to the exit. Unfortunately, he didn't have that luxury. He had no way to reach the exit, even if he saw one.

Perhaps coming down in the sewers hadn't been such a good idea after all.

But there was nothing he could do about it now. His only choice was to move on. Perhaps somewhere in the sewers, he could find something that he could climb on to get out.

As he progressed he began to notice a pattern in the sewer system. The walls of the sewer tunnel curved always to the left, in a long arc. He passed a number of side passages, and he noticed that they always seemed to run straight. He turned down one at random. It ran for a short distance and then came out at another intersection, turning left and right. The walls of this sewer also slowly and uniformly curved.

It seemed to him that the sewer was built in the shape of a wheel, running in circles underneath the city, with spokes connecting the concentric circles. The unusual buildings he had seen had been just about in the center of the city. Perhaps if he walked down the spokes to the center, he would be under those buildings.

He turned left and headed down one of the side passages 'spokes'. Even if his assumption was true, he still had no way to get up to the exits, but he wasn't going to worry about that right now. One thing at a time. He had heard no sound of pursuit since he had fired his shotgun. It was quite possible they weren't all that anxious to chase him through the dark sewers. Maybe this hadn't been such a bad idea after all.

A snarling growl echoed through the sewer.

Reeve jumped and turned around, shotgun in hand. What the hell was that? The growl had sounded like it had come from right behind him, but there was nothing there. He realized that in the sewer, all sounds seemed to be magnified.

He stood there for a moment, looking around nervously. That hadn't been a Chadara. Whatever it was, it had not sounded very friendly. Perhaps there was good reason the Chadaras were not pursuing him.

The growl sounded again, and this time even closer, if that were possible. He couldn't pinpoint it exactly, but it was coming from in front of him.

He turned around and walked rapidly away, trying to be as quiet as possible. Whatever it was, he wasn't anxious to run into it. Maybe if he just headed off in the other direction, it would leave him alone.

He reached another intersection. The walls were curving much more obviously than they had before. He could tell he was nearing the center.

The growl came from behind him again, raising the hair on the back of his neck. It sounded just as close as it had before. He turned and looked behind him again. He couldn't see very far. The fungus did not light the tunnel very well, but he thought he could make out a deeper darkness in the tunnel back there. He saw movement. Something was back there, something big.

He raised his gun and fired.

Once more the sound nearly deafened him. There was a screech behind him, and an animal sound like he had never heard before. He didn't waste anymore time looking, but turned and ran.

He no longer made any attempt at stealth. The creature had found him, was probably stalking him the whole time. He had been quiet before and it had found him anyway, so it seemed useless to continue to try. He had no idea what it was, but from the cries he heard coming from behind him, the shotgun only seemed to have pissed it off. He had no idea if he could outrun it, but there didn't seem to be any alternative.

He turned down another one of the spokes, and suddenly he saw light ahead, not the dim illumination of the fungi, but real light.

Splashing through the water, he struggled toward it. He could still hear the beast behind him. Its growls mingling with the sound of it splashing through the water as well. He could tell it was not far behind.

He came out into a huge cavern. It was circular, and he could see that he had reached the center of the system. The room was lit with blue overhead lights, high above in the ceiling. In the center of the room was a large pool filled with water. A dozen tunnels, identical to the one he had just exited, lined the walls, the runoff from all flowing into the pool.

Large pumps lined one wall. There was a metal stairway beside one leading up to a door. A real door!

Reeve ran up the steps. He turned the handle, but the door refused to budge. He suddenly spun around as the creature emerged from the tunnel.

It was similar to a giant rat. It was covered with long shaggy hair. He looked down at it to see large red eyes staring back up at him. The beast had long claws on the end of each limb, and its muzzle was pulled back in a snarl, exposing yellowed two inch long canines.

Reeve frantically pulled on the door, but it refused to budge. He threw himself against it, but it was metal, and quite solid. It barely moved.

He turned around again, bringing up his shotgun as the creature charged at him. The blast caught it's back, just behind the head. It screeched again, and blood flew, but the wound did not seem to slow it down. It threw itself at the stairs, which collapsed as it smashed into them.

Reeve was flung clear. He cried out in pain as he tumbled to the ground, right at the edge of the pool. He pulled himself up, in spite of the pain, and fired again. The creature was momentarily tangled in the ruins of the stair. This shot hit it in the head, and it screamed in rage as one eye went dark. The creature pulled itself out of the ladder, wounded but still full of fight.

Reeve backed up, looking around desperately. The creature was only a few yards away. The shotgun was empty now, and he knew he would never have time to reload before the beast was upon him. The tunnels were all too far away, not that he could get away even if he could reach them. He looked at the pool. The water was murky, and he could not tell how deep it was. Jumping into the water was not something he was anxious to do. The creature would probably just follow him, and in the water he would have no chance, not that he was any better off on land. Still, it looked like he had no choice.

He was just about to jump in when he spotted a small grate along the wall. It covered a dark hole that appeared to be there to control spillover from the pool. The grate was thin and looked like he could easily break through it. He couldn't tell where the narrow tunnel beyond it led, but one thing was obvious, the tunnel was much too narrow for the beast to follow him.

He turned and kicked quickly at the grate. It caved in easily. He heard a roar, and saw the creature lunging at him. The hole behind the grate was narrow and dark, and appeared to go almost straight down into the darkness. Without hesitation, and for the second time that night, he took the plunge.

He found himself sliding out of control down an almost vertical chute. There were no lights in here, of course, and the fungus that grew along the passageways above did not grow here. Frantically his arms shot out, trying to find something to grasp along the walls. But the walls were smooth. He thrust out his legs, trying to drive them against the opposite wall and slow himself down that way, but though the walls did not glow, they were deeply covered in some kind of slim, and his legs just slipped off. The light above him quickly faded, and in spite of all his efforts, he found himself plummeting completely out of control, downward into the unknown.

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Tifa fell to her knees as the Chadara roughly pushed her into the room.

"Are you alright?" Cloud said, rushing over to her.

She nodded as he wrapped a protective arm around her.

"Are you sure?" he said, looking into her eyes. She certainly didn't look alright. Her face was pale and she was drenched in sweat. Cloud looked up at the Chadara, hate blazing in his eyes.

"Bastards!" he said menacingly.

"Domenchu!" one of the Chadara said, taking out his rod and motioning towards the door.

"What did they do to you?" Cloud asked, ignoring the command.

Tifa shook her head slowly. She shuddered just thinking about it. She didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to think about it. All she wanted to do was shut it out of her mind. But she had to tell them something.

"It...it was horrible," she said slowly. "It was Jenova. It was...inside me."

"In..inside you?" Cloud said.

"In my head," she replied. "It...it was crawling around in my head. It saw everything...everything! Oh God, it was so horrible. Please, I...I don't want to talk about it."

She shivered and seemed near tears. Cloud pulled her to him.

"It's alright," he said gently. "It's over now. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"Domenchu!"

Cloud stood up, staring at the Chadara.

"What the hell did you do to her?" he shouted.

He took a step toward them. The Chadara instantly brought the rod around to point it at him. He felt Tifa grab hold of his arm.

"No, Cloud. Don't. They'll just zap you with that cattle prod again. I'm alright, really."

Cloud hesitated, looking back and forth between the Chadara and Tifa. Finally he relaxed.

"Fine," he said tightly. "But this isn't over yet."

"Domenchu!" the Chadara said yet again, waving the rod toward the door.

"I think they want us to go with them," Elena said.

"And I was just getting comfortable," Reno sighed.

Cloud reached down and helped Tifa to her feet.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

She nodded.

He hesitated a moment, looking at the others, wondering what was going on now. But whatever it was, he wasn't going to find out by standing around. There wasn't much they could do at the moment but go along.

He walked out of the room, his arm around Tifa's waist, supporting her as they walked. The others followed. Cloud stared at the Chadara as they moved down the hall. Even without a weapon he thought he could easily take the one who had spoken. They didn't seem to be all that wary. But there were six others, and he knew he couldn't get them all. And besides, there were probably plenty of others around to come to their aid. It just wasn't the right time.

The Chadara led them down the hall. Cloud looked around as they walked, keeping track of how many Chadara he saw, and where they congregated. He also tried to see into any rooms they passed, as well as memorizing the path they were taking, knowledge that might come in handy in the future.

They reached a stone stairway. They had to watch their footing as they went down, as the steps were unusually narrow and steep, not really made for human feet. Tifa stumbled once, but Cloud's sure grip prevented her from falling.

They seemed to go down a long way. They hadn't gone up at all when they had first been brought in, so it was obvious they were now underground. They came out into a long hallway, with those strange blue glowing sticks lining the walls. They walked down the passageway, and soon came to an area lined with cells.

"Looks like we're being sent to the dungeon," Reno remarked.

"Yeah," Cloud said, looking around. That was exactly what this reminded him of.

"Porta!" the Chadara commanded.

"Whatever," Elena mumbled.

The Chadara glared at them, but then turned and strode forward again. He stopped shortly thereafter in front of one of the cells. He pulled out a key and opened the door, then stood to the side.

They hesitated just a moment, then filed into the room. The area was dimly lit, the far end of the cell shrouded in darkness. The floor was covered with straw, and they could barely make out what looked like cots lining the back wall.

"What lovely accommodations," Reno commented dryly.

The Chadara closed and locked the door. He looked at them for a moment, then turned and led the other Chadara away. In moments they were alone.

"Wonder what made them bring us here?" Aeris pondered.

"Do you think it has something to do with what happened to you?" Elena questioned, looking at Tifa.

"I don't know," Tifa replied slowly.

"The area we were in may have just been a holding area," Reno suggested. "Just until they figured out what to do with us."

"So you think they're just going to let us rot in here?" Elena questioned.

"At least they haven't killed us," Aeris pointed out.

"Give them time," Reno replied grimly.

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

"Whatdya think?" Reno replied. "We wait. Again."

"Wait for what?" Elena said. "For them to come back and do to us what they did to Tifa? Or worse?"

"How the hell should I know?" Reno replied. "If you've got any ideas, now would be a good time."

Elena fell silent. Tifa felt a wave of nausea wash over her. She was still suffering from the aftereffects of her ordeal. She grabbed hold of Cloud for support.

"Are you alright?" he said sharply.

"I'll be fine," she replied. "I just need to lie down."

She turned and walked slowly towards the cots at the back of the room. Cloud followed her with his gaze, concern plain on his face.

She stopped suddenly, and he could hear the faint intake of her breath.

"Tifa?" he said.

She didn't reply. He quickly walked over to her to see her staring at one of the cots. In the dim light it was hard to see, and at first he thought the cot was covered with a pile of rags, but then he made out a face amid the rags, and he realized there was someone on the cot.

A young boy, and it was not a Chadara.

"What the hell?" he blurted out.

The others quickly came up to stand beside them. Cloud could see from the shocked looks on their faces that they were just as surprised as he.

"Is he...human?" Elena was the first to break the silence.

"Ridiculous," Reno said. "How could a human get here?"

"No," Aeris said suddenly. "Not human."

"Gimoaha tu Cetarala?" she said.

The boy did not reply. Aeris took a step forward. The boy cringed back in fear.

"We're not going to hurt you," Aeris said kindly. Slowly she took another step forward, then stooped down and reached out her hand. The boy pushed himself back against the wall, staring at her in obvious fear. Aeris smiled at him.

"Gimoaha tu Cetarala?" she said again.

The boy looked back and forth at them, then slowly focused on Aeris.

"Du...du mon."

Aeris turned to look at the others.

"Not human. He's a Cetra."

The stood there for a moment in silence.

"Of course," Cloud said softly.

"So there *are* others," Elena said.

Aeris sat down on the cot beside the boy, talking softly in Cetra to him. Slowly he seemed to get over his fear. For a long time the two talked, and at first Aeris did most of it, the boy obviously still fearful and reluctant to say anything. But

gradually, as it became clear to him that they were no threat, he began to open up and talk more. For a long time they sat there. The others remained silent, realizing this was best left to Aeris. After a while Reno wandered off, looking over the rest of their cell, inspecting the bars and the walls. Tifa lay down on one of the empty cots, while Cloud and Elena just stood there patiently. Eventually Aeris turned toward them.

"He says his name is Jinn. He comes from an area south of here called Gorthan. It's a mountainous region."

"What place around here isn't?" Reno muttered.

Aeris gave him a look and he shut up.

"It's a desolate area," she continued. "His parents lived there, hiding from Jenova, along with a few rebel Chadara. There were never many of them, and they knew they could never actively oppose Jenova. All those who had tried that had long since perished. They did not seek any trouble, just wanted to be left alone."

"It was the only life he ever knew, and it was difficult. Always in hiding, always looking behind their back, always worried that somehow they would give themselves away, or be found somehow. There were no other Cetra children, and few Chadara children either. It was a hard life for a child."

Aeris paused and patted the young boy's hand.

"But eventually they were discovered. They never found out exactly how, but it wasn't a small patrol that happened upon them, it was a large organized force, so his father suspected they had been betrayed. He never had the chance to find out for sure, for both his parents were killed, along with most of the Chadara. He was brought back here and imprisoned. He's not sure why he was kept alive, or what plans they have for him. He's not even sure how long he's been here, but it's seemed like a long time."

Aeris fell silent and looked at the others.

"Are there any other Cetra around, that he knows about?" Cloud asked.

Aeris shook her head.

"As far as he knows, he's the last one."

Cloud nodded and they fell silent, pondering this new information. It didn't look like it would be of much use to them, but Cloud thought the mere fact that the boy existed was significant. If he was here, there was a good chance there could be more Cetra, in spite of the fact that Jinn hadn't seen any.

"What was that?"

Cloud looked at Aeris, thinking the question had been directed at him. But she was staring off into space.

She slowly stood up, looking up at the ceiling.

"I don't understand. What?"

"Aeris?" he said, a frown forming on his face. But then he shut his mouth as he realized she'd either lost her mind, or, more likely, she was speaking to the planet.

"I'm sorry, what you are saying is not clear," she said.

Cloud saw the others looking at Aeris as well. Tifa looked thoughtful, but the expression on the two Turks' faces was almost comical. Elena looked at Cloud expectantly.

"She's talking to the planet," he said quietly, trying not to distract her.

Reno shook his head. Elena gave Cloud a lost look.

"She can do that? Even here?" she said.

Cloud nodded.

"I guess so," he replied.

"No, don't go," Aeris said. "I can't understand. I can't..."

She lowered her head and looked at the others. They stood there in silence for a moment.

"So?" Reno interjected. "What the hell was that all about?"

Aeris shrugged.

"The planet was trying to tell me something. Something important. But the message was garbled. I couldn't understand it. I think something was blocking it."

"Something?" Elena said.

"Jenova," Cloud pronounced.

"Probably," Aeris agreed. "Though I can't say for sure."

"You couldn't understand anything at all?" Tifa questioned.

"Not really," Aeris replied. "There's some kind of danger. Nearby and unexpected. That's about all."

"That's it?" Reno said derisively. "I could have told you that."

"I'm sorry," Aeris said apologetically. "There was more, I just couldn't understand it."

"Okay," Cloud said. "It's all right." There was nothing Aeris could do if Jenova was interfering. But Reno was right, that information didn't tell them anything.

"So why do you think they put us in here with Jinn?" Tifa asked.

Cloud shrugged.

"I don't know," he replied. "I guess this is just the place where they keep all their prisoners."

Reno tapped on the wall behind them.

"Well, seems they picked a good place. These walls are quite solid. Although," he continued, running his finger between two blocks of stone, "The mortar between these stones seems to be a little weak from age. If we had some kind of tool, I'll bet we could dig through it."

Cloud looked at the wall dubiously.

"How long would that take us?" he questioned.

"Depends on the tool," Reno replied.

Cloud searched through his pockets.

"Does anybody have anything we can use?" he questioned.

"Oh yeah, I got a jackhammer right here in my back pocket," Reno retorted.

Cloud just looked at the others.

"The Chadara took everything we have," Elena said.

"Maybe Jinn has something?" Tifa suggested doubtfully. The rags the boy was dressed in were probably his only possessions.

Aeris spoke to him for a few moments. Then they both stood up and she looked at the others in surprise.

"He says he does," she replied. "He was afraid to tell us at first, but he thinks he can trust us now. Apparently he's had the same idea."

The boy grabbed hold of the cot and pulled it away from the wall. He brushed through the straw that had lain beneath it and picked up something. They all came forward and Cloud saw it was a metal spoon.

"A spoon?" Reno said. "Oh that's helpful. It would take us months."

"Would you quit your complaining," Aeris said. Reno looked at her in surprise.

"Look at the wall," she said.

Jinn had gone over to the wall and was now pointing to one of the stones. They inspected it and saw that the mortar had already been mostly stripped away.

"He's already started!" Cloud said.

"Uh huh," Aeris replied. "I told you he had the same idea. He's been doing it for a long time, whenever he was alone. As you can see, he's nearly through."

Cloud stopped down and examined the stone. Jinn had indeed scrapped away most of the mortar already. It didn't look like it would take them long to finish the job, even with an instrument as ill suited as a spoon.

"Excellent," he proclaimed.

"How do we know there's not solid rock behind that thing?" Elena questioned.

Cloud's excitement level dropped a notch. That was a good question. He looked at Aeris, who posed the question to Jinn.

"He says to listen," she said.

Before Cloud could ask what she meant, she sat down on the floor and pressed her ear to the wall. They all stood there looking at her for a moment, until she turned toward them.

"I hear water," she said.

"Water?" Cloud repeated.

"An underground river?" Tifa suggested.

"Perhaps," Cloud replied. "Whatever it is, it proves there something back there. There doesn't seem to be much more to go on this block, and with all of us here to take turns it shouldn't take too long. I'll start off. Reno, you keep an eye out for any Chadara."

Without further ado, Cloud picked up the spoon and started on the wall. It was not an easy tool to use. He had to use the handle end, and, in spite of the effort it took him, it gouged out only tiny portions at a time. He kept at it until his hand started to go numb, then handed it off to Elena.

They had no idea how long they worked. There was no way to tell time. They couldn't even tell if it was night or day. Eventually Elena sat back, rubbing her hands. She looked at Reno.

"Your turn."

Reno hesitated.

"I don't think I can do it," he said, looking down at his hands, then back up at Elena. "I've got a touch of arthritis. I can't do dexterous work like that."

Elena mouth dropped open.

"Reno, you are so full of it," she exclaimed. "You never mentioned anything like that. Besides, you're too damn young to have arthritis."

"I am not," Reno replied defensively. "It can happen at any age. It depends on the type. Of course I never mentioned it before, I never had any need to. It's not something I go about advertising, you know."

Elena stared at him.

"I don't believe you!" she said. "I can't believe you're making excuses not to help us! I know you're a lazy bastard, but this is a new low for you."

"It's true!" Reno exclaimed.

"Bull!" she retorted.

"Keep it down!" Cloud hissed.

They both shut up, just staring at one another.

"We don't have time for this," Cloud continued. "Reno, we all know you're lying. Just pick up the damn spoon and lend a hand, for once in your life."

"I'm telling you, I can't do it," Reno said stubbornly. "You believe me, don't you Aeris?"

Aeris looked at him for a moment.

"I...uh..," she stammered.

"Oh give me the damn spoon," Tifa cut in, stepping over to Elena. "I'll do it."

"No," Elena said, pulling it away. "It's Reno's turn. I'm not going to let him weasel out of it."

"Damn, Elena," Reno said. "I might expect this kind of skepticism from them, but not from a fellow Turk."

"Oh don't give me that comrade in arms story," Elena retorted. "I know you better than that."

"I'm telling the truth," Reno insisted.

"Stop it," Cloud spoke up. "Dammit, we don't have time for this. It's been hours. We don't know when the Chadara will come back, but they're bound to stop in here eventually. I don't think they're planning on starving us to death. We need to get moving and we don't have time for Reno's stupid games. If he doesn't want to help, fine, he can sit there all he wants. Just don't expect us to be concerned if he needs help sometime. Elena, give the spoon to Tifa."

Elena hesitated a moment, then handed it over with a sigh. Tifa started on the wall while Elena glanced darkly at Reno.

"Asshole," she muttered.

"I heard that," Reno said.

"Good!" she snapped.

Thankfully, they fell silent after that. Cloud stayed near the bars now, watching for any hint of the Chadara. Tifa scrapped away until her hands began to cramp up, then passed the spoon on to Aeris. There was still no way to tell time, but Cloud suspected it was late at night. Elena had fallen asleep on one of the cots, and he could feel his own lids getting heavy. But he perked up immediately when he heard Aeris voice.

"I think it moved."

The others came over beside her immediately. She stood up, getting out of the way. Cloud bent down and pushed on the stone. He did feel it give a little bit.

"It's loose," he said excitedly.

He strained against it.

"C'mon, baby," he muttered.

At first the stone moved only an inch or two, but pushing alternately on each side slowly loosened it even more, and eventually, with a cracking of the remaining mortar, the stone suddenly gave way, falling back to reveal a dark hole in the wall.

"We're through," Cloud said triumphantly and a bit anticlimactically.

Aeris woke up Elena while Cloud slipped through the hole. Inside he was surprised to see what was obviously an artificial tunnel. Water ran a few inches deep down the center of it. A strange growth on the lower part of the walls gave off a faint light.

"It looks like it's part of the sewer system," he said, sticking his head back through the hole again. "This is even better, cause we know there's got to be a way out now. Hurry up!"

The others quickly followed him through the hole. Reno was the last to go through, and had the hardest time. The hole was not large, and Reno, even though he was not exactly heavy, still could just barely squeeze through. If they had had Barret with them, he never would have made it.

But eventually they were all standing in the tunnel.

"So which way now?" Tifa questioned.

"Pick a direction at random," Cloud said. "Just as long as we get far away from here."

"Let's go this way," Aeris suggested, pointing to the left.

No one disagreed and they ran down the tunnel. They didn't know how soon their escape might be noticed. It could be hours before the Chadara came back, or minutes. But Cloud figured the faster they got away from here, the better.

"Look for any way that leads up," Reno said, not very helpfully.

Cloud nodded but did not look back. The tunnels seemed to be a huge maze, and it was difficult keeping track of where they were going. Cloud had no idea how big this system was, but if it served the entire city, it was probably very big. They could wander around down here for a very long time without finding a way out.

They came to an intersection and halted.

"Which way?" Reno said.

Cloud shrugged. He looked down each tunnel, but they all seemed identical.

"Tolant!" Jinn said, pointing to the left.

Cloud looked at the others.

"Sounds good to me," he said, and started them down that way.

There were more twists and turns. The walls of the tunnel were curved, and he wondered if they were going around in circles. Damn, what he wouldn't give for a good compass right now. Of course, for all he knew, a compass might not work on this planet.

They suddenly emerged into a large chamber. Three other tunnels led into it. There was a pool of slime filled water in the center of the room. But the thing that caught their immediate attention was a spiral metal staircase that let up into the ceiling.

"Think that's a way out?" Tifa questioned.

"Don't know," Cloud replied. "But it goes in the right direction."

He started over toward it, but even as he did so heard the sound of running feet, and three Chadara emerged from one of the other tunnels.

"Damn!" Cloud shouted. Without hesitation he charged right at them. All three of them had the rod like weapons. The one in front lifted his up and pointed it at Cloud.

"Cloud, watch out!" Tifa yelled.

There was a flash of blue light, but at the last second Cloud threw himself to the side and the bolt hit the ground harmlessly where he had stood a moment before. The Chadara fumbled with his weapon when he saw he had missed, pointing it at Cloud again, but it did not discharge. A moment later Cloud reached him. He kicked out, and the rod when flying across the room. Cloud dodged in and drove right into the stomach of the Chadara, sending him tumbling backwards, into his comrades.

The last one in line managed to remain on his feet. He fired a blast from his weapon, striking both Cloud and the Chadara he had run into. They both slumped to the ground.

The second Chadara leapt to his feet, weapon ready as Tifa and Reno charged at him. He fired. Tifa threw herself to the ground, sliding underneath the shot. She heard Reno cry out. She looked back to see that he had taken the blast. She kicked out, taking the Chadara's feet from beneath him, and sending him sprawling to the ground again, and sending his weapon clattering away as well. She leaped to her feet, straight at the third Chadara, but the one on the ground suddenly reached out and grabbed hold of her leg, nearly dropping her to the floor once more. She turned and kicked it in the head, and it had the good sense to let go. She turned toward the third Chadara once more. But the delay had bought the third one time for it's weapon to recharge. She took only a step toward it when she was caught in the blast from it's weapon.

Elena was right behind Reno, protected from the shot that had taken him down. Now she rushed forward as she saw Tifa go down as well. She had seen from the other shots that it took a few moments for the Chadara weapon to recharge. She had to use that to her advantage.

She charged at the last one. It stood there for a moment, then suddenly lunged forward, using the rod like a club. She ducked underneath and punched the Chadara in the stomach. He stumbled back, but still held onto his weapon. She waded in with a quick combination of punches and kicks, sending the creature reeling back, but it stubbornly refused to drop it's weapon. It swung at her again, and she stepped back. Suddenly it turned the weapon around, pointing the business end at her.

She fell to the ground. But instead of firing the Chadara lunged forward, driving the weapon into her stomach. She cried out in pain and rolled to the side, realizing she had been tricked, the weapon was still not ready to fire. She turned to look up as the creature stepped back and leveled the weapon at her again.

There was a flash of blue light, and the Chadara fell to the ground.

Elena turned to see Aeris holding one of the rods. It took Elena a moment to catch her breath.

"Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome," Aeris replied.

Elena got up and they tended to the others. They had seen before that the weapon seemed to have no long lasting ill effects. In a few minutes all of them were back on their feet again.

The Chadara Aeris had shot started to stir. Reno picked up another of the rods and casually zapped it again.

"Was that really necessary?" Aeris said.

"I think so," Reno replied.

"Well, at least we've got some weapons now," Cloud said. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

They started once more for the spiral staircase. But suddenly something plunged out of a vent in the ceiling, right into the middle of the pool of water in the center of the room.

"What the hell?" Cloud exclaimed. They all turned to face the water, weapons ready. A figure stood up in the center of the pool, dripping wet with the greenish liquid that filled it, and started to cough.

"Reeve!" Aeris exclaimed.

Reeve stumbled to the edge of the pool of water, and Cloud and Reno reached down and hauled him out. They stood there looking at him in shock.

"What are you doing here?" Aeris said.

Reeve coughed some more, then managed to catch his breath. He looked down at himself, dripping wet and covered with slime, then up at the others.

"I'm here to rescue you!" he announced.