

CHAPTER II: RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE

Reno's visitor turned suddenly at the sound of a noise outside the door, his hand reaching into his suit jacket. Reno stood up and motioned for the man to remain where he was, then walked over to the door, opened it and stepped out into the hall.

Yuffie stood just beside the door outside, hidden from view to the man in Reno's office. She looked at Reno with her mouth open.

Reno glared at her. He put his finger to his lips, then pointed for her to go.

She shook her head.

He stepped up right beside her and leaned forward until their faces were inched apart.

"Get the hell out of here," he whispered. "If he finds out you're out here he'll probably kill both of us!"

Yuffie folded her arms across her chest. She looked at him and shook her head stubbornly.

His glare intensified.

"Is everything alright out there?" he heard from in the office.

"Yeah, fine," Reno retorted quickly. He looked at Yuffie again, but she didn't look like she was going to budge. He couldn't make a scene and she knew it.

Reno leaned forward again.

"If he finds you out here I'll kill you myself!" he hissed, then walked back into the office.

He closed the door and quickly walked over to his desk. The man was looking at him sharply.

"It was nothing," Reno said, reseating himself.

Reno's visitor gave him a piercing look. It seemed obvious that he thought something had occurred. But Reno just stared at him impassively, and finally the man shrugged, apparently determining that whatever it was, it must have been unimportant.

"So, are you agreeable to my proposal?" he asked, getting back to the subject at hand.

Reno drummed his fingers on the desk for a moment.

"Ordinarily I would consider your offer more than sufficient compensation. But unfortunately in this case, I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline."

A slight raising of one eyebrow was the only indication of the man's surprise.

"May I inquire why?" he said.

"It's very simple, really," Reno replied. "Even a million gil isn't going to do me much good if I'm dead. Barret Wallace is a member of Avalanche. If I took him out the rest of Avalanche wouldn't rest until they got revenge. Even the Turks don't want that kind of heat. I'm afraid some people are just untouchable. It's too risky."

The man slowly leaned forward and placed his elbows on Reno's desk, his fingers tapping his chin. He didn't speak for a long time.

"I must say I'm surprised," he finally stated. "I didn't think the Turks would beg off from anything given the right price. I guess the rumors I've been hearing may be true after all."

Reno looked at the man casually, as if not really interested.

"And what rumor might that be?" he asked.

The man fixed his eyes on Reno.

"That the Turks are getting soft," he stated. "That they don't want to take risks anymore. That they've lost their edge."

Reno seemed unfazed by the man's accusations.

"Don't bet on it," he replied.

For a moment they sat there in silence. Then the man shrugged and stood up.

"Well, if that's your final word then I guess we have nothing more to discuss. I'm afraid my employer will be very disappointed. He wanted the best, but it appears the Turks reputation is not all it's cracked up to be. I don't suppose I need to remind you that you are not the only game in town. There are some out there who would jump at the chance for a million gil, no matter what the risks. They would consider it..."

The man's gaze fixed on Reno once more

"...a challenge."

Reno stood up slowly. Though he knew the man was just trying to goad him he still felt the sting of his words. Still, he wasn't about to let the man know that.

"If we have nothing more to discuss, then why are you still talking to me?" he questioned, his voice smooth, betraying no hint of his true feelings.

Reno got up and walked over to the door. He opened it up, then swung around to face the man again.

"I think it's time for you to leave," he said loudly.

The man looked at him for a moment more, and Reno was satisfied to see just a hint of anger in the man's eyes. Then he walked past Reno and out into the hall. He turned and glared at Reno one last time, then walked away.

Reno stepped out into the hall and looked around. He could see the man walking over to the elevators at the end of the hall, but he saw no sign of Yuffie.

Breathing a sigh of relief he closed the door, then walked back to his desk and sat down heavily. He leaned back in his chair and turned to stare out the window, lost in thought.

He didn't have much time to ponder, however, for a few minutes later the door opened and Yuffie walked back in, quickly coming over to plop herself down on his desk once more, a look of surprise still on her face.

"I heard the whole thing," she began.

"Lucky for me," Reno replied ruefully.

"I knew you wouldn't do it," she stated. "Do you know who he meant when he said you weren't the only game in town?"

Reno gave her a sour look. He wasn't anxious to discuss this with her. Why the hell did he have to walk in when she was here? But he didn't think he had much choice at this point, if he didn't tell here she'd just bug the crap out of him, or even worse, go blab to some of the others.

"I've got a pretty good idea," he replied. "There's always new individuals and organizations cropping up to try to cut in on some of the Turks action. Most of them are just a bunch of incompetents and don't last long. But there's one group I've been hearing a lot about lately. I don't know much about them. All I know is they're called the Fog and they're ruthless. Last month an entire family of seven was massacred in lower Junon because they were after one of the family members. I've heard the Fog was responsible. Pretty unprofessional if you ask me. Not at all the way the Turks would have handled it, but it got the job done. They don't compare with the Turks, of course, but they're the most prominent group around after us, so my guess would be this guy will go to them next."

"The Fog?" she questioned. "What kind of stupid name is that?"

"I don't know," Reno replied. "What kind of name is the Turks?"

"And you think they'll do it?" she asked.

"For a million gil?" Reno replied. "Of course they will. I was sorely tempted myself. But I could hardly accept the job when a member of Avalanche was standing right outside my door, now could I?"

"Are you telling me you would have accepted the job if I hadn't been standing out there?" Yuffie said incredulously.

Reno shrugged.

"A million gil can be a very strong incentive," he replied with a smile.

Yuffie stared at him for a moment.

"You're full of shit," she said, finally deciding he was kidding with her. At least she was pretty sure he was kidding.

Reno did not reply.

"Well, if he's going to get these Fog people after Barret then we better warn him," she continued, pulling out her PHS.

Reno reached over and grabbed hold of her hand.

"You will do no such thing!" he said sharply.

Yuffie looked at him in surprise.

"What? Why not?"

"The man was a client," Reno replied. "What he told me was in the strictest confidence. The Turks have a reputation to uphold, a reputation that we live by. If word got out that we couldn't be trusted to keep our mouths shut, it would ruin us."

Yuffie just stared at him with her mouth open.

"So you're not going to do anything?" she asked finally. "You're not going to tell him? You're just going to let them kill your friend?"

Reno looked at her darkly.

"For one thing, Barret Wallace is *not* my friend," Reno replied caustically. "Number two, this has nothing to do with friendship. This is business, and I'm not about to jeopardize the Turks reputation for anyone. I want you to promise me you will not tell Barret about this."

Yuffie just continued to look at him, her head slowly shaking.

"I can't believe it," she muttered. Then her eyes darkened. "I most certainly will not!" she said defiantly.

Reno stared at her, and suddenly his face lost all expression. Slowly he stood up.

"Yuffie," he said slowly. "I want you to promise me you will not tell Barret."

Yuffie stood up as well. She had never seen quite that expression on Reno's face before. There was no hint of his usual smirk, no gleam of mirth in his eye, yet he did not look angry either. She couldn't see any emotion at all. It was almost as if he wasn't really even there, and suddenly, much to her surprise, she realized she was afraid.

"Reno, you can't be serious," she said slowly.

"I am very serious," he replied. His hand slipped beneath his jacket.

"Reno..." she began, but the words died in her throat. There was just something in the way he was looking at her. She felt her own hand moving toward her shuriken, but she did not take hold of it. She didn't want to fight. Reno had never looked more serious. She had a feeling if she grabbed her shuriken now, there would be no turning back. If they fought this time, it would be to the death.

"All right," she heard herself saying. "I promise."

Reno stared at her for a moment more, then his body seemed to relax. He sat back down in his chair, suddenly looking like his old self.

"If you break that promise, I'll kill you," he stated.

She didn't reply, just stood there. She couldn't believe he would do this, but perhaps that had been naive of her. She had known all along what Reno was like. She knew what he had done when he was with Shinra. She knew how ruthless he could be, but she had to admit she had turned a blind eye to it. Mainly, she supposed, because it had never happened in front of her. She hadn't been there when he had pushed the button that had destroyed the pillar above sector seven in Midgar. She had an image of him as a flamboyant scoundrel. A man who was always angling for an advantage, but was not really evil. Kind of the way she thought of herself. But what she saw now disgusted her.

Without another word she turned and walked away.

"Yuffie," Reno said as she opened the door. She turned back to look at him. The roguish gleam was back in his eye.

"Still want to be a Turk?" he asked.

She stepped through the entrance and slammed the door behind her.

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Tifa ducked quickly and the sword whistled over her head. She kicked out as she dodged backwards, but Cloud avoided it easily. He moved in again, the wooden practice sword slashing back and forth in front of her. Tifa slowly retreated. Then she suddenly lunged forward just as the sword passed her and struck Cloud in the chest. He took a step back then came at her again.

"Is that the best you can do?" he taunted.

She spun around to avoid another swing of his sword, then dropped down and tried to sweep his feet out from under him, but he jumped up, then struck downward. The sword slashed across Tifa's leg.

"I got you again," he said. "C'mon Tifa, I know you're holding back."

"I don't want to hurt you," she replied.

She feinted toward his head then leapt to the side and kicked at his leg. He dodged out of the way, nearly falling over in the process, but quickly regained his balance.

"Hurt me?" he said doubtfully. "The punches you've thrown so far wouldn't even hurt Marlene. Now c'mon, gimme your best shot. I can take it."

He thrust at her suddenly. She spun out of the way, then brought her arm around and batted the sword away with her elbow. Stepping into the opening she hit him three times on the chest then leapt back before he could recover.

"You're still as quick as ever, I'll give you that," he admitted grudgingly. "But what were those, love taps you were giving me? I said to give it your best shot."

He drove at her again, the sword whirling like lightning in front of her. Tifa retreated yet again, then lunged forward when she saw an opening. But this time Cloud twisted out of the way, and she passed right by him. Spinning around, he quickly hit her with a sharp blow to the posterior.

Tifa stifled a yelp of pain and turned to glare at him. He just returned the look with a devilish grin on his face.

"You keep using the same moves and even a dullard like me will learn how to counter," he said magnanimously.

Tifa resisted the urge to growl at him.

He slashed at her again. She dodged to the side, stepped in, then lunged back as his sword came around again. She leaped up and kicked him in the side, knocking him off balance again. Even off balance the sword came around, hitting her in the side as well. They both stumbled back and regained their balance.

"I got you first on that one," Tifa exclaimed.

"Yeah, but the difference is your blow wouldn't have even slowed me down, but if this was a real sword you'd be dead now."

Tifa made a face as he lunged at her again. For a moment she stood her ground, then at the last second she dodged to the right. His sword seemed committed to slashing the spot she had just vacated, yet somehow Cloud turned it in mid swing. It whistled through the air and hit her smack on the rear end once again.

"Owww!" This time she could not prevent herself from crying out. She staggered away and then turned to look at him again.

"You're pissing me off!" she exclaimed.

"Good," he replied, stepping toward her again. "Maybe now you'll start treating this like a real fight."

He thrust forward once more. She turned to the side, the blade barely missing her. She pivoted and her fist shot out, striking the flat of the blade. There was a loud crack and the wooden sword shattered. Without hesitating she stepped

forward, grabbed hold of his collar and pulled back. She fell to the ground, lifting him and flinging him over her. He flew through the air and landed flat on his back nearly ten feet away.

She rolled over and jumped to her feet. She looked at Cloud, but he was just laying on the grass, unmoving.

"Are you all right?" she said, concern in her voice.

She hurried over and knelt down beside him. He was laying spread eagle on the ground, his eyes closed.

"Cloud?" she questioned, leaning closer to him. "Are you all right? I'm sorry..."

His eyes opened and he grabbed hold of her, pulling her down and quickly rolling over until he was on top.

"Now that's more like it!" he said, obviously no worse for the wear. "See, I knew you had it in you."

She looked at him and smiled, but it quickly faded.

"It's this Mako thing," she said slowly. "I know I'm stronger now. I can feel it, but I don't know how to control it. I literally don't know my own strength."

Cloud nodded in agreement.

"It does take some getting used to," he replied. "But you'll adjust. It'll just take some time."

Tifa looked thoughtful but did not reply.

"That last move wasn't bad," Cloud commented. "A couple more sessions and you actually may be able to hang with me."

Tifa gave him a skeptical look, then suddenly grabbed hold of him and twisted round until she was on top.

"I can kick your ass and you know it," she claimed.

He wrapped his arms around her but did not struggle.

"Well, if I remember correctly, I snagged your ass a few times just now," he replied.

"Yeah," she said. "And did you have to hit me so hard?"

"Awww, did I hurt you?" he said with a pouty face. "Here, let me rub it."

His hand slid down over her skirt. She immediately slapped it aside.

"People can see," she admonished, looking around. They were lying on the lawn in back of Elmyra's house. There was no fence, and Tifa could see a neighbor not too far away working in his garden, though he did not seem to be paying attention to them.

Cloud nodded toward the house, a sly smile on his face.

"So let's go inside then," he suggested.

"Pervert," she accused.

He grabbed hold of her again and pulled her closer.

"If I am, it's because you make me one."

He pulled her to him and kissed her. Her hands came up and circled around his neck.

Suddenly she lifted her head, looking up into the sky.

"What?" Cloud said.

"Listen," she replied. She sat up, sliding off him and getting to her knees. Cloud sat up. He could hear it too and looked up as well.

"There!" he said, pointing over her shoulder.

She turned and saw the black jet slowly dropping down out of the sky just above the trees to the west.

"It's the Slipstream," she said, quickly getting to her feet and trotting off. "C'mon, let's go see what's going on!"

The hatch slid open and Aeris stepped out of the Slipstream. They had landed in an open field not far behind Elmyra's house. Even now she could see Cloud and Tifa trotting over. She waved to them then turned as Ellengio and Cid walked out of the airplane beside her.

"Hi," Cloud said as he came up, Tifa right beside him. Aeris looked them over. They were both disheveled and sweaty from their workout.

"Looks like you two have been busy," she commented.

"We were practicing," Tifa explained.

"For what?" Cid muttered, giving Cloud a look neither of the girls noticed.

"So what's up?" Tifa asked. "This just a social visit?"

"Not exactly," Aeris replied. "Ellengio wants to take a look at the site where the crystal materia was found."

Cloud looked puzzled.

"You mean in Midgar?" he questioned.

"No, not where you found it," Aeris replied. "Where it was originally found."

"You mean two thousand years ago?" Cloud said in surprise.

"Yes," Ellengio replied. "The place is well known to the Cetra. It is on one of the southern islands, not too far from Mideel."

"Is there going to be anything left there after all this time?" Cloud questioned dubiously.

"The site was preserved by the Cetra," Ellengio replied. "Unless it was disturbed, everything should be as it was."

"We thought you might want to join us, that is, if you feel up to it," Aeris said, looking at Tifa.

"I'm fine," Tifa readily agreed. "Just let us clean ourselves up and we can be on our way."

A half hour later the Slipstream rose up into the air and streaked off to the south. Cloud expressed an interest in learning how to fly the black jet, so he was sitting up front beside Cid in the copilot's seat. Tifa sat down in the back beside Aeris.

"I hope Cid waits til they're alone before he let's Cloud fly this thing," she commented.

"You don't have much faith in his flying ability?" Aeris questioned.

Tifa looked at her.

"Do you?"

Both of them laughed.

"Well, he can't put it through any worse maneuvers than Cid has," Aeris commented.

"Yeah, but Cid does it on purpose," Tifa replied.

Cloud glanced back at them.

"What are you two talking about?"

"Nothing," Tifa replied quickly. "Just girl talk."

Seemingly appeased, Cloud turned away and asked Cid something.

"So why does Ellengio want to go back to the site where the crystal materia was found?" Tifa asked, apparently through making fun of Cloud.

"He told me he really didn't want to say just yet," Aeris replied. "But he seems to think it's very important. I'm sure it's related to Jenova. I don't think he believes the threat is over."

Tifa looked at her in surprise.

"But we killed Jenova, again. I thought as long as we didn't use the crystal materia anymore, we would be safe."

"So did I," Aeris agreed. "But I can tell he's concerned about something. For all that we've talked about he's very close mouthed about some things. It's almost like he's afraid to tell me."

Tifa didn't like the sound of that. She had thought that things were going to calm down, that they were finally going to get some peace. After all that had happened, was there still more to do? What could be so bad that Ellengio wouldn't even tell Aeris about it.

"Did you ask him straight out?" Tifa questioned.

"Yes I did," Aeris replied. "Last night before we left. But he was evasive. He never actually answered me."

She glanced up at Ellengio who was sitting right behind Cid. He was looking out the window, not appearing to pay any attention to them.

"It's so strange," Aeris continued. "He's so different from what I expected. He acts just like any of us."

Tifa glanced at Ellengio as well.

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know," Aeris replied thoughtfully. "Something different. He seems so...human."

Tifa glanced at her with a puzzled expression.

"Human? What made you think he wouldn't be."

"Well, he is a Cetra," Aeris stated.

"So are you," Tifa reminded her. "And you act just like the rest of us. Most times, anyway."

"What do you mean by that?" Aeris questioned in mock anger.

"You know," Tifa replied. "All that weird talking to the planet stuff. That's not exactly normal behavior for a human. But other than that, you seem just like the rest of us."

"Yes, but I'm half human," Aeris pointed out. "And I was brought up by humans as well. Ellengio wasn't. For some reason I expected him to act differently. I guess our races are more alike than I thought."

Tifa looked at her thoughtfully.

"Well, that's good, isn't it?"

Aeris nodded slowly.

"I suppose," she replied.

Tifa looked out the window. She could see Fort Condor on the plain below them. She looked back at Aeris.

"So where are Zack and Reeve?" she questioned. "I was surprised when I saw they weren't with you."

Aeris paused for a moment before answering.

"They're back in Ifalna," she replied. "I'm sure they would have come along, if I had told them I was going."

Tifa looked at her in surprise.

"Have they been bothering you that much?"

Aeris looked at her unhappily.

"It's not that," she said quickly. "They haven't bothered me. Actually they've both been very nice. They haven't said or done anything, but they don't have to. Whenever they're with me I can feel it. I can tell what they're thinking just by the way they look at me."

Tifa thought about that for a minute.

"Is that so bad?" she asked with a smile.

The lack of a return smile told Tifa that her attempt to lighten the mood had failed.

"I guess I should be flattered," Aeris said seriously. "But I can't help but feel torn. I love them both very much. I wouldn't want to see either of them hurt."

Tifa looked at her sympathetically.

"It's probably not my place to give you any advice," she said slowly, "Seeing as how I've had only one man on my mind for as long as I can remember. But I'm going to say this anyway."

She paused for a minute, looking at Aeris carefully.

"For once in your life, be a little bit selfish. Don't think about how anyone else feels. This is too important a decision for you to do that. Just this one time, forget about everyone else. Look into to your own heart and pick who *you* want."

Aeris sat there for a moment in silence. She glanced up at the men but they were engrossed in their own conversation.

"I have looked," she said slowly. "And I just don't know."

Tifa sat there looking at her for a long time.

"I think you do know," she said finally. "But you just won't admit it to yourself. I think you're still afraid to hurt someone."

Aeris started to speak again, but they suddenly felt the airplane begin to dip down. They both looked toward the front.

"The island's right below us," Cid stated. "I'm bringing her down."

Cid landed the Slipstream on a weed covered plain just off the beach of the small island. They swiftly climbed out and Ellengio looked around.

"That way," he announced, pointing to the jungle to the north.

They followed him as he plunged unhesitatingly into the underbrush. There was no trail, but Ellengio seemed to know exactly where he was going. They walked for quite a while through the forest. The air was still under the trees, and Cloud soon found it uncomfortably warm. The air was alive with the buzz of insects, and he had to constantly swat them aside, adding to his discomfort. But then he heard the sound of rushing water ahead, and a few moments later they came out of the trees beside a fast running stream. A gentle breeze blew by here, cooled by the water, making them all much more comfortable.

They followed the stream for a while, then suddenly Ellengio turned off and plunged into the jungle again. They did not go far this time, however, before they saw huge granite cliffs looming above the trees ahead of them, shooting almost vertically up into the air, long vines trailing down them. Ellengio looked around for a moment, for the first time seeming unsure of the way. Then he led them to the left along the cliff face. The sound of the river had faded away, although it had never really disappeared completely, but now Cloud could hear it again, louder than ever. They came out into a small clearing and stood looking up at a cascade of water splashing down the granite rocks to fall into a deep pond that spilled over to form the river they had been following.

Aeris stood looking up at the waterfall.

"How pretty," she commented.

None of the others spoke. Ellengio led them straight for the waterfall. When they reached the base of the cliff the water was falling down almost on top of their heads.

"This way," Ellengio said.

They climbed up a steep outcropping of rock, then Cloud saw that there was a narrow path running behind the waterfall. They followed Ellengio along it until they all stood directly behind the water, it forming a window of water on their left side as they walked, and shooting up a cooling spray all around them. Aeris stuck her hand into the waterfall and watched the water part around it. She looked at Ellengio and said something, but her voice was obscured by the roar of the falls.

They came out the other side a few moments later, back into the bright sunlight. Ellengio looked up at the granite cliff face above them and shaded his eyes.

"Now we climb," he announced.

They all looked up dubiously at the rough rock face above them. The granite cliffs seemed less sheer on this side of the waterfall, but even so it did not look like an easy climb. Nevertheless, before anyone could say anything Ellengio started up,

scrambling up through the rocks with the occasional help of some of the vines that hung down from above. The others reluctantly followed.

"Couldn't we have parked a little closer?" Cloud muttered.

"Your plane cannot land in the jungle," Ellengio replied. Cloud hadn't realized he'd said it loud enough to be overheard. "This is the only way."

They slowly made their way up the steep slope. It wasn't too difficult a climb, but the cliff face was exposed, and the early afternoon sun beat down on them. Cloud had thought it hot down in the jungle, but partially due to the added exertion of the climb, this was even worse. Soon they were all huffing and puffing and covered with sweat. The sound of the waterfall nearby only made it worse, for they were not close enough to it to be caught in the cooling spray any longer, yet it being in plain sight made it that much more apparent just what they were missing.

They stopped to rest for a moment, pausing on a large outcropping of rock almost two thirds of the way to the top. Cloud looked down and was surprised to see how high up they were. The pool at the bottom of the waterfall could barely be made out in the jungle below. He lifted his eyes and looked out over the forest. From this height he could see all the way to the beach, and the southern ocean beyond. He strained his eyes, but he could see no sign of the Slipstream.

"Let's get going," Ellengio remarked. "Not much further."

They started up the cliff face once more. Ellengio led them up, climbing easily. Cloud was surprised at how nimble he was, considering his age. Aeris followed him, moving quickly but cautiously. Cid was behind her, by far the slowest. Cloud considered commenting on how he'd probably be in better shape if he cut down on his smoking, but thought better of it. He didn't want the pilot to waste his breath cursing him out.

Tifa followed Cid, with Cloud bringing up the rear. As Tifa climbed up after Cid her hand slipped off the smooth granite and she stumbled and slid back down a few feet. Cloud quickly grabbed hold of her to steady her.

"You okay?" he asked sharply.

She turned and gave him a reassuring nod, then started up the slope again. He followed, keeping a cautious eye on her. This was only her second day out of the hospital, and though she had been given a clean bill of health she still wouldn't be a hundred percent for a while yet. But even if she was finding the going difficult, he knew she wouldn't complain. They hadn't known what they were getting into when they had agreed to come along, but thinking back on it now he should have known better. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have come in the first place.

Still, there wasn't much he could do about it now except keep an eye on her and make sure they rested if she looked like she was getting tired. He knew it would be pointless to suggest to her that they turn back.

He looked up again and saw that the top of the cliff was not far above them now. He could see the overhanging vegetation that marked the jungle at the top. He looked over toward the waterfall and was surprised to see that it did not flow over the top of the cliff, but instead poured out of a large opening in the cliff face about twenty meters below the top.

"We're almost at the top," Ellengio said encouragingly.

A short time later, and with a collective sigh of relief, they hauled themselves over the top. They stopped for a minute to look around. They could see the whole southern end of the island mapped out below them.

"That was fun," Cid commented, panting heavily. "I can't wait to climb back down."

"Well, we can rest for a while before we do that," Ellengio replied. "C'mon, we're almost to the cave. It's much cooler inside it. We can rest there."

With some grumbling the other followed as he led them once more into the jungle. The vegetation was thicker than ever here, and they had a hard time pushing their way through it. The trees closed in around them once more, their thick leaves and hanging vines making it impossible to see more than a few yards ahead into the jungle. Occasionally they came across rocky outcroppings of granite, some of them shooting up thirty or forty meters overhead.

"I thought he said it wasn't much farther," Cloud heard Tifa mutter as she wiped the sweat from her brow.

Cloud did not reply, not that he didn't agree with her. The ground in front of them started to rise steeply again, and suddenly the jungle started to thin out slightly, enough for them to see ahead. Above them the ground sloped sharply upward, rising up higher and narrowing until it reached a peak far above their heads. They all stopped, looking at the mountain in front of them.

"I hope we don't have to go all the way up there?" Cid questioned, his face paling.

"No," Ellengio replied. "The cave is just up the slope now. It's not far at all."

Ellengio was about to start forward again when Aeris stopped him.

"What's that?"

Ellengio seemed about to ask her something but stopped. They could all hear the sound coming from the jungle behind them.

"Sounds like drums," Cid said slowly.

They all looked at Ellengio.

"There is a native apelike creature here," Ellengio said slowly, as if trying to remember. "Low intelligence and few in number. They won't give us any trouble."

He turned and continued on. The others started after him, but not before both Cloud and Cid had unlimbered their weapons.

The ground sloped steeply up, and though the trees had thinned the undergrowth was still as thick as ever. Their progress was slowed to a crawl. But this time Ellengio had been accurate in his statement that they did not have far to go. Soon they saw another wall of granite rise up in front of them. As they approached it they made out the first man-made object they had seen on the island. At the base of the granite cliff they could see entrance to a cave, and just inside the entrance they could make out a large stone door.

They stepped out into an open clearing surrounding the cave. Ellengio walked rapidly over to it. The others followed more cautiously. The sound of the drums continued uninterrupted in the background, and now Cloud was looking around suspiciously. He had seen furtive movements out of the corner of his eye a few times, though when he turned to look around he saw nothing. Still, his instincts told him that something, or someone, was nearby.

Ellengio stepped up to the door and started fiddling with some device on it. Cloud walked up beside him and saw that it was three concentric dials set one within the other. Cloud watched him for a moment as Ellengio turned them slowly, but soon decided he would be of no help there. Cloud walked back out into the clearing, looking around suspiciously. A movement caught his eye in the bushes to his left. He turned quickly and caught a glimpse of a large grey creature for a moment, but it disappeared almost immediately. His gaze drifted around the jungle surrounding the clearing. From the faint movements and sounds in the trees he could tell that there were quite a few of the creatures watching them.

He stood with his sword in his hands, ready for anything, but nothing further happened. Ellengio had said these creatures would not cause any trouble. Perhaps they were just curious about these strange newcomers to their island.

Cloud turned to say something to Ellengio. Immediately a dark object whizzed by him. The spear struck the rocks near Aeris, who jerked back with a cry of surprise.

"Damn bastards!" Cid exclaimed.

Cloud ran back to the cave, standing in the entrance with Cid beside him, with the other three behind them.

"I thought you told me they wouldn't cause any trouble," Cloud stated with a hint of anger.

Ellengio did not look up at him, just started spinning the dials on the door faster.

"They didn't bother us the last time I was here," he replied. "But that was a long time ago."

A dozen more spears flew out of the trees. Most of them bounced harmlessly off the rocks around them. Cloud batted one aside, while one got through and stuck the stone door near Tifa.

"Can we hurry it up here?" Cid suggested, looking at Ellengio.

"I'm going as fast as I can," Ellengio replied. "Like I said, it's been a long time. If I make a mistake with the sequence I have to start all over again."

Another volley of spears flew towards them. Cid grunted in pain as one struck him in the ankle.

"Can somebody remind me again why I came along?" he grumbled.

"We're sitting ducks out here," Cloud stated.

Tifa came up beside him.

"Your weapons are useless if they stay in the trees," she stated. There was a flash of green light as she cast cure on Cid.

Cloud nodded in agreement, pulling out a materia orb as well. He concentrated for a moment, then lightning flashed through the jungle in front of him. There were screams, quite similar to that of a human, and the crashing of bodies through the underbrush as the remaining creatures retreated.

"That's it, run you bastards!" Cid shouted after them, standing up and placing his weight on his now recovered leg. "Bet they won't be back for a while."

Cloud walked slowly back into the clearing. He looked around but saw no sign that any of the creatures were nearby.

"Looks like we scared them off," he agreed. "But still in all, I wish you'd hurry up with that door. Who knows when they might come back."

"I've got it," Ellengio said.

He stood up and pushed, and the stone door slowly opened up, revealing a narrow passage that quickly disappeared into darkness.

"Bout time," Cid muttered. Ellengio produced a flashlight and snapped it on, then walked quickly into the cave, the others right behind. Cloud took one last look around before following, but saw nothing.

The passage led almost straight into the hillside, with no turns or side passages. The floor sloped slightly downward, but other than that seemed to run perfectly straight. The walls were smooth. The tunnel had obviously been cut in the rock by artificial means.

They walked on for a while. Cloud found it hard to keep track of time in the darkness around them. He kept listening for any sound of pursuit, but all was quiet behind them. Eventually they came out into a much larger chamber, and Cloud could see right away that this one was a natural cavern. The walls were rough and the floor was covered with stalagmites. But on the far side of the room he could see that the wall had been cut away.

Ellengio led them in that direction. Cloud felt a slight tremor and stopped for a moment. Listening carefully he thought he heard a sound coming from the passageway they had entered from. A low rumbling, so faint he could barely hear it. It was gone in a moment. He looked at the others but none of them seemed to have noticed.

They were all gathered around Ellengio at the far end of the chamber, staring at something where the wall had been cut into. Cloud walked up beside them and stared in shock. Beneath the wall were the polished bones of a manlike creature. They were obviously ancient, yet appeared to be in surprisingly good condition. The cartilage holding them together had long since decomposed, and they had fallen apart. Some had obviously disappeared altogether, but the rest had been arranged on the ground in order, or as close to the correct order as could be achieved. The bones were arranged with the creature on it's back, and looked remarkably human. Though it was clearly not human. It was much taller and thinner than a man, but what really stood out was the long bones that ran out on either side of it's back.

"What the hell is that thing?" Cloud asked.

"That is what was found in this cave over two thousand years ago," Ellengio replied. "The crystal materia was found nearby."

Aeris looked at Ellengio thoughtfully.

"So you think this thing came here from space with the crystal materia?" she said.

"That is what we believe," Ellengio replied.

Cloud pointed at the long bones coming off the skeletons back.

"What are those, wings?"

Ellengio nodded.

"We think so," he replied. "The bones were scattered when we first found it. We pieced it together as best we could."

Cloud looked at the skeleton thoughtfully.

"So for all you know, this configuration could be completely wrong."

"I doubt if it's completely wrong," Ellengio replied. "It's so similar to our own structure that most of it is almost certainly correct. There were only a few minor bones whose place was disputed."

"Like the wings?" Cloud suggested. He would hardly consider that minor.

"It's possible," Ellengio replied.

"But how do you know it's not something from this planet?" Cid questioned. "Maybe it's just some poor creature who got lost down here and died of starvation in these tunnels."

"A good question," Ellengio replied. "Because there was one other thing found down here. What I am seeking now."

He swung the flashlight around. It danced along the floor until it came upon a metal box that gleamed in the light not far from the foot of the skeleton.

They all walked over to it. The outside of the box was a silvery color that reflected the light quite well, but other than that seemed perfectly ordinary. There was no sign of a hasp or lock, and Ellengio reached down and flipped it open.

Inside was what looked like a rather large book. Ellengio reached in and picked it up. He flipped it open and the others could see that the pages were as new as if they had been printed yesterday. There was no sign of fading or yellowing.

"That book was here as well?" Cloud questioned.

"And the box," Ellengio replied.

"The box?" Tifa said in surprise.

"The box," Ellengio repeated. "It's made of a metal completely unknown to this world even now, much less two thousand years ago. Anything placed inside it will remain perfectly preserved. The crystal materia was in the box, as well as this book, but the humans who first found this were only interested in the crystal. They were too primitive to realize the value of the book, and had no inkling at all of the box's properties. It was fortunate they didn't destroy anything. The creature that brought this here must have considered the book to be of great value to have gone to such lengths to see that was preserved."

Cloud couldn't argue with that conclusion.

"So what's in the book," he asked. "What does it say?"

"We don't know," Ellengio replied.

"What do you mean?" Tifa asked.

"We've never been able to translate it," Ellengio responded. "It's written in a language totally alien to us. We have no common ground, no basis for understanding. We were never able to decipher it."

Cloud looked puzzled.

"So why come for it then?" he asked.

"Things have changed," Ellengio replied. "The last time anyone worked on this was almost two thousand years ago. After Jenova came with the plague the Cetra had no more time for research into such things, we were busy just trying to survive. Now you humans have reached a level of scientific achievement comparable to what the Cetra once had, and in many cases exceeded it. It may be time to take another crack at it. I understand the one you call Nanaki is quite proficient with languages. Perhaps he could shed some light on this for us."

Cloud nodded in agreement. Ellengio placed the book back in the box, then lifted it up.

"Well, we've got what we came for," he stated. "Now let's go see what awaits us in the jungle outside."

He led them swiftly back through the passageway. Cloud was right behind Ellengio now, materia already in his hand. Hopefully that one encounter with lightning would be enough to keep the creatures away, but he was more than willing to give them another dose of it if need be.

They were almost back to the entrance when he began to suspect that something was not quite right.

"I think we're pretty close to the entrance," he stated. "Why don't I see any light?"

Ellengio did not reply, but his pace quickened. He glanced back and Cloud could see the concern on his face. He obviously thought something was wrong too.

"Do you think they came back and closed the door on us?" Cloud questioned, the idea coming to him suddenly.

"It wouldn't do them any good," Ellengio replied. "The door opens easily from this side. But I'm sure they wouldn't know that."

"Just like you were sure they wouldn't cause any trouble," Cid pointed out.

"Don't remind me," Ellengio replied.

They reached the door, and though it was open, the entrance was blocked by a huge granite boulder.

Ellengio stood there shining the light on it.

"Damn!" Cid exclaimed and went off in a very colorful string of curses.

"They must have started a rock slide above the cave," Ellengio said slowly. "I didn't think they were clever enough..."

They were all silent for a moment.

"So what are we going to do?" Tifa said nervously.

Cloud looked at the boulder in front of them. It was obviously much too large to ever budge by hand. He pulled out a green materia.

"Get back," he said.

The others retreated a few meters back into the passageway. After a moment there was a flash of green light, then a loud explosion, almost deafening in the narrow confines of the cave. This was followed by a loud rumbling sound and they felt the ground tremble under their feet. They heard a shout from Cloud, then he came running back toward them, the tunnel behind him billowing with a cloud of dust.

"Back!" he shouted.

They hurried further down the passageway. The rumbling sound died out behind them and they stopped once more. Ellengio trained the flashlight on Cloud and they saw he was covered with dirt and dust.

"I tried to use Ultima, but it just brought the entire cavern down," he said. "We're not gonna get out that way."

"Is there any other way?" Tifa asked, looking quickly at Ellengio.

The Cetra shook his head.

"Not that I'm aware of."

Tifa fought hard to keep the fear out of her voice.

"So how do we get out of here?"

No one replied. Ellengio looked around.

"We'll have to go back to the cavern. There are some tunnels off it. I don't know if all of them were ever fully explored. Perhaps there is another way."

None of them seemed to be thrilled about his answer, but there wasn't much else to do but go along. They walked back to the main cavern and looked around. There were two tunnels leading away from the cavern. One opposite the passage they came in and one to the right. They explored the one opposite and after walking a few meters found that it came to a dead end. They retraced their steps and went down the other passage. This one twisted and turned sharply a few times and then also came to a dead end.

"Great," Cid muttered. "Now what do we do?"

Ellengio shook his head and said nothing.

"There's no way out," Tifa said, as if talking to herself. Cloud looked at her sharply. He could tell she was scared, hell, he couldn't blame her for that, they all were. But she was trying her best to hide it.

"No chance we could dig out through the entrance?" Cid said, looking at Cloud, but not very hopefully.

"No way," Cloud replied. He realized now that using the Ultima materia had been a stupid thing to do, even though no one would say so. It had only gotten them buried even deeper. But what else could he have done? There was no way they were going to move that boulder by hand. No matter what they did, they couldn't have gotten out through the entrance, but what other way was there?

They sat in silence for some time, each engrossed in their own thoughts. Most of those thoughts revolved around an unpleasant death.

Suddenly Aeris looked up.

"Can you hear that?" she questioned.

The others looked at her.

"What?" Cloud asked.

"Shhh," she admonished. "It sounds like..."

They all fell silent again. Cloud strained his ears, but heard nothing.

"...running water," Aeris finished.

She got up and walked slowly back toward the end of the cave. It narrowed at the end, the rocks becoming jagged, with deep crevices lining the walls. All of them too small to pass through.

She stopped in front of one of them.

"It is water," she said. "Come here and listen."

The others quickly gathered round her. They could all hear it now, coming faintly from a dark crevice near the floor at the back of the cave.

Ellengio shined the flashlight inside.

"I don't see anything," he stated.

"But there's obviously water back there somewhere," Cloud said. "Which means there must be another tunnel. And that could be a way out."

"Possibly," Ellengio replied. "But sound travels funny underground. What we could be hearing may be miles away. And we can't get through this crevice anyway. It's much too small."

"Well, damn, it doesn't look like we've got much choice," Cid stated firmly. "Maybe we can make this crevice a little wider."

With that he jammed his spear into the crevice.

There was a loud cracking sound, and the wall of the cavern fell away. They heard the sudden sound of rushing water, and the splash of rocks falling in it. Then the ground gave way beneath them, and they found themselves plunging downward.

Cloud heard Tifa cry out and lunged for her, but she vanished in the sudden pitch darkness around them. With a loud splash he found himself immersed in ice cold water. He came up to the surface, sputtering. He couldn't see a thing. The current was pulling him along rapidly, though exactly how fast he couldn't really tell in the dark. He called out to the others, but heard no response above the roar of the water. He banged roughly against a wall. He reached out and his hands slid along it, but they could find no purchase, and he continued to be pulled helplessly along. Suddenly he saw light in front of him, growing rapidly. The roar of the water was getting louder too, and he suddenly realized where he was and what was about to happen.

He looked around again, and in the growing light saw someones bobbing head not far away. He shouted as loud as he could, and when the person turned toward him he saw it was Aeris. He struggled to swim over to her but could not seem to get any closer. The light was bright as day now, and he could see the end of the tunnel, the opening ahead of him, and hear the roar of the water as it plunged down the cliff face outside.

He struggled against the current for a moment, but soon realized it was hopeless. He saw Aeris disappear over the edge, and a moment later he flew out into the air himself.

For a second he could see the jungle below him once more, but then it was obscured in the spray as he plunged down the waterfall. He hit the pond below and sank down for a moment, then kicked his feet and shot back up to the surface. He

