

CHAPTER XXV: THE HEAT IS ON

"How much further do you think it is?" Altim questioned.

He was shading his eyes, looking at the plain ahead of them. A plain that seemed to go on and on forever into the distance. To the left a low line of mountains seemed to have been escorting them on their way all day long, but ahead he could see nothing but a few straggled plants amid the cracked earth and sand.

"No way to be sure," Ellengio replied. "Rono said about two days travel."

Altim said nothing more, the look on his face making it unnecessary. Ellengio looked down at the chendu he was riding as Red and Nipala padded up beside him.

"If only we could make these blasted beasts go faster," Ellengio muttered.

"Slow does seem to be their only speed," Red observed.

"I don't even know why we bother riding them," Altim spoke up once again. "We could go faster on foot."

"Maybe for a while," Ellengio replied. "They do seem slow, but they never seem to get tired. And they do save us the energy it would take to walk ourselves. We'd be exhausted by now if we had to hike on foot all this way in this heat."

He glanced at Red and Nipala, who seemed perfectly comfortable walking along beside them.

"Unfortunately we human types don't have the stamina of you two."

Red nodded but did not reply.

"We're lucky to have the beasts," they heard Vincent's voice from the back. The Chadara had practically forced them to take the beasts when they had left the city. They rode in single file, with Ellengio at the head, followed by Altim, then Cait, and then Vincent bringing up the rear. Red and Nipala trotted along beside them, having refused to even attempt to ride, saying their four legs would let them keep up just fine. Altim wondered if they knew just how lucky they were.

"Yeah, real lucky," Altim stated. "I admit they may be useful, but I'm not sure it's worth it. It wouldn't even be so bad if they didn't stink so!"

Ellengio nodded ruefully. The creatures did seem to give off a particularly foul odor. He reached down and rubbed his hand against the back of the beast he was riding. He lifted and looked at it.

"Their skin seems to have a waxy coating on it," Ellengio stated. "I think that's what smells so bad."

"Well, whatever it is, I wish could find some way to get rid of it," Altim said disgustedly. "I think the smell is going to be in my nostrils forever."

"My guess is the coating serves some purpose," Red surmised. "Maybe it protects them from the heat somehow. It would be interesting to examine it more closely."

Altim made a face.

"Great, they sweat and you want to keep it."

"Are those storm clouds to the west?" Vincent questioned.

They all turned to the left, looking up at the sky above the mountains. They could all see a wall of dark clouds creeping up the horizon at a rapid rate.

Ellengio shaded his eyes and stared at them.

"It certainly looks that way," he said. "I wasn't sure this planet even had storms. They seem to be headed in our direction. I wonder if we'll be getting some rain."

"That would be something, now wouldn't it?" Cait stated.

"Are you sure?" Altim said doubtfully. "I was under the impression it never rained here."

Ellengio shrugged.

"We don't know for sure," he replied. "They look like storm clouds, but this isn't our planet. They might not carry any rain at all for all we know."

"Well, I hope they do," Nipala spoke up. "It would be a pleasure with all this heat."

Ellengio looked down at the two. They did not seem to be suffering as much as the others. Red's kind came from the desert regions of Cosmo Canyon, and had been bred to tolerate the heat, though not on this scale. He hadn't thought it bothered them.

"I wouldn't mind a little rain myself," was all he said.

They rode on. The ground around them was almost perfectly flat. The earth cracked and flaky in most places. There was very little vegetation, and it seemed this area was the most inhospitable they had seen since they had arrived here. Ellengio kept his eyes on the clouds as they progressed. The dark mass moved inexorably toward them, the movement plainly visible. The clouds must have been moving very fast.

The chendu seemed to be going even slower than ever. They kept turning to look to the west, bellowing every now and then. Ellengio frowned as he watched their behavior. The storm seemed to make them uneasy. Was that because there were so few here, or did they have a more substantial reason to be upset?

"The chendu are nervous," Vincent stated.

"I see," Ellengio replied.

They had been traveling straight north, but now he turned and led them more to the west, toward the long line of mountains. His eyes scanned the plan, but he saw no sign of anything that could offer them some shelter, just in case they might need it. There might be something closer to the mountains.

The clouds rolled closer above them, covering the sun. At first they felt grateful for the shade. But it didn't really seem to make it that much cooler. In fact, Ellengio found he was sweating more than ever. The air had been dry, and what little breeze there had been had evaporated their sweat and cooled them. But the moisture content of the air must have gone way up in just the last hour. Now it almost seemed as if they were walking through a sauna. The sweat beaded on his brow now and did not evaporate, but instead dripped down his forehead until he reached up and wiped it off on his sleeve. The wind was still there, had picked up in fact, but now it was blowing from the west, and was so hot it was almost painful to breathe it.

"I am feeling very uncomfortable," Vincent stated calmly.

"I think I'm going to die!" Altim said more realistically, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"I don't like this at all," Ellengio said.

The clouds were almost right over them now. To the west the sky was black with them. The odd thing was, there was no thunder or lightning. Almost no sound at all, in fact, just the faint whisper of the breeze. Somehow that made it seem even more ominous.

"I wish it would start raining!" Altim exclaimed.

Ellengio looked up, thinking exactly the same thing. The clouds were overhead now, and if this were their own planet, they would probably be getting deluged by now. But here, who knew? There might be no rain in those clouds at all. It might just be a windstorm, or even nothing at all.

The chendu abruptly stopped dead.

Ellengio spurred it on for a moment, smacking it with the riding stick, but it refused to budge. He looked at the others and saw they were in the same predicament.

"What's wrong with these things?" Cait exclaimed.

Ellengio shook his head.

"I don't know."

Vincent slid down off his and looked up at the sky.

"I have a feeling they know something we don't."

"But what?" Altim said. "Even if we get a little rain, even if we get a lot of rain. What's the worst that could happen?"

A moment later a drop of water splashed into the fur of the chendu he was atop.

"It's starting," he said. "Maybe they just don't like to walk in the rain."

He lifted his head to look up. A drop hit him in the face and he turned his head away, crying out and wiping his hand across his face.

"Owww," he yelled. "It's hot!"

The others just looked at him for a moment. Then another drop landed on Vincent's hand. He snatched it back and quickly wiped it off. He looked at his hand and saw a red mark where the drop had landed.

He heard a hiss from Red and saw him shaking his head violently.

"The rain is scalding hot!" Vincent said.

"How can that be?" Nipala said, jumping jitteringly back and forth on her feet.

"Not sure. It must be passing through some kind of layer of super-heated air," Red mused.

"But wouldn't the super-heated air rise?" Cait questioned.

"Who cares!" Altim interrupted. "It's coming down harder. We've got to find some shelter!"

"Well there's no place out here," Cait stated, looking around. "Maybe there's someplace closer to the mountains."

"There are some rocks over there, perhaps they will provide some cover," Vincent pointed to the west.

The others all slid off their mounts. Altim immediately started off.

"Hold on," Ellengio commanded. He loosened the harness and pulled the course blanket that protected the chendu from underneath it. He turned and flung it on top of Nipala. "Take anything you can that will offer some protection."

The rain was hot enough to burn exposed flesh, but even a thin layer of clothing offered enough protection to prevent them from being damaged, at least, at the rate the rain was coming down at the moment. Ellengio had no idea if even their clothing would protect them if it started to come down harder, and looking up at the ever darkening sky, he thought that quite likely.

"Hurry up!" Altim shouted. He had already pulled the blanket off his chendu and was pacing nervously. The rainfall was steadily increasing. Even with the protection, there seemed no way to keep some rain from hitting exposed skin. The air around them seemed to be filled with steam, and they could barely make out the rocks that Vincent had pointed out only moments before.

Cait had pulled the last blanket off the chendu and wrapped it awkwardly around Red.

"Let's go!" Ellengio said.

"What about the chendu?" Nipala questioned.

Ellengio paused for a second.

"They'll have to take care of themselves," he said.

"If they're too stupid to get out of this, it's their own fault!" Altim stated.

Seeing that they were all ready he started off again, running quickly toward the rocks. The others followed more slowly. There was no way to fasten the blankets around Red and Nipala, so Vincent and Ellengio ran beside them, holding the blanket's over them as best they could. But it was awkward and they couldn't go very fast. By now the rain was coming down heavily around them. The air was filled with steam and puddles were forming on the ground.

"Weird freaking weather," Vincent observed.

Ellengio looked down at Red and Nipala, splashing through the puddles with no protection on their feet.

"Are you all right?" he questioned.

Red nodded.

"Our fur is providing some protection," he replied. "And our paws have heavy pads on them. It's somewhat painful, but we can bear it."

Red looked ahead, squinting in the steamy heat. The worst part was that occasionally a drop of water would get in his eye, which was very painful, but they had to see where they were going. Not that it helped much, for in the steamy air they could now barely see a few feet in front of them. The rocks they had seen were completely hidden from view, and the chendu behind them as well. They were running on a featureless plain, with no landmarks. For all he knew they could be going in a totally wrong direction by now.

"We can't go on like this," he said. "We don't even know if we're going in the right direction."

"What choice do we have?" Altim called back from ahead of them. They could barely make him out in the foggy air, but he seemed to have slowed down and was looking around as he walked, plainly unsure of the direction.

"Are we going the right way?" Nipala asked fearfully.

Ellengio looked ahead of them.

"I'm not sure," he said hesitantly. Usually his sense of direction was perfect, but now he wasn't sure. The rain seems to be confusing him somehow.

Ahead of them Altim came to a halt, looking around, obviously at a loss.

"This is foolish," Red muttered. "It's insane to go running around in this without any idea where we're going."

"You got a better idea?" Vincent questioned.

Red shook his head. There didn't seem much they could do but stand there and suffer. On this open plain there was no shelter. It would have been wiser now, he realized, to have skirted along the mountains instead of striking out onto the exposed plain. But how could they have known? It was a new planet to them, they were bound to make mistakes. Was this mistake going to result in their slowly being roasted out in the middle of nowhere?

"We have to do something!" Altim exclaimed, fear plain in his voice. "I can barely breathe."

"Why didn't Rono warn us about this?" Cait said plaintively.

"They probably assumed we already knew," Red replied. "It this was an ordinary occurrence, and he no reason to believe otherwise, Rono probably had not even thought about it. It would be like reminding someone on our planet not to go out in a hurricane."

Red looked around again. The rain was coming down hard now. All of their clothing was soaked, and though it still offered protection, they were all almost unbearably uncomfortable. And suddenly a thought came to him. If this were a common occurrence, perhaps the life here had acclimated to it.

He hadn't noticed at the time, but now he realized the chendu had seem totally unconcerned by the rain. They had just stood there, seeming in no discomfort, even after Ellengio and the others had removed the blankets from them. They had all assumed the beasts were too stupid to realize what was happening, but did that really make any sense? If the rain damaged them and they just stood there, it seemed unlikely that any would still be around. That didn't seem like a particularly valuable survival trait.

"We have to go back," he said suddenly.

"Huh?" Cait questioned.

"We have to go back to the chendu," he said firmly.

"What are you talking about?" Altim said. "Those stupid things didn't even know enough to find shelter."

"Do you think there's any shelter out here large enough to hold them?" Red questioned. "No, most of this continent is made up of open plain, with almost no shelter. If we assume this rain is a common meteorological feature, then they must have some protection against it."

Without waiting to argue anymore the turned around and headed back as best as he could determine. Ellengio, holding the blanket against him, had no choice but to go along. The others stood there for a moment, then followed.

They could not see the chendu, but Red was sure they hadn't gone very far. Hopefully they would be able to find them again. He didn't think much of their chances if they didn't.

They made their way back as best they could. The rain was a steady downpour now. Even though they were all well covered the water still seemed to find it's way to their skin, slipping under hood and blanket and into the smallest uncovered area between their garments. There were puddles everywhere now, and the water splashed up and over their shoes, and in spite of the padding on their paws, Ellengio could see both Red and Nipala were having difficulty walking. The water seemed to form a permanent mist all around them, and their breath came in painful ragged gasps.

"How far away are they?" Vincent questioned, somehow his voice still sounding calm.

"I don't know," Red said. But even as he did so, Altim, who had slipped into the lead once again, spoke.

"There they are!"

Red looked ahead and saw the dim forms of the beasts shimmer into view in front of them. The chendu stood just as they had left them, unmoving in the rain, heads down, but apparently unaffected. The beasts made no motion as they came up beside them. Red noticed that their eyes were closed. He stood beside one, examining it for a moment. Coarse hair covered almost it's entire body, but there were a few exposed spots, mostly on it's underside and it's face. Red noticed that the waxy residue seemed to be thickest in those spots. He wiped some off with his paw and immediately felt the pain and heat lessen.

"This coating seems to offer some protection," he said.

Ellengio looked at him for a moment, then wiped his hand along the chendu as well. He rubbed his hands together then held them out in the rain.

"He's right!" he exclaimed. "This gunk they're coated with protects them from the heat. Everyone smear it on any exposed skin. The chendu seem to have more than enough."

None of them looked too pleased with the idea.

Altim ran a finger along the side of one of the chendu, then looked at it with a frown on his face.

"This stuff?" he said distastefully.

"Yes!" Ellengio said firmly, already wiping his hand on the underside of the beast, which seemed to have the greatest concentration of the coating.

Somewhat reluctantly the others followed suit. Altim grimaced as he rubbed some of it on his hands.

"Oh this is disgusting!" he muttered.

"I couldn't agree more," Ellengio said, the smell nearly making him choke as he smeared some on his face.

"I think I'd rather die," he heard Nipala mumble.

Despite their groaning, eventually everyone was covered with the waxy residue.

"So what do we do now?" Altim said unhappily.

Red shrugged. The rain was still coming down heavily, and stung their eyes, the only exposed part of them still not covered. He looked at the chendu, thinking undoubtedly that was why they had their eyes closed too. In fact, now that he thought about it, that was probably why they had stopped in the first place. He was beginning to have a new appreciation for the beasts.

"We wait," he said.

There was more grumbling, but Red was right, there wasn't much else for them to do. They were still very uncomfortable, and their chest's still hurt from the heat of the air being taken into their lungs, but it was bearable. The rain had turned from something life threatening into a mere inconvenience.

It was more than an hour later that the rain finally began to taper off. The clouds that had rolled overhead moved off to the east, and the sun broke through, beating down on them with undiminished force. The steamy air cleared up, and the water on the ground quickly began to evaporate in the late afternoon sun. The chendu lifted their heads, and one of them bellowed mournfully.

"Looks like our mounts are ready once again," Vincent stated.

"Bout time," Cait grumbled.

They remounted the chendu, who started on their way again without protest. They resumed their usual line ahead formation. Red walked along beside Ellengio up front.

"That was good thinking Red," Ellengio said.

Red just nodded.

"We've got to be careful," Ellengio continued. "Wandering around on a strange planet like this, it's surprising we didn't run into something like this sooner. In fact, if you think about it, it's a wonder we're still alive at all. Almost anything we run into could be deadly, and we may not even know until it's too late. I suspect we've been mighty lucky to have even made it this far. What I wouldn't give to have a guide."

Red's head bobbed up and down in agreement.

"Considering that we're wandering around pretty much clueless, I think you're right," Red said. "But there's nothing we can do about it. In hindsight it's easy to say we should have stuck closer to the mountains, or paid more attention to the chendu. But I don't think there really was anything we could have done to anticipate that. Whatever happened, we survived it, and that's the important thing."

"True," Ellengio said thoughtfully. "But that doesn't mean we will the next time. And given our lack of knowledge about this planet, it seems almost certain there will be a next time. I think the sooner we get to Meredith valley, the better off we will be."

"How much farther is it?" Red questioned.

Ellengio looked ahead.

"Not sure exactly, hard to judge distances when you used a pile of sand as a map. The valley is in the wilderness, the Chadara don't have any reason to go there, but they estimated it was about a two day trip, so hopefully we'll get there some time tomorrow."

They fell silent. The chendu plodded onward, the ground slowly being eaten up under their feet. The plain around them was almost utterly featureless. The long line of mountains could still be seen to the left, but it went on for as far as the eye could see, never ending, never changing. With no reference points to judge, it almost seemed as if they were not moving at all.

The sun had dropped near the horizon when that changed. Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a narrow canyon appeared in front of them. It cut right across their path, a jagged rent in the earth, as if gouged out with a gigantic knife. They found themselves looking down a sheer rock face, hundreds of feet deep. It was not very wide, perhaps no more than a hundred meters, but it might as well have been miles.

They dismounted and looked back and forth at the crevasse in front of them. It seemed to go on for as far as the eye could see to the east and west.

"Great," Nipala said. "How are we supposed to get across this?"

Ellengio shook his head.

"If we try to go around, it will take us hours out of our way, maybe longer. We have no idea how far this canyon goes. For all we know it could end a few miles to the east, or west, or it go on and on."

No one spoke for some time. Vincent came forward and stood right on the edge, studying the canyon below them. Ellengio came up beside him.

"Do you think we can find a way down?" he questioned.

Vincent took a deep breath.

"It does not appear impossible," he replied. "But it will be difficult."

He looked back at the animals.

"I do not see how the chendu could negotiate it."

Ellengio was in reluctant agreement.

"We'd have to go on without them," he said presently.

"Maybe we can find an easier way down somewhere else," Altim suggested doubtfully.

"Possible, but unfortunately there's no way to tell," Red stated. "We don't know which way to go, east or west. We could wander for miles and not find anything."

"Rono didn't tell us about this either," Nipala said.

"No," Ellengio said slowly. "But he might not even have known about it. The Chadara had not visited this valley in a long time."

"So basically it's take the chendu and try to go around or climb down on foot," Cait stated.

"That does appear to be an accurate list of our choices," Red agreed.

"So what's it going to be?" Nipala questioned.

Ellengio looked down the canyon thoughtfully.

"Neither choice is particularly appealing," he said.

"Well, it's starting to get late," Altim pointed out. "We haven't eaten all day. What say we stop for a while and have something to eat, and you can think about it."

"The passage of time is not going to change the situation," Vincent stated.

"True, but who knows," Ellengio reflected. "It's true, we haven't eaten in a while, and maybe we'll come up with something in the meantime."

Vincent didn't reply, although he didn't look very hopeful. They all sat down in the shade of the chendu and pulled provisions out of their packs. Their clothing had long since dried up in the heat of the sun, but the waxy exudation they had covered themselves had dried and was very uncomfortable, even though they had begun to get used to the smell. Ellengio ate quickly, apparently anxious to be on their way. He was done well ahead of everyone else. He looked at them for a moment, but said nothing. Then he pulled the book that he had carried with him all this time out of his pack. He walked over to the edge of the canyon and sat down to study it.

"He's looking at that thing constantly," Vincent said.

"He does seem very interested in it," Red agreed.

"Well, it could have some very useful information in it," Nipala pointed out. "After all, it did come from this planet. Maybe it could warn us of other dangers."

"It hasn't helped us so far," Altim said glumly.

"Do you know if he's found anything useful in it?" Vincent questioned, looking at Red.

"He hasn't mentioned anything," Red replied. "In fact, he hasn't talked about it at all."

"I've noticed that," Vincent mused, looking over at Ellengio. "He does seem to guard it rather jealously."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nipala questioned.

Vincent didn't take his eyes off Ellengio.

"Probably nothing," Vincent replied, his voice dropping off to silence.

They finished eating soon enough. Vincent was just about to tell Ellengio they were ready to go when Cait suddenly spoke up.

"I'm receiving a transmission for Cid!" he said excitedly.

Vincent looked at him in surprise. They had been trying to contact Cid off and on since they had left the ship, but had received no reply. It was something they had all been concerned about.

"Ellengio," Vincent called out. "Cait's got in touch with Cid."

Ellengio immediately got up and strode over to them.

"Finally," he exclaimed. "Are they all right. Why haven't we been able to contact them?"

"Cid says they're not at the ship," Cait said.

"Not at the ship?" Ellengio said in surprise. "Where are they then?"

Cait paused for a moment.

"He said they had to abandon it. The Chadara found it. It's a long story."

"I'll bet," Nipala said. None of them could picture Cid leaving the ship for any reason. That was their only ticket back. If something happened to it...

"He wants to know where we are," Cait said.

"Tell him that we're headed for Meredith valley," Ellengio replied. "Tell him that we think the generator is located there. Tell him he should meet us there."

Cait nodded and paused again.

"He doesn't know where it is. But he said he can ask Roshnialu, or something like that."

"Who?" Red questioned.

"Roshnialu," Cait repeated. "He says to tell Ellengio he was right. She's half Cetra. Half Cetra?"

Ellengio's eyes grew wide.

"Half Cetra!" he said himself, his voice filled with excitement. "Where did they find him, er, her? Are there any more?"

Ellengio pressed close to Cait, demanding an answer.

"He says..." Cait stopped and paused for an annoyingly long time.

"I think...I think I've lost them," he said finally.

"What?" Ellengio exclaimed.

"They've been cut off," Cait said. "I've lost all contact."

Ellengio gave a snort of frustration. He paced back and forth in front of them.

"I knew it," he muttered. "I knew there had to be more. There had to be some that survived. They were too smart, too adaptable to have been wiped out."

"Cid said she was only half Cetra," Nipala felt obligated to point out.

Ellengio dismissed that with a shake of his head.

"But if there's one, there's a good chance there are more. Even a half Cetra proves that the bloodline still exists, that they were here at least a generation ago, and if they were here then, why shouldn't they be here now. No, there's no doubt in my mind. The Cetra race has not been extinguished on this planet!"

"I hope so," Vincent said evenly.

He looked at the canyon in front of them.

"So, have you decided?"

Ellengio stopped his pacing. He paused for a moment, the excitement of the discovery fading as he forced himself back to the reality they had to deal with.

"Yes," he said. "We might as well go on on foot. The chendu don't go much faster than a man anyway. Trying to find a way around will slow us down too much. If we're unlucky we could end up going miles out of our way, and, at the speed these beasts move, add days to our journey. A day or two on foot isn't going to kill us."

"We'll still have to get back you know," Red pointed out practically.

"But we know the others know where we are headed now," Ellengio replied. "We can always come back with them."

"That's assuming they have chendu of their own," Red commented. "And that they can find the place, and that they don't run into this canyon as well."

"Gee, you make it sound so negative," Cait stated.

"I realize we'll be taking a chance," Ellengio said. "But that's what this whole thing is about, now isn't it? One huge risk for all of us. The important thing is to get to the valley as soon as possible and complete the activation of the generator. Once we do that, we can take all the time in the world to get back to the ship."

"But what about the ship," Nipala said. "Cid said the Chadara had found it. That they had to abandon it. What if something happens to it?"

"Obviously that's another thing we have to worry about," Ellengio replied. "But it's also something we can't do anything about. And I've found it doesn't pay to worry about things you can't do anything about. The important thing for us to realize is that if the Chadara have found the ship, which means Jenova probably has too, and if that's the case they may be pursuing us. They may even have some idea of our mission. Which makes it all the more important that we get to the valley as swiftly as possible. We were obviously lucky that we left the ship when we did. We must protect the crystal materia at all costs. It cannot fall into Jenova's hands."

"Well, we might as well get going then," Vincent said. "It's going to get dark soon, and I don't relish climbing down or up this canyon in the dark. No matter what happens, we're not going to get much farther today."

"I'm afraid you're right," Ellengio agreed. "Take everything you can off the Chendus. We're going to have to carry it all ourselves now."

As they were removing anything that might prove useful from the chendu Nipala looked at the creatures.

"Can we just leave them out here?" she questioned.

"They'll be fine," Vincent said. "And considerably better off than us, I suspect. This is their native world and they're bred to live in this environment. I'd say their odds of survival are much better than ours."

"Yeah," Altim agreed. "I'd hate to run into another of those thunderstorms without them."

"Good point," Ellengio said, looking up at the sky. The clouds had long ago broken up and moved off to the east. He had a feeling storms like that were rather rare. After all, even hot it was still water, and the desert around them obviously did not get much of that resource.

"All set," Vincent said, coming up beside him.

"All right, let's get going then."

They started down into the canyon, Vincent leading the way and picking the trail slowly. The slope was steep, but not overly difficult. Behind them the chendu stood outlined in the fading light, heads bent to chew on the sparse vegetation that grew at the edge of the canyon. That was the last view they got of the great beasts before the canyon lip rose up to hide them from view.