

CHAPTER XV: THE RED CLIFFS OF GROUCHOON

"They're coming back!" Amanda said.

Aeris rushed up to stand beside her. She could see the others outside, walking slowly toward the spacecraft. She frowned.

"They're not all there," she said slowly. "Where's Vincent and Elena?"

"We'll know in a few minutes," Cid replied, and edge of concern in his voice.

The party outside made their way toward the rocket. Though they were walking swiftly, it seemed to Aeris that it took them an agonizingly long time to reach the ship, and practically forever for Cid to open the door and get them through the airlock. But finally she heard quick steps on the metal planking of the deck and they walked into the room. Immediately Aeris could tell that something wrong. All their faces were pale, and Tifa had tears in her eyes.

"What happened?" Aeris asked apprehensively. "Where are the others?"

For a moment no one spoke. Aeris looked at Tifa, but she just turned away.

"Vincent transformed and flew off, we don't know where," Cloud said grimly. "Elena...Elena is gone."

"Gone, what do you mean, gone?" Reno questioned.

"Gone," Cloud repeated, as if he couldn't say it any other way. "She went over the cliff."

"Over the cliff?" Aeris said. "You mean..."

She looked at Cloud in horror. He just lowered his head and nodded.

"Elena's dead?" Reno said in disbelief.

Cloud did not reply, and the room fell silent.

"Are you sure?" Reno questioned.

"We're sure," Barret spoke for the first time. "She went over the cliff Reno."

"Did you see her body?" Reno asked, a hint of desperation in his voice.

"It would have taken hours to climb down there, if we could find our way at all," Cloud said haltingly. "It was a sheer drop, hundreds of feet. She couldn't possibly have survived."

"Could Vincent have caught her?" Amanda asked.

Cloud shook his head slowly.

"It took us a few moments to even realize what had happened. Then a few seconds for him to transform. By the time it was complete, she would have already reached the bottom. He couldn't have saved her."

"How could let this happen?" Reno said coldly, staring at Cloud.

"There was nothing we could do," Cloud said defensively. "We were attacked by a monster. It looked like a rock and took us by surprise. After we had nearly killed it it lunged into the group, right at Elena. It knocked her off the cliff before we had a chance to do anything. It all happened in a second. We couldn't help her."

"You couldn't help her? Just how hard did you try?" Reno said, his voice thick with accusation.

"Cloud's telling the truth," Barret snapped. "There was nothing we could do. You don't think we would have saved Elena if we had a chance?"

"Sticking up for him again?" Reno remarked savagely. "You're still Cloud's little crony, I see. Some things never change. Funny how it was Elena, the only one of you who wasn't a member of Avalanche, who ending up going over the edge. Can you really tell me you did everything possible for her, Cloud, oh yea of the legendary quick reflexes? Wonder if it would have turned out the same had it been your precious Tifa that had gotten in the monster's way."

"I told you there was nothing we could do," Cloud stated angrily. "There was no time to react."

"No time for you, maybe, but if I had been there, maybe I could have done something."

"It wouldn't have made any difference," Barret cut in. "You wouldn't have been able to help her either."

"How do you know that?" Reno spat out. "I might have been able to help her, but Cloud didn't give me a chance."

He looked at Cloud again.

"You were in charge of the mission. It's your responsibility that she died. As far as I'm concerned, you're as guilty as if you killed her with your own hands."

Cloud's eyes clouded with anger. He drew his hand behind his head and slid his sword out of its sheath.

"I've had just about enough of your bullshit!" he exclaimed.

Reno lifted his nightstick from his belt.

"You've always been a big man hiding behind that sword," he snapped.

Cloud looked down at the sword for a second, then back at Reno. A moment later the sword clattered to the ground.

"I don't need that to take on the likes of you!" Cloud exclaimed.

Reno smiled coldly and pointed the nightstick at Cloud. With a growl Barret took a step forward, and Zack shouted a warning. But then the nightstick dropped to the ground.

"Let's see what you've got," Reno said, raising his fists.

Cloud lunged forward. Behind him he heard Tifa yelling for them to stop, but he was no longer paying any attention. Reno had been a pain in the ass since he had joined them, but this time he had gone too far. This time he was going to get what he deserved.

Cloud struck at Reno, who quickly brought his own hand up, blocking the blow. Reno struck back with his other hand. Cloud ducked, and the blow hit him in the forehead instead of the chin, but still it stunned him for a second. Reno struck quickly three more times, setting Cloud back on his heels. He hadn't expected the quickness of Reno's attack. Actually, if he had thought about it, he would have realized it had been years since he had gotten into a fist fight. He had been training with his sword for so long now, he had nearly forgotten how to use his fists. As a Turk, Cloud knew Reno had been trained in all forms of combat. Unwittingly, Cloud had given Reno the edge.

Another blow clipped him on the jaw, making his head spin for a moment. He dodged backwards, then suddenly lunged forward, catching Reno off guard. Reno might have had more experience, but Cloud was a fast learner, and had quicker reflexes. Reno's next blow glanced harmless off his shoulder as Cloud moved inside and jabbed at Reno's stomach, feeling the blow land solidly. Reno bent forward, and Cloud brought his left around and felt it hit the side of Reno's head. Reno staggered back. Cloud immediately went after him, but suddenly found his forward progress stopped as someone wrapped their arms around him. He twisted round to see Zack.

"Let go!" Cloud shouted.

Reno, seeing Cloud helpless in Zack's grasp, pulled back his fist, but just as he was about to bring it forward he suddenly felt someone grab hold of it and pull him back as well. Rude wrapped his other arm around Reno's neck and shoulders, effectively pinning him as well.

"What are you doing?" Reno exclaimed angrily.

Ellengio stepped between them.

"That's enough of this nonsense!" he said sternly. "What is the matter with you two? We've got enough problems without this. Don't any of you realize the seriousness of our situation? We're on an alien planet. We know Jenova is here, but we have no idea of its strength. For all we know the entire planet could be against us and what do we end up doing? Fighting among ourselves! Can you get it through your thick heads for just a moment that we are here to save our planet? If we do not succeed Jenova could return to earth, next year, in fifty years, in a thousand years. And next time they might succeed. Do you want us all to become slaves to Jenova? Or our children? Do you want our planet to be taken over by Jenova all because we couldn't get along long enough to complete our mission here? I brought you all along because you were good fighters and I thought you were mature enough to put the mission first, before your petty squabbling. Don't you see that what you are doing is playing right into our enemies hands?"

Reno and Cloud stood glaring at one another. Ellengio looked back and forth between them until they both turned away.

"I want you both to agree that there will be no more of this until our mission is complete," Ellengio said.

There was silence.

"Well?" Ellengio demanded.

"All right," Cloud said, obviously having a difficult time producing the words.

Ellengio stared at the red haired man.

"Reno?"

Reno remained silent, knowing he was going to have to agree but loath to say the words.

"Reno?" Ellengio said again, an edge in his voice.

"Very well," Reno spat out.

Ellengio stared at both of them for a moment more, then nodded.

"All right, you can let them go."

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"Where'd you learn how to fight?"

"Whatdyamean?" Cloud asked.

Tifa placed the cool wet rag against the bruise on Cloud's forehead.

"Just what I said," she replied. "Where'd you learn how to fight? Cause I gotta tell you, that was pretty pathetic. You started out with a roundhouse, a blow that you telegraphed from about a mile away. Reno could have taken all day and blocked that."

"It's a little late to tell me now," Cloud grumbled.

"Well, if you would have warned me ahead of time that you were going to go off half cocked on Reno like that, I could have given you a few lessons first," she replied.

"It was kind of a spur of the moment thing," Cloud admitted.

"Well, next time you have the urge to do something spur of the moment like that, might I suggest that instead you stick your head under a faucet and turn on the cold water?"

Cloud shook his head.

"Thanks a lot for the encouragement," he said. "I thought you were on my side."

"I am," she replied. "But Ellengio was right. That was a stupid thing to do. You know Reno was just trying to bait you, and you let him get to you."

"I know," Cloud said. "I'm sorry. He just seems to know exactly what to say to get under your skin."

"Well, you've just got to learn how to ignore it," Tifa said.

She took the rag off his forehead and eyed the injury critically.

"You're going to have a bruise there for a few days, but it's not serious."

"So I'm going to live?"

"As long as you behave yourself from now on," Tifa replied. "I think Reno's going to have a black eye."

Cloud smiled in spite of himself.

"I did get a few good shots in in the end there, didn't I?"

"You got lucky," she replied. "You caught him by surprise."

His smile quickly disappeared.

"You're taking all the fun out of this."

"That's the idea," she replied. "All right, you're all done."

They walked back to the control room. Most of the others had left the room, but Cid and Ellengio were still there. Cloud looked at Ellengio.

"So what happens now?" he asked.

Ellengio looked out at the planet thoughtfully.

"The mission goes on," he replied. "We've just arrived and already we've suffered a serious setback, but no matter how we feel, we can't let that stop us. This mission is more important than any one of us individually. It's probably too late to do anything further today. But tomorrow we'll have to send out another party to scout out the city below, and maybe a second party to hunt for Vincent. I don't like the idea of him wandering around out there on his own. In the condition he's in, he'd probably be better off if he were with us. We don't need to lose him too."

"He might come back on his own," Cid suggested, not very hopefully.

"That would make things much simpler, but I don't have much hope for it," Ellengio replied.

"Don't you think it would be better if we all stick together?" Cid asked.

Ellengio paused for a moment, then shook his head.

"I think it's important we find Vincent as soon as possible, but I also don't think we should waste any time finding out about that city below us. I don't think splitting into two groups will be unwise, but we should leave some people here as well. I don't think it would be a good idea to leave the ship unguarded."

"So three groups then?" Tifa said.

"Yes," Ellengio replied. "Cloud, you'll have to decide who goes where again."

"Maybe you should do it this time," Cloud said hesitantly. "It looks like my choices didn't turn out too well the first time."

"Nonsense," Ellengio countered. "You did fine, and there was nothing you could have done about what happened, in spite of what Reno may have said. All of the others trust you."

Cloud lowered his head. Ellengio's words made him feel a little bit better, but not much. Reno's words had rubbed him raw, probably because he thought there might be some truth to them. It had been his decision who went out, and he was in charge of the group. He couldn't help but feel somewhat responsible for what had happened to Elena.

He looked outside. The sun had dropped below the horizon, and he could see stars appearing in the sky above. He looked up at them for a moment. It didn't look much different from the view from earth, and he wasn't very familiar with the constellations, but he could tell something was not right. The stars up there were alien to him, just like everything else around them. They were truly far from home.

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"Time to get up."

Cloud opened his eyes to see Tifa standing beside him, already dressed.

"Damn," he muttered, stretching his arms and yawning. "Is it daylight already? I fell like I just went to sleep."

"It wasn't that long ago," Tifa replied. "Ellengio said that this planet spins faster than the earth, completing a revolution in only sixteen hours instead of twenty four. The night was only eight hours long."

Cloud sat up and shook the sleep away.

"I have a feeling that's going to take some getting used to," he replied.

"Yeah," Tifa agreed. "It also means that there are only about eight hours of daylight before it gets dark again, so Ellengio said we should be off as soon as possible. Have you decided who's going with what group?"

"I guess," Cloud replied, not sounding very enthusiastic. "We'll take Aeris, Zack, Reeve and Reno with us to explore the city. Ellengio can take Barret, Cait, Yuffie and Altim to go look for Vincent. That means Cid, Red, Nipala, Rude, Lai Li, and Amanda stay behind."

Tifa stood there for a moment pondering this.

"Interesting choice," she commented. "Are you sure you want Reno with us. After what happened yesterday, I would think you would want to get as far away from him as possible."

"Yeah, well I figure Reno's better off with us. This way I can keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn't stir up any more trouble."

"Just make sure you're not the one doing the stirring," she commented.

"Don't worry, I've learned my lesson," he replied. "I'd like to keep Aeris with us too, just to keep an eye on her as well. I don't want her to get in any trouble either. And I figured Zack and Reeve would help keep an eye on her as well."

"I suppose," Tifa said slowly.

"And Cid's gotta stay here," Cloud continued. "As the only one who can get us out of here, he's someone we can't afford to lose. Amanda and Lai Li are inexperienced, and I don't want them put in dangerous situations unless absolutely necessary, and if something happens to all of us, it'll be better if Red remains here because I know he'll be able to think things through calmly and rationally. And Rude is pretty level headed too."

She looked at him closely.

"Looks like you've put a lot of thought into this," he stated. "I'm impressed."

"Thanks," he replied.

Tifa left to help cook breakfast while Cloud finished getting ready. Fifteen minutes later he was in the mess hall with the others, hastily wolfing down the meal of eggs and pancakes that Tifa and some of the others had prepared. As they ate he explained how they were going to be broken up. Some of the others looked unhappy about it, especially Reno, but no one objected.

"Just what is it we're going to be looking for?" Reeve questioned. "I mean, suppose that city down there is filled with these Jenova creatures?"

"We need information," Ellengio said. "We know the shield generator is hidden somewhere on this planet. We have to find out where."

"But hasn't Jenova been searching for it all this time?" Lai Li asked. "They've had almost two thousand years to look. If they can't find it in that time, what makes you think we'll have any chance at all?"

"Did it make any mention of it in that book?" Barret questioned.

"No, not that I can find," Ellengio replied. "But there were other people who knew. The Cetra and some of the Chadara. I'm assuming that there will still be some of them around, and they may have had the information passed down from their ancestors, keeping it hidden from Jenova all this time."

"So you think there still may be some Cetra here?" Aeris said, her eyes wide with surprise. The thought had obviously not occurred to her.

"It was something that I had hoped for," Ellengio said. "I've felt something since we landed, but it's too vague to tell anything about. It may be Cetra, or just the different feel of this planet. Have you felt anything, Aeris?"

She shook her head.

"No, just the planet itself. But I'm only half Cetra. We already knew that you are more sensitive to such things than I."

Ellengio nodded.

"Well, anyway, I think what we need to do is try to find some allies. If not Cetra, then at least some Chadara. Hopefully they may be able to tell us something."

"We don't even know if the Chadara exist anymore," Zack pointed out. "For all we know, Jenova could have wiped out both the Cetra and the Chadara centuries ago."

"True," Ellengio said. "And in that case our job will be much tougher. But we won't know by sitting here. We've got to go down to the city and see."

He stood up and looked around, seeing that everyone was just about finished with their meal.

"I think it's time to get going," he stated. "We don't have a lot of daylight, so the sooner we're off, the better."

The others got up as well, and all those leaving headed for the airlock. When the door opened once more on the outside world Cloud thought it felt a little cooler than yesterday. He glanced up at the sky to see the sun just peeking over the peaks behind them. It was still early, and it would probably get just as hot as yesterday in a few hours. It would be best to get as far as they could while the early morning coolness lasted.

They all started down together, following the path the group had traveled the day before. Cloud kept his eyes open, constantly scanning the skies for some sign of Vincent or the creature they had seen in the air yesterday, but he saw nothing but pale blue sky above them. After a short hike they reached the spot where Elena had gone over the edge. The body of the dead rock creature lay where they had left it.

Ellengio walked over to the edge and looked down himself. Then slowly shook his head and came back to them.

"I'm afraid I'll have to agree with your assessment," he stated. "No one could have lived through that fall. There's a pathway over to the left that seems to lead down there. I'll take my group that way now. I'm going to assume that Vincent went down into the gorge. We'll try to get down to the bottom and take a look around."

"All right," Cloud said soberly. Being in the spot where it had all happened made the memory of it that much clearer. Even though Elena had been a Turk and they had fought many times, he really hadn't disliked her. In fact, of all the Turks, he had kind of liked her the most.

"We'll head down to the city and see what we can find out."

Ellengio nodded and the two groups separated, Ellengio leading his along the narrow cliff face off to the west, while Cloud led the others down the trail towards the city below. The trail was steep, but it was downhill, so the going was not all that strenuous. As they dropped lower they began to get a better view of the city below them. The buildings all seemed to be made of the same material, some kind of white stone, or concrete. Each one pockmarked with dark round holes that Cloud took for windows. None of the buildings seemed to be more than one or two stories, and they seemed to have been built with no kind of organization at all. Some seemed to be right up against one another, others were separated by large spaces. He could see nothing resembling roads or any straight lines. The effect was very alien and rather primitive looking. He stared down at the city as they walked, trying to spot some sign of habitation, but there was no movement below. The city seemed deserted.

The trail switched back on itself several times on the way down, and after two hours they still had not reached the bottom. The sun had rapidly climbed up into the sky, and now it was as hot as it had been yesterday. Even though they were going downhill Cloud still felt himself breaking out into a sweat.

Cloud was in the lead, walking at a measured pace. The others followed in single file behind him, the trail being too narrow to walk side by side.

"Hold on a second," he heard Tifa say behind him.

He turned and saw her looking at Zack who was last in line and had stopped, looking around slowly as if searching for something.

"What is it?" Cloud questioned.

Zack did not answer for a moment.

"I feel like we're being watched," he said finally.

Cloud saw the others look around nervously. He couldn't help but glance around himself. But he saw nothing out of the ordinary. Still, he knew his old friend had good instincts for things like this, and he wasn't going to just ignore it. Slowly he pulled out his sword. Zack had been reluctant to bring his own sword, still concerned that he might do something foolish with it, but in the end Cloud had convinced him, and he now saw that Zack had his sword in his hands as well.

They continued down the trail, walking just a bit more cautiously. The city was in plain sight now, and they were close enough to see anyone, or anything, that might be outside the buildings, but there was no movement, no sound. The place was eerily quiet. Perhaps the creatures that built it only came out at night, or took some kind of siesta during this part of

the day. Who knew? But it was just as likely that the city had been abandoned long ago. Or maybe not that long ago. He looked over the city again, looking for signs of decay, but the buildings all seemed to be intact, none of them in disrepair. If it was indeed abandoned, it could not have been that long ago that it happened.

A shadow crossing the ground in front of them gave them the first hint of trouble. Cloud looked up to see something diving directly at him. For a moment he thought it was Vincent, transformed as the Chaos beast, but the creature was heading right at him, claws outstretched, and behind it, he could see others.

"Watch out!" he yelled, even as he dove out of the way.

He felt a sharp pain as the claws ripped at his shoulder, but it was only a glancing blow. He recovered quickly and swung his sword, but not quickly enough and the beast flew up and away from him. He looked up to see more flying all around them, slashing now at the other members of the party. In the sudden chaos he couldn't tell how many there were, but it was at least six or seven.

He heard a blast from Reeve's shotgun, and one of the creatures spun in the air and dived down toward the plain below. Two more were hovering over Zack, but the defense he was weaving with his sword was impenetrable. Reno's nightstick flared, and another of the beasts fell, this one right on the trail beside them, stunned. Cloud swung his sword as another dove at him. It quickly turned away. He ran back towards the others. He saw one come down at Aeris. She swung her rod and it fell back, but another suddenly swooped down behind her. Its claws latched on to her, knocking her forward and the Princess Guard out of her hands at the same time. Then it flapped its wings, lifting up off the ground, carrying Aeris with it.

"Aeris!" Cloud shouted.

Zack lunged forward, swinging his sword, but the creature flew up out of range. It turned out over the cliffs, heading down and toward the city. Reeve ran up to the edge of the cliff, shotgun ready to fire, but Aeris and the creature were out over the gorge now, and he realized if he fired the beast might drop her to her death.

"No!" he shouted helplessly.

But none of them had time to think about what had happened. The creatures above them were still attacking, and they were forced to fight for their own lives. In the distraction Aeris abduction had caused, another one had swooped down on Tifa, and had grabbed her arm, starting to pull her up into the air. With a shout she lifted up her legs and kicked the creature right in the stomach. It let out a cry of pain and let go. It had lifted her up almost ten feet, and she fell awkwardly, her arms flailing wildly, and landed heavily on her back.

Cloud tried to make his way over to her, but the creatures were swarming around him, and there seemed to be more coming all the time. The sky above them seemed to be crawling with them, and he was having a difficult time defending himself, much less helping anyone else.

Reno fired his nightstick at one of the creatures diving down at him. The creature screamed at the shock, curling up into a tight ball. The creature had been almost upon him when he had discharged the nightstick, and now its momentum carried it right into him, knocking him roughly to the ground and sending his nightstick clattering among the rocks. Reno quickly pulled himself out from beneath the creature, obviously not seriously injured, and ran for his weapon, but even as he did so another of the creatures swooped down and grabbed hold of him, quickly lifting him up. Its claws dug into his shoulders, and he swung wildly behind him to try to fend it off, but he couldn't make solid contact, and a moment later the creature was diving down the gorge with Reno firmly in its clutches.

"I don't think they're trying to kill us," Zack called out. "I think they may be trying to capture us."

Cloud was busy defending himself, but he did hear Zack's shout. If that were true, then they had to be intelligent. Except for the leathery wings and dark gray skin, the creatures were humanoid in shape. They were quite similar to the Chaos beast, actually, except for being a bit smaller. They seemed to be attacking as an organized group. The wings and body were similar to the skeleton they had found along with the Cetra book. Was it possible these were the Chadara?

"We're not your enemy!" Cloud shouted, swinging his sword yet again to clear them away from him. He didn't really know why he said it. He had not heard any of them make any noise, except for cries of pain, and he had no reason to believe they could speak, much less understand English. But if these were the Chadara, the last thing he wanted to do was have a battle with them.

He turned to see that one of the creatures had once again gotten a hold of Tifa, and was lifting her up, and this time she appeared too stunned from the fall to defend herself. Already the creature was close to the edge of the gorge.

"No," Cloud shouted, no longer thinking about making peace. He swung his sword viciously to clear a path, then charged over toward the creature that had Tifa. It was off the trail now, over the gorge. Without thinking he dropped his sword and leapt into the air. For a moment he thought he was going to miss the creature and plunge downward, but then his hand shot out and grabbed hold of the creature's leg. It kicked viciously, and Cloud felt his grip slipping. He looked down. The creature was dropping down quickly, the weight of two people more than it could bear, but they were still far above the valley floor. A fall from here would surely kill him.

He tried to tighten his grip, gritting his teeth, but the creature kicked again and he felt his grip slip some more. He knew he couldn't hold on for more than a few more seconds.

Just as his hand was slipping off another hand shot out and grabbed hold of his arm. He turned to see that Tifa had recovered enough to grab hold of him. He let go of the creature's leg with his other arm and grabbed hold of her hand, swinging down and dropping below her.

Though it was a strain, he thought he could maintain this position. The problem now was that the creature was dropping quickly, for the weight of the two of them was more than it could carry. Cloud could hear it flapping its wings madly, but they were still dropping too fast for a safe landing. Now Cloud's fear was that the creature would try to save itself by letting go of Tifa.

But then suddenly another creature flew down beside the first, wrapping its arms around Cloud. Cloud did the only reasonable thing he could and let go of Tifa. The other creature immediately regained control and they both turned toward the city. Cloud looked back, barely able to make out the small figures there as the cliffs rapidly disappeared behind them.

"They've got Cloud!" Reeve shouted.

Zack did not answer, still trying to fight off the creatures that were now swarming around him. He swung his sword like a man possessed, and the creatures were forced to back off. He and Reeve stood side by side now, with Zack protecting Reeve each time he had to reload, and Reeve picking off any of the creatures that got past Zack's guard. Already half a dozen of them lay dead or dying at their feet.

Reeve let go another blast from his shotgun, and another creature that was coming up behind Zack fell to the ground. Zack slashed back and forth, and most of the creatures backed off, having learned that he was just too quick with his weapon to get at him, although occasionally one would dart in toward him. So far everyone that had done that had paid dearly.

There were five or six left, it was hard to tell with them swooping around constantly, never staying in one place. Zack lunged at one of them and it dodged out of the way, nearly doing a somersault in the air. Then suddenly four of them darting in at him from all different directions.

One went down at a blast from Reeve's gun. Zack slashed at another one, then dove to the side. One of them managed to grab hold of his arm, the others missing completely. He turned and drove his sword deep into the creature's body, even as it tried to lift off with him. With a strangled cry the creature collapsed to the ground.

Zack sprang to his feet, sword ready, to see that the others were flying off.

"They've given up!" Reeve exclaimed triumphantly.

Zack pushed his sword into the ground and leaned heavily on the hilt, panting for breath and watching the creatures slowly disappear into the city below.

"True," he said. "But they've got the others. I wouldn't exactly call it a stunning victory."

Reeve nodded, walking up beside Zack and staring down at the city below. The creatures quickly disappeared from sight into the city below, along with their friends. In a few moments the city appeared as deserted as it had when they had first seen it.

"We'll have to go tell the others," Reeve said. "What a disaster. This mission seems to have been cursed from the start."

Zack looked up at the cliff they came down thoughtfully, then back at the city again.

"It would take all day to climb back up there and then come down again. Who knows what may happen to the others in that time. We're almost at the bottom of the cliff. We can probably reach the town in an hour or two from here."

Reeve looked at him in surprise.

"You want to go after them ourselves?"

Zack nodded.

Reeve shook his head.

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I think that's an incredibly bad idea," he said. "The others back at the ship should be informed of this. They need to be warned. If we don't go back and tell them, they could fall into the same trap. Besides, that city is probably full of those creatures, what could the two of us possibly do down there except get caught ourselves?"

Zack looked at him with a hint of disdain.

"If that whole city is full of them, then even going back and getting everyone on the ship isn't going to do much good," he pointed out. "If we're going to sneak into the city, the smaller the group the better."

Reeve looked at him skeptically.

"We have to warn the others," he repeated.

Zack shrugged and looked back up the cliff, shading his eyes from the sun.

"So go ahead and warn them," he replied. "Nobody says you have to come with me. We don't know what these creatures are going to do, we don't know how they are going to treat their captives, but we killed a lot of them," he continued, sweeping his hand around to point out the bodies that lay around them "And I don't think that'll make them very happy, or treat their captives very kindly. It may be vitally important that we get to them as fast as possible. I'm not going to let anything happen to Aeris."

And with that he started down the hill once more, not even waiting for Reeve's response.

Reeve just stood there for a moment, looking back and forth between Zack and the cliffs above. Then he suddenly trotted downhill, after Zack.

"This is completely insane," he muttered to himself.