

CHAPTER XII: ULEASHING THE MONSTER

His head hurt.

Reeve stared into the darkness. He was lying on his back. He could tell that, even though he couldn't see. He had been falling down the slope. He remembered that. He had heard the others falling too. At least, at first. He had hit something. Struck his head. That was the last thing he remembered.

He lifted up his head. It swam for moment, and he almost blacked out again. But then the pain diminished.

"Cloud?"

Silence.

"Red? Cid?"

No response.

Tentatively; "Anyone?"

Nothing.

"Hey, can anyone hear me?" he shouted.

He waited, listening for any sound. But all he heard were the echoes of his own voice.

"Shit," he muttered.

He slowly pulled himself to his feet. His hand came up to the back of his head. It felt wet, and it was painful to the touch, but if he moved slowly it didn't hurt too much. He looked around slowly, but all he could see was pitch black.

"Cloud, Red, anyone?" he shouted once more.

Again, no reply except his echoes.

He moved forward slowly, his hands in front of him, but he met nothing at all. After a few steps he stopped. He couldn't see anything. He didn't know how far he was from the wall. But then again, he also didn't know if a bottomless pit was right in front of him either.

They had all fallen down the same slope. He had heard them. How did they get separated? How long had he been unconscious? Had the others left, not being able to find him? That didn't seem likely. They had the flashlight. They would have been able to look around. Unless the flashlight was broken in the fall.

Or had he somehow gotten separated from them. Had he fallen down a different slope, or somehow ended up on a different path. That seemed more likely, but if that was so, what was he to do now? He couldn't wander around in the pitch dark. And besides, if the others were looking for him, wouldn't it be better to stay put, to stay near the place where he had fallen down, then to wander away even farther?

On the other hand, the others might not be able to find him. In which case he would have to find his way out on his own. But how could he do that?

He had fallen down a slope. Which meant he had to go up to get back. The slope he had fallen down had to be right nearby. If he found it, perhaps he could make his way back up.

He picked a direction at random and started forward once more, walking slowly, testing every step before putting weight on his foot, afraid of coming suddenly upon a crevice. He counted the steps he took, and stopped at twenty, thinking he couldn't have rolled much farther than that. He retracted his steps and then started out again in another direction. Or at least, he thought it was. It was difficult to even keep track of which direction he was going in the darkness. He only walked a few paces this time, however, when his hand made contact with the wall.

He turned around again. This was going to take forever, and might not get him anywhere, but he supposed it was better than just sitting there waiting. Still, he would give anything to have some light.

But wait. Maybe he did have some. He knew he didn't have any matches, but what about his materia? He reached into his pocket, but suddenly stopped.

In front of him he saw a faint light.

More than one, in fact. They were very faint. Small reddish colored light. In pairs, moving slowly. A shock ran through him as he realized they were eyes.

He found himself taking a step backwards. He started to withdraw his hand from his pocket, thinking to pull out his shotgun, but he stopped. They were all around him, dozens of them. He couldn't possibly get them all with his gun. Instead his hand gripped a materia tightly, ready to pull it out.

But he didn't. There were too many of them, and even if he used the materia he was pretty sure he couldn't get them all. But the eyes were approaching slowly, warily. As if they were as unsure of him as he was of them. If they weren't going to attack, he didn't want to provoke them.

They were close now. He could see the eyes clearly, their reddish tint making them appear oddly bloodshot.

"Don't come any closer," he said

To his surprise, the eyes halted. Had the sound of his voice given them pause? Had they ever heard a human before?

For a moment noting happened.

"An outsider."

Reeve nearly jumped out of his skin at the sound of those words.

The voice had sounded distorted, like it was spoken underwater. It certainly wasn't a human voice.

"Who..who are you?" Reeve stammered.

"An outsider," the voice hissed again. "Kill him."

Reeve took another step back, pulling out his materia.

"I don't mean you any harm," he said.

The eyes started to advance, but then another voice spoke up.

"Wait."

The creatures halted their advance once more.

"Wait? Why wait, Zaffri? Kill him. He's one of them."

"We don't know that, Cheruchi" Zaffri replied.

"Why else would he be down here?"

"I don't know," Zaffri replied. "Are you one of them?"

The last question had obviously been directed at Reeve. He was tempted to immediately say 'no'. He didn't know who 'they' were, but he had a pretty good idea.

"Who do you mean by them?" he asked. "The people who built the reactor?"

"See, he is one of them!" Cheruchi said, his voice a harsh accusation.

"Don't be foolish. Just because he has heard of them doesn't mean he is one of them."

"They're all alike!" Cheruchi insisted.

"Just like we're all alike?" Zaffri countered.

"Then what is he doing down here?"

"Maybe we should let him explain." Zaffri was closest too him, standing right in front of him, in fact. The creature looked right at Reeve.

"We were searching for the reactor," Reeve said. "We thought it might be here. I'm not one of them. In fact, my friends and I are here to stop them. What they are doing is illegal. We know that mako reactors are harmful to the environment, and no one is allowed to build them anymore."

"He lies," Cheruchi said immediately. "He is alone."

"Where are your friends?" Zaffri asked.

"I don't know," Reeve replied. "I fell down a slope. They were with me but we got separated somehow. I hit my head and was knocked out. I don't know whether they were here and wandered off, or if they somehow landed somewhere else."

"He fell down the chute," Cheruchi stated. "Stupid human. Why don't you watch where you are going."

"It's hard to see in the dark," Reeve defended himself. "Do you know where my friends are?"

"There were others. They went into the reactor. I told you he was with them! I told you he was one of them!" Cheruchi stated.

"They went in there to stop the reactor!" Reeve said, relieved to know at least that his friends were still in the game.

"Lies!"

"Stop it Cheruchi," Zaffri admonished.

"Don't tell me you believe him!" Cheruchi exclaimed.

"He's says he's here to stop them!" Zaffri said. "You've seen what they've done here. You've seen what they've done to our home, our people. You know we can't stop them ourselves. Everyone who has openly opposed them has died. Maybe this is our chance to fight back."

"And maybe this is a trick to try to wipe out the last of us!" Cheruchi snapped.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Zaffri relied. "But I'm willing to take the chance. We can't stop them ourselves. We need help. This might be our only chance to save ourselves."

"Or to wipe us out completely," Cheruchi said sourly.

"The way things are going, that's going to be our fate anyway."

He looked at Reeve again.

"How did you plan on stopping them?"

"Umm, well, I'm not exactly sure," Reeve replied reluctantly.

"See, he can't even say," Cheruchi said immediately. "He is lying."

"We don't know because we haven't seen the reactor yet," Reeve defended himself. "We weren't sure it was here. We had to find it first, then we were going to come up with a plan."

"Stupid human," Cheruchi said again.

"That's enough," Zaffri said, though his voice held no hint of anger. "What do you need us to do?"

Reeve paused for a moment.

"I need to find my friends."

"Very well," Zaffri replied. "We can't go back up the slope. It's too steep. But there is away around. Come with us."

"If you betray us, we'll kill you," Reeve heard behind him as he started after Zaffri.

Reeve did not reply, but he kept his materia in his hand. He only took a few steps before he stopped, however. With Zaffri turned away from him, he couldn't see the creatures eyes. He couldn't follow.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I can't see where I'm going. Is it possible to make some sort of light?"

From the hissing sounds around him, Reeve immediately realized he had said the wrong thing.

"No, no light," Zaffri said emphatically. "We do not use it. We do not need it. It hurts us."

"I'm sorry," Reeve replied. "I didn't know."

The hissing sounds around them slowly died away.

"But I had forgotten you human's don't have the ability to see in the dark. Come, place you hand on my shoulder, and I'll lead you."

He reached out his hand, groping toward the sound of Zaffri's voice. And when he made contact he almost recoiled. The skin was soft, rubbery, and felt like it was covered with some kind of slime.

Somehow Reeve managed to not pull his hand back.

They proceeded through the dark. The only thing Reeve could see was the flickering of the eyes of some of the others around him.

"Umm...what are you?" he said after a while.

"What do you mean?" Zaffri replied.

"What you do call yourselves," Reeve rephrased. "I've never heard of beings like you. I didn't know you existed."

"We call ourselves the Telenor," Zaffri said. "It's not surprising you've never heard of us. Not many humans have ever come across us. We abhor the light, and your people don't like the dark. There were never many of us, and we've avoided contact if at all possible. We've been perfectly happy living in peace in our caves."

"Until your people built the reactor," the unmistakable voice of Cheruchi floated to him.

"They've been killing you?" Reeve questioned.

"Yes, like an animal, when they come across us," Zaffri replied. "But that has been rare. We are very good at concealing ourselves. That is not the main problem. They've poisoned the water our village uses. All the fish are gone. Many have starved."

"Poisoned the water?" Reeve repeated.

"Yes, you'll see. We'll pass it on the way to our destination."

Reeve had no idea how long they continued walking in the dark. Even with Zaffri leading him, he couldn't go very fast. The minutes seemed to drag by with excruciating slowness. Eventually, however, he looked ahead and saw a faint light. They continued toward it for a few moments, until he began to be able to make out the faint outline of the creatures around him. They seemed roughly humanoid in shape, though much shorter than an average human. He could also make out the sound of running water ahead.

Zaffri stopped in front of a dark tunnel leading off in another direction. He pointed toward the light.

"That's where the humans are poisoning the water," he said. "It's too light. We don't dare go any closer. We must go this way now." He indicated the turn off.

"Wait," Reeve said. "I want to go take a look."

"Don't trust him," Cheruchi said. "He's going to warn the others!"

Zaffri turned toward at Reeve, who could just make out the round face looking at him.

"Perhaps," he said. "How are you called, human?"

Reeve was surprised by the question.

"My name is Reeve," he replied.

"Very well, Reeve. Do you give me your word that you will not betray us?"

"You will take the word of a human?" Cheruchi said, sounding shocked.

"I don't believe all humans are as bad as those here," Zaffri replied.

"Then you are a fool," Cheruchi said in disgust.

"I won't betray you," Reeve said emphatically.

Cheruchi just snorted in disgust.

"Very well," Zaffri said. "I will wait for you here."

"All right," Reeve replied. "Thanks."

He looked around for a moment, but Cheruchi seemed to have nothing else to say. Reeve turned and walked rapidly down the tunnel toward the light.

The sound of running water swelled as he walked, and the light grew. The narrow tunnel ran into a much larger one. A river ran through the center of this tunnel. On the opposite shore stood a metal door, with a bright industrial light hanging above it.

Reeve walked slowly across the tunnel until he stood at the edge of the river. Looking down he could see two huge pipes below the waterline. He knew enough about mako reactors to know these pipes were probably being used to take river water into the reactor to cool it. But as far as he knew, that was all they were used for. A coolant. That alone wouldn't poison the water.

Or would it?

He reached down and touched the water. It was cold to the touch.

He stood up and walked downstream a bit, past the output pipe and touched the water again. It was noticeably warmer.

The fish that lived in this water had probably been undisturbed for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. The cold water running below the mountains had probably been a constant temperature that whole time. A temperature the fish had grown acclimated to.

But now the reactor was warming the water. All of a sudden a drastic change had been introduced. Was it any wonder the fish might not be able to adjust? The temperature change alone might have killed them all or forced them to move to an area of lower temperature. An area far from where the Telenor fished.

He looked around slowly, studying the river. Part of the tunnel had been expanded, gouged out to fit the pipes in, he supposed. The wall above the intake pipe was vertical, held back by thick wooden planks. Reeve thought for a moment. Those planks had been put in to support the wall. If they were forcibly removed, the wall might collapse.

He considered it for a moment more. Then turned and walked back the way he had come.

Zaffri and the others were waiting.

"I have a plan," Reeve said.

The others just looked at him.

"They're using the river water to cool the reactor," he explained. "That has heated the water, which is probably what has caused the fish to leave. But the wall above the intake pipe looks weak. If I can cause it to collapse, we may be able to cut off the pipe. Without water to cool the reactor, they've have to shut it down. And in all the excitement from that happening, I may be able to get inside and find my friends."

They all stood there looking at him silently. Reeve wasn't sure whether they didn't understand or they didn't believe him.

"You can do that?" Zaffri said finally.

"I can try," Reeve replied. "I can use my materia on the planks holding the wall up. If I can weaken them, they might collapse. It's worth a try!"

Again the Telenor were silent. Reeve was grateful that at least just this once, Cheruchi seemed to have nothing to say.

"Do you need us to help you?" Zaffri asked finally.

"No," Reeve replied. "But you may want to get back. What I'm going to do is going to give off a lot of light."

The Telenor hissed at him again. But Zaffri seemed to understand.

"Very well," he said. "We are willing to let you try."

"All right, I'll be right back," Reeve said.

He turned and hurried back down the tunnel. A few moments later he stood in front of the river again. He reached into his pocket and took out a materia orb. He looked at the wall again, and the ceiling above it. He just hoped this wasn't going to bring the whole place down on top of him.

But there was no sense in worrying about that now.

He took a deep breath and concentrated.

The materia suddenly flared with green light, and a moment later a flash of lightning blasted into the planks on the far wall. There was an enormous crack. Reeve took a step back, ready to run.

But nothing happened. He stood there for a moment, looking at the planks. They were singed, and he could see a long crack running along the bottom one, but they remained intact.

He sighed and concentrated again.

The green light flared again, and a second bolt struck the wood. This was too much for them to bear, and with an explosive snap they broke asunder. Reeve really did take a step back now, as a wall of rock suddenly plunged downward from the roof.

Reeve ducked, fearing the worst, as a wall of dust and water washed over him. For a moment he thought sure he was going to be buried alive. But then the sound of crashing rocks stilled. He found himself standing, coughing in the dust filled air, but still alive.

It took a few moments for the dust to settle, but eventually he could make out the river again, and saw with satisfaction that the intake pipe had been completely buried by the avalanche.

Turning he ran back down the tunnel, going so fast he almost ran right into Zaffri before he saw him.

"That should give them something to think about!" he exclaimed. "No let's get to the entrance so I can find my friends!"

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"Greetings Madam President. It's an honor to see you again."

"What's the situation Captain?"

"We've captured five infiltrators," the Captain replied immediately. He could tell by the serious look on Miss. Gram's face that she wasn't interested in formality or small talk. "All of them members of Avalanche. Cid Highwind, Nanaki, Nipala, Cait Sith and Cloud Strife."

The President pondered this for a moment, then a thin smile appeared on her face.

"Cloud Strife eh?" she said slowly. "Very good. How did they find us?"

"They came in through the caves under the reactor," he replied. "Through one of the drains."

"And I thought you told me no one could get in that way," she said sharply. "Isn't that why we were releasing the monsters into the caves, to prevent that."

The Captain went slightly gray.

"Yes ma'am," he stammered. "I don't know how they got past all the monsters. They must have been lucky,"

"I don't believe in luck!" the President growled.

"Yes ma'am!" the Captain said, snapping to attention and staring straight ahead.

"Did you search the caves to see if anyone else was with them?" she demanded.

The Captain hesitated.

"Ma'am, those caves are filled with monsters. Sending men in there would be extremely dangerous. If anyone else was with them..."

She took a step forward and looked right in the man's face.

"They got through, didn't they?" she questioned. "And if they're here, there might be more. Avalanche has a tendency to stick together. Don't underestimate them."

"Yes ma'am!" he exclaimed.

"Good, now I want you to *personally* see that those caverns are thoroughly searched for any sign of any other members of Avalanche. Am I making myself understood?"

"Umm, err," he hesitated for a moment, his face turning paler still. "Personally?"

"Yes, personally," she replied. "You have a problem with that?"

"Yes, ma'am. I mean, no ma'am. I'll get right on it, ma'am!"

"Good," she replied. "Now I need to see Calin. Where is he?"

"He's, umm, down in the research lab," the man replied.

The President nodded.

"Fine," she said.

The man turned to go.

"And one more thing," she said suddenly.

He stopped and looked back at her.

"Get in touch with Mr. Van Cleff in Gongaga," she said. "I was hoping to keep Reno of the Turks as bait or possibly a bargaining chip. But now that we've got Cloud Strife I no longer think that will be necessary. Reno is expendable. Tell Mr. Van Cleff to dispose of him however he sees fit."

The Captain nodded.

"Yes ma'am."

She turned and walked swiftly away without another word. She walked out of the room and down the hallway, slipping into an elevator at the end. As she rode downward her foot tapped impatiently on the floor. When the elevator stopped she pushed through the doors almost before they opened. She walked rapidly down the hall, ignoring the greetings from the people she passed. Finally reaching her destination, she turned and walked into the research lab.

She stopped and looked around for a moment before she spotted the man she was looking for.

"Calin!" she called out.

One of the lab coated researchers turned around at her call. He stood there waiting while she walked up to him.

"Madam President," he said, "What a surprise."

"Well, it's not a social visit," she replied without preamble. "Avalanche has infiltrated the reactor. They've found the place. We captured the ones that came in, but I'm not certain we got all of them. Even if we did, the others can't be far behind. It's just a matter of time before they show up here in force. We have to complete the experiment now."

"Now?" Calin questioned. "But...we're not ready."

"You told me you've already had two animals that survived the process," she stated.

"Yes, animals," Calin replied. "Not humans. Just because an animal survives doesn't mean a human will. They're not the same, you know. We've got a lot more experimenting to do before I would even think of..."

"Are you listening to me?" the President said sharply. "We don't have time! The other members of Avalanche can't be far behind the one's that are already here, and I don't have any illusions that the precious security force here will be able to hold them off. We've got to finish the project before that happens or we won't even get a chance to make the attempt."

"But it's just too dangerous," Calin protested.

"We already know two people have survived this," she pointed out.

"Yes," he replied. "One was protected by her mother's womb, and the dose given to Tifa Lockheart was minuscule compared to what we are talking about here. If we miscalculate it will kill you."

"You have all of Dr. Hojo's notes on the project," she said, unconvinced. "You have all your research from studying Amanda Nathan. You've had all these months to work on this, and you're telling me you've gotten nowhere?"

Calin shook his head.

"It's not that simple," he replied. "Of course we've gotten somewhere. We've made tremendous progress, but we still have a long way to go. I can't in good conscious attempt this yet on a human being."

"And I say you will!" she said. "I told you, we don't have time. It's now or never. This is my one shot. I won't have it ruined without even making an attempt. I don't care if it may kill me. It's worth the risk. The only way to get my revenge is to do this, and if I can't have my revenge, then I might as well be dead anyway!"

Calin looked down at the floor.

"Is your revenge really worth that?" he questioned.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "They played me for a fool. They murdered my father. I swore I would get revenge for him, no matter what it took, no matter what the sacrifice. His blood is on their hands, and I'm going to make them pay no matter what it takes. Now quite wasting time and let's get started!"

Calin stood there looking at her for a moment. Well, he had made his attempt at being reasonable. He really hadn't expected to convince her. It was her funeral.

"Very well," he said. "Come with me."

He led her across the lab. Opening a door they entered a small room. It was windowless, the walls, floors and ceiling painted flat white, giving it an antiseptic look. In the center of the room stood a large pod half reclining on a pedestal.

"I'm afraid this is not going to be very comfortable," Calin said as he stepped up next to the pod. "It was, after all, designed to hold animals."

If he thought the look of the pod would give the President second thoughts, he was mistaken. She stepped up to immediately and settled down into it.

Calin looked at her for a moment, then reached over for the cover.

"You may feel some discomfort," he warned. "We don't really know how painful the process is."

"Just get it over with," she said bluntly.

Calin nodded and pulled the lid down. Now the only part of her he could see was her face through the window of the pod. She was just glaring at him. He turned and walked out of the room, over to a nearby counter full of machinery. He flipped the switch on the PA system.

"Prepare to initiate full mako infusion. The subject is President Gram. This is not a test." There was a hub bub of voices and the technicians that were nearby looked at him in surprise, but the serious look on his face dispelled any questions they might have had.

Calin settled down in a seat, looking at the monitors in front of him as the technicians began to bring the machines around them to life. Any doubts he may have harbored about going ahead was forgotten in the thrill of actually seeing his project finally coming to life in front of him. It didn't really matter to him anyway if she survived or not. His apparent concern for her life had merely been window dressing. A way to deflect the blame in case she didn't survive. A way to hedge on his own survival.

A hum slowly started to fill the room. The sound of the mako reactor coming up to full power. Calin leaned forward and studied his instruments carefully. If he was right, the problem had been one of dosage and time. Dr. Hojo had infused mako into Rebecca Nathan slowly. Too slowly as it turned out. He couldn't really be blamed, that was the way it was done with the men in SOLDIER. Since even small doses of mako had made even the men ill, Hojo has assumed that larger doses would kill them. A man couldn't take a large enough dose to achieve the result they were looking for here. But female physiology was different. Calin had calculated that a female body could withstand the dosage necessary to achieve success, if just barely. Rebecca Nathan had been infused too slowly and with too small a dose. Since Amanda had been only a fetus at the time, with a body weight of only a few grams, the dose she had received was proportionally larger, large enough to obtain the desired result. She had survived because her mother's body had absorbed most of the poison.

That was the hard part. President Gram had no one to shield her. No womb to act as protective cover. The mako infusion had to be just the right dosage, and had to be infused all at once. That was the only way it could work. With this dosage too much would kill her outright. Too little would kill her more slowly, but just as surely. It was a one shot deal.

"Reactor at maximum power," he heard one of the technicians announce.

"Vital signs normal," another one said.

"All system parameters in acceptable ranges."

Calin reached out and put his hand on a lever.

"Infusion starting...now!"

He pushed the lever forward.

The power levels on the pod jumped to life in front of Calin, shooting up the scale.

"Flow rate at 1200 milliliters!"

"Maintain infusion rate between 1000 and 1500," he called out.

"Yes sir."

"Heart rate increasing."

Calin's eyes flew across the gauges in front of him, some of them starting to creep up into the red.

"Flow rate at 1400 milliliters."

"Maintain there!" he called.

"Heart rate continuing to increase. Blood pressure 160 over 90."

"Brain wave activity erratic."

"We've reached the one minute mark."

Calin felt his hands tingling with excitement. Might this actually work? He had worked so hard, studied so long. All those years with Amanda, could they finally be paying off?

"Flow rate at 1450 milliliters."

"Decrease to 1300," Calin said.

"Heart rate increasing dangerously! Blood pressure 210 over 100."

Calin looked nervously at the gauges. The infusion was taking its toll. She was getting close to her limit, but they had no choice now but to see this thing out.

"One minute thirty seconds."

He took his eyes off the gauges for a moment to look at the pod. He could see the President's face through the window, but he couldn't make out her features. The only thing he could see was that her head was shaking furiously.

Just a little bit longer.

"Flow rate at 1500 milliliters."

"I told you to drop it to 1300!" he snapped.

"We're trying. It's not responding very well."

"Damn," he muttered. He knew if it went up much higher than that, she didn't stand a chance.

"Just a little longer!" he exclaimed, to no one in particular.

"Blood pressure 220 over 110. Heartbeat erratic. We're losing her!"

Calin stood up, his hand on the lever, staring at the clock in the center of his console.

"Flow rate at 1550 milliliters."

"All life signs critical!"

"Should we abort?"

"Too late for that!" Calin shouted. "Just a few more seconds."

"EKG flat lined!"

"What the hell? All life signs negative. Did we lose power?"

Calin was barely listening now. There was nothing they could do now but see it to the end. At this point anything else would kill her, if it hadn't already. He felt his hand tighten on the lever as the seconds slowly ticked down to zero.

He pulled the lever back.

"Infusing complete," he called out. "Initiate immediate shut down!"

As the hum of machinery slowly died around him, Calin looked at the pod. The President's eyes were closed, and she wasn't moving.

"Get her out of there!"

Two technicians scrambled to obey. But as they reached the pod they stopped suddenly.

"What is it? What are you waiting for?" Calin questioned.

One of the men turned toward him.

"Her eyes," he began.

There was a flash of light and a crack of thunder and the door tore off the pod, spinning through the air and slamming into the two technicians.

President Gram lifted herself out of the pod. She looked around for a moment, a wild contorted look on her face. Her eyes glowed bright emerald green. She raised her hand, and fire burst forth along the wall right beside Calin. He stumbled backwards, away from the machinery.

She stepped out of the pod room. Her hand came up again. Lightning struck the machinery nearby, sending up a shower of sparks and the technicians beside it flying across the floor.

"What are you doing?" Calin screamed.

The woman laughed. A harsh screeching cry, devoid of humor and all sanity.

"We've done it," she screamed. "Now the power that Hojo tried unsuccessfully to harness is in my hands, in my very soul! Nothing can stop me now, no one can stand against me. Now I can make them pay. I can make them all pay!"

Her hand shot forward again and another burst of lightning seared through the machinery. Calin heard screams and smelled burnt flesh.

"Stop it!" he shouted. "You're killing them!"

"Yes I am," she agreed, her raucous laughter filling the room. "And no one can stop me! I have the power now. This reactor gave it to me. But now it has fulfilled its purpose. If left standing it could be used to repeat the process on someone else. I'm not going to let that happen. This reactor is now obsolete."

For the first time she looked right at him. He cringed away from the madness in her eyes.

"And so are you!"

She thrust her hand forward. Calin dived behind the counter just as fire raked the air where he had stood a second before. He felt burning heat on his legs and scrambled farther behind the counter.

"Run!" he screamed. "All of you, get out of here!"

"That's right, try to save yourselves!" he heard her yell. "Scurry away like the ants you are. But it not going to help you. Pitiful creatures that you are, now feel the wraith of a god!"

Calin couldn't see her from where he was hiding, but he could see the green mist that suddenly filled the air.

Then he was thrown backward as the entire room exploded in a blast from Ultima. Counter and all he was flung against the far wall. Falling to the floor like a rag doll, barely conscious, feeling like every bone in his body had been broken, Calin looked up to see a huge piece of machinery tipping down on top of him, before everything went suddenly black.