

Chapter Nighteen: The Midgar Nightmare II

"Should you really be walking around on top of that?" Rude

"Cid?"

"What do you want?"

"Yer goddamn chain-smokin' is giving me a headache!"

"So hold your breath, then!"

Barret cursed under his breath and resisted the urge to pound his friend into the floor of the elevator. He was well aware that neither he nor Cid was in a very good mood at the moment, but in Barret's opinion, he was the one that had to suffer more since, not only was he wet and tired, he had to breathe in a lungful of second hand smoke every time he inhaled. Given the rate at which the slow-ass elevator was moving and the rapid rate that Cid was filling the confined space with cigarette smoke, Barret figured he'd probably be dead by the time they reached the top levels of the Shinra Building, where Cait Sith was safely stored in an office that hadn't been damaged from Diamond Weapon's assault on the Shinra Headquarters.

Barret eyed Cid evilly. "I mean it, old man!" he growled. "Put that damn thang away!"

Cid turned and gave him a withering glare, continuing to expel smoke from his mouth. "Me old? Look at you! And I ain't puttin' this thing away till it's done, for your information!"

"I'm gonna be dead by the time we reach the top!" Barret protested angrily.

Cid shrugged and leaned against the glass elevator wall behind him. "Better hope we get there quickly, then. Why did that damn cat put his little stuffed toy so far up anyways?"

Turning away from Cid (and the main source of the smoke), Barret stared out the opaque, rain-streaked elevator glass and into the city of Midgar, which was fighting to survive the torrents of rain plummeting from the dark sky. "Don't know," he said in response to Cid's question. "'Jes 'cause he wanted to keep anyone else from getting to it, I guess."

Cid snorted, smoke exiting his nose and fighting for a place in the already smoke-filled air. "Who the hell would want a stuffed moogle and an annoying cat that fights with a goddamn megaphone?"

"Hell if I know!" Barret snapped, trying to ignore the smoke-induced migraine that was pounding at his temples. He knew that he should have volunteered to go with Tifa, Cloud, and Rude to pay a visit to Hojo's lab. Anything would be better than staying here and being forced to inhale all this damn smoke with Old Man Chimney...

The elevator continued to head upwards with agonizing slowness, and every second was torture for Barret. He could practically feel his lungs turning all gross and charred and blackened with every breath he took. Soon they'd shrivel away into nothing, and he'd have to rely on a respirator to do all this breathing for...

"We're here!" Cid sang happily as the elevator chimed.

Eureka! Barret thought, nearly running Cid over in his haste to get out the smoky elevator. He stumbled to a stop and hunched over his knees, inhaling deep breaths of air that was blessedly free of second hand smoke.

Cid walked up behind him, taking one last puff of his cigarette before grinding it beneath his boot. "The hell's that matter with you?" he demanded of Barret. "You huffin' like you just ran a marathon."

"Sure as hell feels like I did," Barret snapped, straightening up. "I'm taking the stairs next time, old man."

"Do what you want, old geezer," Cid counterattacked, blue eyes roving over their surroundings. "Where to now?"

Barret took the cue from his friend and examined the floor they had exited on. He quickly recognized it as the thirty-third floor, the one with all those goddamn annoying doors that never wanted to stay open at once. Fortunately, when Reeve had become President of Neo-Shinra, he had deactivated all the superfluous security and turned the entire level into a huge storage facility. The only problem was that the power to this area only worked when it felt like it, and it was apparently in a bad mood at the moment.

"Where are the goddamn lights?" Cid demanded, squinting the gloom. He took a few experimental steps forward.

"They ain't workin' right now," Barret replied, trying to remember if Reeve had ever told him which room Cait was stored in. Then his eyes flicked over to where Cid was stumbling around. "Yo, Cid!" he cried. "You about to run into a wall!"

"Shut your flapper!" Cid snapped, still walking. "I know where-ow! Mother @\$%er! Who the hell put that @\$%ing wall there?!"

"Heh, heh," Barret laughed, but said nothing to his friend, knowing that Cid would probably blow his top and whip out the Venus Gospel if Barret dared so much as to snicker.

"Hey, old fart!" Cid said grumpily, his voice echoing in the storage level as he rubbed his aching nose. "Where the hell is that damn robotic cat hiding?"

Barret's eyes roved through the darkness, only to find nothing. He could see shadows of walls and corners, but other than that, he was completely blind. He knew the layout of the floor fairly well, though, from when he had helped Cloud and the others clean out the floor. He knew it better than Cid, at least.

"Follow me," he ordered Cid, taking a step down what *looked* to be an empty space between storage blocks.

"Follow you?!" Cid echoed, his boots making loud stamping noises and he rushed to catch up with Barret. "I can barely see you!"

Barret waved his arms in the air and started making a lot of racket by stomping on the floor. "Get yer dumb arse over here!" he told Cid.

A humanoid shadow moved until it was in front of him. "I'm here," Cid said grumpily, not liking being ordered around. "Now what?"

"Now we move out," Barret said matter-of-factly, and started off into the darkness, trusting Cid to follow him.

Though he could see next to nothing in the blackness, Barret was pleased to find that he *did* remember what the room looked like. He had always had better-than-average night vision, and he was able to sense the hulking bulks of the storage blocks as he went past them, keeping him from running headfirst into one and ending up with a huge goose egg on his head. But although he may have known the layout of the floor, Barret knew that their search would be futile until he knew exactly where Cait Sith was.

"Hey, foo?" he called to Cid.

"Yeah?" came the terse reply.

"You know where that damn cat put his robot?"

"No," Cid grumped. "Haven't we been through this question before?"

Barret stopped, and Cid plowed into his back with a loud curse.

"Watch it!" Cid snapped, retreating a couple of steps from Barret's shadowy figure.

"Shu'up!" Barret told him, scowling at the darkness all around him, cursing it for its impenetrable armor. "We don't know where Cait is! Whatcha wanna do, Cid? Search all the storage blocks one by one?!"

"Ain't there three main storage blocks?" Cid spoke up. "Wouldn't that damn robot be in one of those, then?"

"Oh," Barret said, wishing he had thought of that. "Good thinkin' old man!"

"Yeah, yeah," Cid muttered, deflecting the compliment. "Let's just hurry up to the first block. I wanna get outta here. This place gives me the creeps."

"You jes' sayin' that because you can't see," Barret said as they started to walk again, with Barret in the lead and Cid playing drogue.

"You can't see either!" Cid exclaimed.

"I can too!"

"You can not!"

The two men let their arguing voices fill the silence as Barret continued to lead the way through the darkness. Barret had purposely baited Cid into fighting with him. The idea of stumbling around in the darkness with nothing but silence

pounding him on either side was not an attractive one. Besides, arguing was one thing that Barret was damn good at, and he always loved a good challenge, but Cid would have to do. Besides, he didn't want the other man to be getting too nervous during their walk, or he would eventually turn paranoid. Barret had no idea how long they would have to search, and he also didn't know if this floor was as monster-free as it had been last time. Who knows what demented specimens still lurked around Hojo's lab and had wormed their way down to this floor? He wanted to get in and out as soon as possible, and if he had to argue with Cid the entire way to keep a cool head, then that was just the price he would have to pay.

But as luck would have it, the two men found Cait Sith almost right away.

They stumbled into the first storage room they could find, and nearly jumped for joy when they saw a small lamp sitting on a desk across the room, trying its hardest to illuminate the room with its gentle glow.

And bathed in that meager light was the dormant form of Cait Sith, the crowned cat slumped over the gigantic form of the pink robotic moogles.

Barret and Cid turned to each other simultaneously and grinned, glad to finally be able to see something in the dark.

"Bingo," Barret said.

"Right on, old fart-meister!" Cid exalted with a wide smile, putting his gloved hands on his hips and staring across the room at the huge stuffed moogles and the immobile cat on top of it. The oversized moogles seemed to grin at the two men, and Cid could practically hear Cait's annoying voice saying, "Geez! What you guys so looooooong?!!!"

Great, and I'm gonna bring the dufus back to life, Cid thought grumpily, then rubbed his hands together with anticipation of working with something mechanical.

"You gonna be able to fix him?" Barret asked his eager companion.

"Sure!" Cid replied cheerfully. "It'll be simple." He started to walk across the floor to the waiting form of Cait, but he suddenly stopped and started digging through his pockets feverishly.

A feeling of impending doom washed over Barret. "Oh no," he warned Cid. "I know you ain't..."

Cid triumphantly pulled out a cigarette and lit it, inhaling contentedly and expelling the smoke through his nose. "Ah," he sighed.

"Put that shit away!!" Barret roared, throwing his arms in the air, appalled by Cid's audacity.

The pilot sent him a withering glare. "You don't like it, then wait your ass outside!" he snapped, then stalked off towards Cait Sith.

Barret let out a few choice phrases and went to go wait outside.

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Tifa sighed and let another file drop into her "worthless" pile. "Nothing," she announced glumly.

"Nothing at all?" Cloud called from across the room where he was hunting through a pile of debris.

"Nope," Tifa said with another sigh as she got up from her seat on a surprisingly intact chair and walked over to Cloud. "You find anything?"

Cloud kicked at a scrap of metal with his boot, as if blaming it for the entire incident. "No," he said gloomily.

Tifa folded her arms across her chest and looked around the room she and Cloud were working in. After long minutes of stumbling around blindly after Rude, the trio had happened upon a room that, thank God, had a couple of lights that worked. The room had apparently once been a storage unit for all sorts of files and papers, most of which had been reduced to pools of ashes floating around the corners of the room like miniscule phantoms. Rude, however, had immediately confirmed the room to be the one that he had seen the Running Man searching around. According to the tall Turk, their suspect had been looking through files at the very spot Tifa had been sitting at a few seconds ago. The three had agreed that Tifa and Cloud would stay behind and see what the Running Man had found so interesting while Rude went on to see just how the Running Man might have escaped from the lab unnoticed.

And Tifa and Cloud, after nearly thirty minutes of scouring every inch of their assigned room, had come up with nothing.

"I wonder if Rude found anything?" she wondered aloud, more to herself than to Cloud.

The ex-SOLDIER came up behind her, a bit of warmth in the darkness. "Who knows?" he said rhetorically, his sheer closeness to her making her heart skip as if he were some girlish crush of hers and not a friend she had known for her entire life.

"Do you think he found something?" Tifa forced herself to ask, looking at Cloud out of the corner of her eye.

Cloud sighed and scratched his head absently, his gloved fingers sinking into the golden spikes. "No," he said gloomily. "I don't think we're going to find anything in this place."

"Tifa, Cloud," Rude suddenly called. "Come over here. I think I found something."

This time, Tifa couldn't resist turning to Cloud with a gently amused smile curling her lips.

Cloud turned bright red and made a face. "Go figure," he grumbled and stalked off in the direction they had heard Rude's voice coming from.

Tifa bit back an affectionate laugh and followed him, carefully avoiding sharp scraps of metal that sought to puncture her legs as she passed. The two AVALANCHE members found Rude in a room even darker than the one they had been in. Looking around, Tifa realized that it had probably been two rooms at one time, only Diamond Weapon's attack had completely eradicated one of the walls, leaving a pile of plaster, metal, and broken glass as a tombstone for the structure. Rude was standing by the wall farthest from them, shining his flashlight in their direction to show them where he was.

"Rude!" Tifa called, waving.

"Over here," he said, motioning for them to come over.

"What did you find?" Cloud asked dryly as the two of them stumbled over broken flasks and overturned boxes on their way over to their friend.

"Something strange," Rude answered, staring at them with his pale green eyes. He had removed his sunglasses a long time ago since it was obviously imprudent to be wearing them in pitch darkness. Both Tifa and Cloud had been shocked to find the eyes normally completely masked by those glasses a stunning shade of bright green.

"What so strange?" Cloud questioned, looking around for the big thing Rude was supposed to have discovered. All he could see in the darkness was debris and miscellaneous broken objects.

Rude turned and gestured with the beam of his flashlight, silently shining it into the darkness. Cloud and Tifa instantly saw what he was talking about, and their eyes widened in surprise. Tucked furtively away in the corner of the room was what looked to be a strange metal well. Only difference was that this "well" was two times as wide as a normal one and had a featureless hatch sealing off the top of it.

Tifa lifted an eyebrow. "You're right, Rude. This *is* strange. Any idea what it is?"

"Looks like a well or something," Cloud commented, striding fearlessly up to the anomaly and peering at it.

"That's actually a more accurate description than you may think," Rude said flatly.

Cloud looked at him in surprise, knocking on the surface of the "well" with his hand. "You know what this is, Rude?"

"Transport tunnel," Rude answered without hesitation, but Tifa heard something akin to disgust in his deep voice.

Cloud looked up from his examination and stared hard at Rude, suspicion flickering in his Mako blue eyes. "Transport for what?"

"Human specimens," Rude replied flatly.

His words hung in the air for a few seconds before Cloud finally found his voice. "Human specimens?" he hissed, straightening up and clenching his hand into a fist. "Hojo's human specimens, I presume?"

"That is correct," Rude said, watching Cloud carefully, as if afraid the blond-haired man was going to snap at any moment.

The ex-SOLDIER shut his eyes tightly, eyelashes fluttering as if they alone were holding in the whirlwind of heartache and hurt that churned within him. "That...bastard," Cloud uttered in a low, guttural voice, sounding completely unlike himself. "That...monster."

"Cloud," Tifa whispered, her heart aching for him as she started to walk towards him. She couldn't even imagine the pain he must be in, remembering back to the time when he was imprisoned by Hojo - as a human specimen.

Cloud abruptly turned his back to her, the lonely circle of Rude's flashlight hitting him square between his tense shoulders, bits of light dancing in his golden hair and glinting off the metal buckles on his suspenders. He put his hands on his hips and lowered his head as if in intense concentration, the muscles of his arms bunched and rigid as he fought with some internal demons still haunting his fractured memories.

Tifa was just about to call Cloud's name again when he suddenly leapt onto the top of the "well," not even pausing to think what would happen if the hatch had given out underneath his weight.

"I wonder what's down here?" he asked rhetorically, pacing around the wide hatch as if he were walking on normal ground instead of a metal door leading to tunnel formerly used for Hojo's sadistic purposes. Though his tone was vastly calmer than it had been a few seconds before, Tifa could still hear the anger simmering underneath that cool surface. And she couldn't blame him; Cloud, of all people, had a right to be angry. Hojo had nearly destroyed his life with his atrocious experimentations.

"Should you really be walking around on top of that?" Rude asked, striding over to the massive cylindrical well. The top of it nearly reached past the tall man's waist. "It probably will be a long fall if it gives out underneath you."

Cloud stared down at him, Mako blue eyes glittering in the meager light from the flashlight. "Is there any way we can open it?" he asked flatly, ignoring Rude's warning.

Tifa strode over to stand next to Rude, looking up worriedly at Cloud's face. "Cloud, do you really want to open it?" she asked, running her hands lightly over the metal surface of the hatch's door. It seemed sturdy enough, but she wasn't going to be too careful when it was *her* Cloud that was prancing around on top of it.

"We need to open it," Cloud insisted, squatting on his haunches and running his hands over the surface, long fingers searching for any hidden grooves. "Rude, shine the light more over here."

"This is probably where the Running Man escaped from the lab," Rude commented as he moved closer to where Cloud and Tifa were examining the hatch, directing his flashlight beam at the dull surface of the metal "well."

"Where do you think it leads?" Tifa asked Rude, the light from the flashlight dancing in her burgundy-colored eyes and highlighting the fine bones of her face.

"To the sewers. That's where all the transport tunnels lead." Rude answered without hesitation, unable to bring himself to look Tifa in the eye. It just didn't seem right somehow, talking of the ghastly things he had seen as a Turk while looking upon her beauty.

Whoa, Tifa thought, blinking in surprise. *That was a fast answer. Wonder how he knew about all that...*

Cloud raised his slightly luminescent eyes and studied Rude. "The sewers?" he echoed, glancing down at the metal hatch underneath his boots. "That's where Reno and the others-"

He never got a chance to finish his sentence because a faint scream suddenly ripped weakly through the still air of the lab, making Tifa's heart skip and beat before the blood turned to ice in her veins.

"What was that?" she gasped, her burgundy eyes wide. Cloud and Rude had similar looks on their faces.

The scream came again, only this time a shriller, more high-pitched shriek could be heard alongside it, with a strange howling noise in the distant background. They melded into one horrible cacophony of terrified sounds before dying off just as quickly as they had begun.

"I think it's coming from beneath you, Cloud," Rude said quietly.

Cloud stiffened, and then abruptly leapt off the top of the closed hatch, landing on the floor beside Tifa. "You mean someone's down there in the tunnels still?" he asked, looking halfway between downright perturbed and strangely angry.

Tifa wasted no time. If someone was down there calling for help, then she was going to do something about it. Heart thundering in her chest, she placed her hands on the top of the metal hatch and yelled as loud as she could. "Hey! Is anyone down there?!"

"You bet your ass someone is down here!" a faint voice screamed, startling the trio.

Rude was the first to recognize the voice. "Reno!" he cried, face actually registering the surprise he must have felt in his heart. "Is that you?"

"No!" came Reno's faint voice again, dripping with sarcasm. "It's the almighty Sephiroth! Get us the hell outta here!"

"Hey, it's Rude!" came another faint voice.

"Elena!" Rude called.

"Open the hatch!" Tifa cried, talking to everyone and no one at the same time. Without hesitating, she leapt up onto the top of the hatch like Cloud had been doing seconds before, her gloved hands searching with blind desperation for anything that could open the hatch and let them into the tunnel. The sounds of Reno and Elena yelling filled her ears, urging her on, and the only thing on her mind was getting her friends out of the tunnel. After placing the flashlight on a nearby table, Rude leapt up and joined her as Cloud ran around the sides of the "well," searching for a button or trigger hidden on the scratched and tarnished metal. Bits of debris crunched under his boots and others cut into his legs, but he kept on going.

"Hurry up you idiots!" came Reno's voice. He sounded panicked.

"Reno, where's Red?" Cloud yelled, hands making a dull thumping sound as they lightly stuck the sides of the hatch, searching for any strange shapes or levers.

"He's fighting the giant snake!!!" Elena screeched, and Cloud was surprised all the glass in the lab didn't shatter just from the incredibly high tone her voice was pitched at.

Cloud felt his blood freeze in his veins. "Giant snake?" he echoed incredulously.

"That's what she @\$%ing said, you dumbass!" Reno cried. "Get us the hell outta here before it eats us!"

"Reno," Rude called, his voice amazingly calm. "Is there a door or a button on that side that can open the hatch?"

"Yeah, but we can't reach it!" Reno replied. "The ladder leading up to the hatch is broken! Shit! You guys hurry! Please!"

The desperation in Reno's normally mocking voice was surprising. Cloud had never heard Reno say "please" for anything before, and that was enough to make him pick up his pace. His gloved hands raced all over the metal surface on the sides of the hatch, fingers searching blindly for something, anything that would release the hatch. He had to get Reno and the others out of there! He was the one that had sent them into the sewers! If they died, it would be all his fault...

His fingers suddenly hit something. It felt like a depression in the metal that gave slightly underneath his fingertips. A button!

"I think I found something!" Cloud cried, and before anyone could say anything, he punched the button.

There was an immediate whoosh of air like a giant releasing a breath of relief. Then Rude and Tifa let out cries of surprise as the hatch beneath them suddenly started to reel backwards, sending them both flying to the floor of the lab, where they landed amongst shattered test tubes and plaster debris.

"Are you guys okay?!" Cloud demanded, regretting that he hadn't given them a bit more of a warning.

"We're fine," Tifa said breathlessly as Rude helped her to her feet.

"Guys!!" Reno's voice cried, much louder now that five feet of metal wasn't standing between them.

Acting fast, Cloud grabbed the flashlight from the table and peered over the edge of the "well," nearly recoiling from the stench that drifted upwards to ram itself into his face. Wrinkling his nose, he shone the flashlight straight down.

"Hey!" Elena cried, throwing up her arms to shield her face. "Not in the eyes, if you please!"

Cloud's eyes widened at her appearance. The blond-haired Turk was soaking wet and was covered head to toe with a dark substance that looked like dirt but probably wasn't, given the place she and Reno had just emerged from. Her short hair was tangled and clotted with all sorts of nasty-looking things. A quick glance to the left showed that Reno was in the same condition, his fiery ponytail ravaged and scraggly and his suit ripped in several places.

"What happened to you guys?!" Tifa asked worriedly as she and Rude crowded in on either side of Cloud.

"Now's not the time for stupid questions!" Elena screeched, her head craned backwards to stare at the trio. "Get us outta here!"

"And quick!" Reno added, glancing back nervously at the length of tunnel they had apparently emerged from before it abruptly took a shift upwards to become the "well" in Hojo's lab, precisely where Cloud and the others now stood.

Cloud panned his light around, taking in the whole situation. He quickly came to the conclusion that things were not cheery. Reno and Elena were on level ground at least twenty feet below them without any means to get up. The rusted ladder, which must have served Hojo's diabolical purposes for years, was lying in a cracked heap around the two Turks' feet, algae already growing on it. The section of tunnel separating Cloud, Tifa and Rude from Reno and Elena was almost a 90-degree vertical climb with no visible handholds.

"Well!" Reno cried impatiently, a deep scowl on his dirty face. "Do something! Don't just stand there!"

"Rude, help!" Elena echoed, her brown eyes wide and frightened in the light from Cloud's flashlight. "Before it comes!"

Rude turned to Cloud and said with amazing calm, "Is there a rope or anything up here that we can use?"

"I'll look," Tifa said quickly, and ran off into the dimly lit lab, searching the tops of tables and amongst the debris.

Cloud was about to ask if Reno and Elena had any way to get up the wall when an unearthly screech split the air, shaking the very metal underneath Cloud's hands. Every muscle in his body went rigid with fear as the bestial scream rang through the tunnel and the lab, the echoes rebounding off the walls again and again until it seemed that the scream would go on forever.

I guess that's the snake...

"Shit!" Reno cried. "It's coming!"

"Hurry!" Elena begged. "Please!"

Tifa suddenly came rushing back to Cloud's side, sweat on her forehead and her face pale with fear. "There's nothing," she said quietly. "No rope, no anything."

For a moment, Cloud felt panic rising in him, but he quickly repressed it, telling himself that he needed to be strong for his friends. They were depending on him to see them all through safe and sound, and he couldn't abandon that trust.

"Strife!" Reno suddenly called, and Cloud looked down in surprise to find Reno's aquamarine eyes drilling him with their Mako light. "Don't disappoint me, Strife," Reno said with iron control in his voice. "You're going to get us outta here. You're going to save our lives."

Realization suddenly dawned on Cloud. *He's scared*, he thought in wonder. *Good God, Reno's terrified...unreal...*

"Hey, where's Red?" Tifa suddenly cried, some of her long hair dangling over the edge as she leaned down.

"I'm right here," a gravelly voice called, just before Red himself came bounding out of the tunnel, nearly plowing into Reno and Elena. He was in no better condition than his human companions, only he had several wounds on his body, the blood running thinly to tangle and clot the fur around it. His ragged breaths filled and echoed in the tunnel as he fought for breath.

"Did you kill it?" Elena demanded immediately. "Please tell me you killed it!"

"No," Red said calmly, scratching his ear. "But I hope you know how to swim."

Swim? Cloud thought in confusion, and the looks on Reno and Elena's faces showed that they shared his bafflement.

Reno was about to say something sarcastic when a low roaring sound filled the tunnel, making everyone stop and listen. To Cloud's surprise, he found the sound vaguely familiar; it was almost like the noise water made when it was going down the drain in the shower...or when he turned on the water hose outside. Or maybe it was more like the sound of the waterfall outside of Lucrecia's...

"Holy shit!" Reno suddenly cried, grabbing Cloud's attention and forcing it to focus on the scene that was unfolding twenty feet below him. Reno, Elena, and Red barely had time to shield their faces before a humongous wave of water forced itself into tunnel, washing over them and filling every crack and crevice it could find. It rose at an alarming rate, eating up several feet of tunnel in only one second, getting closer and closer to Cloud and the others.

"Water?!" Cloud said incredulously, shining his flashlight on the murky surface, looking for any sign of his three friends. They had vanished beneath the surface.

"It's flooding the tunnel!" Tifa cried, gripping the edge of the "well" tightly.

She's right, Cloud thought grimly as his eyes searched for any shadows beneath the water. *I hope it doesn't overflow into the lab. And where are Red and the others? Damn...what if the currents in the water carried them back down the tunnel... towards the snake?*

Cloud's worries were short-lived, however, because three spouts of water suddenly exploded from the murky surface as Red, Reno, and Elena burst free of the water's liquid hold, sucking in huge gasps of air into their squashed lungs, their limbs clawing desperately for some sort of salvation.

"Guys!" Tifa cried in relief, one gloved hand resting over her heart. "You're alright!"

"For now!" Elena sputtered, wiping water out of her eyes. "Get us outta here!"

"Where's the snake?" Cloud demanded as he judged the distance between the two groups and saw that things were actually looking up. Hmm...the water had cut it in half. Maybe if he dangled over the edge...

"The snake was too large to fit in the tunnel," Red answered, doggypadding and trying to see through the fall of his mane that had flopped into his one good eye. "It made the water flood the tunnel with some sort of spell. It's going to use it to act as a sort of lubricant to help it along. I don't think we have much time!"

"Don't worry!" Tifa said consolingly, but the look in her eyes was one of almost pure panic. "We're going to get you guys outta there!"

Everyone looked at Cloud expectantly.

Damn, Cloud thought, shifting nervously under their gazes filled to the brim with panicked trust in the man they had come to call leader. *It's times like these that I wish they wouldn't rely on me so much. What if I can't get them out in time? But...I have to...I won't fail...*

Determination flashed in his Mako eyes. "Rude," he ordered. "You're the tallest! Lean over the edge as far as you can! See if you can reach one of them!"

"Don't make Rude do it!" Elena screeched as Rude started to obey. "What if the snake jumps up and eats him?"

"We're the ones in the water!" Reno yelled. "It's gonna eat us first!"

"Be careful, Rude," Tifa said softly as both she and Cloud watched the tall Turk bend over the edge and stretch his arm out as far as it would go. Cloud's heart was thudding in his chest as the air throbbed with adrenaline and anxiety. If Rude couldn't make it...

"Someone hold my legs," the Turk suddenly ordered as Reno jumped for his hand and missed, crashing back down into the water. "If I can make it down a little further, I think we'll be okay."

Cloud moved to comply, but Tifa beat him there. "You keep a watch out for that snake, Cloud," she said, fastening her hands around Rude's calves, a look of determination on her pretty face. "We'll take it from here."

Worry consumed Cloud. "But Tifa..." he started to protest, thinking that Rude was going to be way too heavy for her.

His exclamation was stopped when the brunette smiled gently at him. "I can hold him, Cloud," she said calmly. "You try and reach one of the others!"

But despite her words of encouragement, Cloud couldn't stop himself from watching with anxiety as Rude dipped further over the edge, pulling Tifa forward with him. Rude's feet left the floor completely, and Tifa's face creased with the effort of holding onto him. Her boots make squeaking noises as they slid across the floor of lab, but she planted them firmly against the edge of the "well" to prevent herself from sliding further. Cloud could see the muscles of her slender arms lock as she fastened them around Rude's legs in an iron grip, and there she stood: the powerful goddess unwavering in her fate.

Cloud forced himself to tear his gaze away from her and pay attention to what was happening below. Reno had dived underwater and was now pushing Elena up from below as she leapt for and caught Rude's hand, her fingers digging into his gloved palm.

"I got her!" Rude called as Reno reemerged from the murky water with a loud gasp, strands of blood-red hair falling across his eyes.

"Tifa!" Rude cried, wrapping his other hand around Elena's arm to reinforce his grip on her. "Can you pull me up!"

Tifa didn't reply; she was too busy focusing on not dropping Rude. Sweat rolled down her face and dripped down her chin, and her eyes were shut tightly with exertion.

"She can't!" Cloud answered for her. "Elena, you're going to have to use Rude as a ladder..."

"O-Okay," Elena said weakly and started to obey, grabbing a hold of Rude's jacket and starting to pull herself up.

"Strife!" Reno suddenly cried, treading water next to Red. "Do something to help the rest of us! We don't have time to wait!"

Cloud shook his head violently, feeling utterly helpless, a feeling he despised. "I can't do anything!"

"Well, think of something!" Reno yelled, hitting the water with his hand in anger and splashing Red. "We're waiting!"

Cloud pressed his gloved fingers against his temples and pressed hard, trying to shut out all the sounds whirling around him like a tornado of suffering and battle. He forced himself to calm down until his breaths flowed deep and easy in and out of his lungs and his heart wasn't beating so fast.

Ok...I need a rope or something. Anything that they can grab onto. My sword? No way...they'll cut their fingers on it. Any of my armor? No! Damn it! Any of my clothes? No, the shirt won't reach, and the pants will take too long to get off with the boots and suspenders...hey! That's it!

"Reno, hang on!" Cloud cried, unsnapping his suspenders from his belt in one swift motion. He tugged on the leather, testing its strength. A look of worry creased his face. The leather was well worn from the toils of endless battles; would it be enough to hold Reno? Well, it would have to be!

Putting the flashlight in his mouth, Cloud rushed up to the edge and leaned over as far down as he could, holding the end of the suspenders tightly in his fist and dangling the other end down to where Reno was treading water.

"Grab on!" Cloud tried to say around the flashlight, doing his best to hold the makeshift rope steady.

For once, Reno didn't have something pert to say in return. All harsh or sarcastic words he might have said died in his throat when he saw the lifeline Cloud was offering. Placing his palms flat against the side of the metal tunnel, Reno pushed down so that he sunk a little deeper in the water. Then he pushed up hard, springing up out of the water higher than Cloud thought he could have gone. Reno's hands shot forward and grabbed the leather suspenders in a death grip, and though Cloud had been prepared for the abrupt change in weight, the force still jerked him forward, the suspenders burning his palms as they tried to slither from his grasp.

"Shit!" he cried, arms locking as he was forced to support all of Reno's weight. "Reno, you're heavy, goddammit!"

"Shut up and pull me up, Strife!" Reno shot back, shaking his head to get his ponytail out of his eyes. He was dangling about a foot off of the water, his hands locked indefinitely around the leather straps that were keeping him from plunging back to a watery doom.

Cloud flexed his muscles dubiously, seriously doubting his ability to pull such a large amount of weight for the entire ten feet of tunnel between Reno and final salvation. He hadn't been expecting Reno to weigh so much! For such a skinny guy, it felt like he was as big as an elephant.

But still, Cloud refused to give in. Steeling himself and gritting his teeth so that they sank down into the plastic covering of the flashlight, he braced his feet against the edge of the tunnel and leaned backwards as far as he could. Slowly but surely, he began to pull in the leather straps in a methodical hand-over-hand technique, trying to ignore the sweat rolling down his face and Reno's weight at the end of the suspenders.

Cloud didn't know how long he was at it before his muscles started burning from overexertion. His limbs felt weak and watery, and the poor flashlight was now adorned with permanent teeth marks along its sides. He didn't know how much longer he could keep it up, and he also had no idea how far Reno was from the tunnel's entrance.

A series of scrabbling, scratching noises suddenly rang through the air, and Cloud froze, expecting the worse. His eyes, which had been shut tightly in concentration, flew open only to see a dripping wet Red sitting on the floor a few feet away, panting heavily. Cloud blinked in surprise, nearly losing his grip on the suspenders. Last time he had looked, Red had still been in the water...

Red noticed Cloud's stare and said with amazing calm, "It helps to have four legs and sharp claws."

Realizing that the scrabbling noises he had heard had been Red scaling the wall of the tunnel, Cloud nodded stiffly and resumed the excruciatingly painful process of pulling Reno up inch by inch...

"Argh!" Reno - quiet until then - suddenly cried. "Strife! Get over here!"

Rolling his eyes and snarling under his breath, Cloud wound the leather straps around his aching hands to reinforce his grip and walked over the edge of the tunnel, poking his head over the side to see what Reno was shrieking about.

Cloud didn't see anything out of the usual, just Reno hanging about a foot over the water like he had been before.

Wait a minute, Cloud suddenly thought. *Why is he still in the same spot? I KNOW I pulled him up higher than that!*

"What's going on?" he asked aloud, his voice muffled because of the flashlight in his mouth.

"The water just rose!" Reno yelled, casting a rather panicked glance at the liquid surface waiting eagerly underneath him, ready to swallow him if he were to fall again.

"Something's in the tunnel," Red observed, placing his paws on the edge of the tunnel and peering down at Reno calmly.

It took only a second for Red's words to sink in.

"The snake!" Cloud cried, his teeth unsheathing themselves from the plastic covering of the flashlight, losing their hold on it simultaneously. Cloud watched helplessly as their only source of light plummeted from his mouth and into the tunnel, missing Reno's head by a millimeter and...

...hitting a green, scaly snout that had just begun to emerge from the water. The flashlight bounced off of the shiny surface and rolled into the water in defeat, its small but powerful light illuminating an impossibly long, ghastly body before the water reached its batteries and extinguished its light forever, plunging Cloud and the others into almost total darkness.

Indeed, the only thing that managed to completely slice through the darkness was the slitted eyes of the snake as its head, huge and hideous, emerged from the water, its forked tongue lashing the air inches from the soles of Reno's shoes.

All the blood drained from Cloud's face as he beheld the monstrous creature whose head almost filled the entire tunnel. The anaconda rose from the water with calculating slowness, the water falling away from its scaly hide in sheets and leaving a ghastly glitter that Cloud could barely see in the darkness. He was vaguely aware of Elena screaming and the straps of his leather suspenders biting into his gloved hands, trying to bring him back down to earth. But the light from snake's eyes and the way its slitted pupils dilated and contracted like a beating heart had him mesmerized. An odd smell suddenly drifted up to him, and Cloud found that his heart was pounding with irrational terror. Why was he so frightened?! He had fought the Midgar Zolom before, and the swamp dwelling reptile had only been a little smaller than this one. But he was so afraid...

Maybe it was the Mako glow in Reno's aquamarine eyes that finally drew him away from the snake's frighteningly silent approach, but Cloud suddenly felt his gaze slid from the snake's luminescent eyes to the placid, unnaturally calm eyes of Reno, who was still dangling about three feet out of Cloud's reach, the form of the snake rising slowly beneath him, hissing suddenly as it did so.

"It's right behind me, isn't it?" Reno asked Cloud, Mako eyes boring into Mako eyes with a strange sort of detached intensity.

"Yeah," Cloud said quietly, watching the battlefield in Reno's eyes as all his training as a cold, callous Turk fought a losing battle with the simple emotion of human fear.

Then something in those aquamarine eyes suddenly snapped as terror got the best of Reno. The Turk's muscles suddenly locked desperately, and Cloud felt a pair of gloved hands fasten around his wrists in a death grip, driving the metal of Cloud's Crystal Bangle into the tender skin of his wrist. And as he felt the suspenders slid limply from his hands, Cloud realized belatedly that Reno was no longer at the end of them.

He was holding onto Cloud's wrists instead, the overpowering stench of sewage and fear plastering the ex-SOLDIER'S face with all the fury of a tsunami.

"Reno!" Cloud cried in surprise, as the sudden weight on his body dragged him forward, his feet almost leaving the floor. The tunnel and the snake suddenly loomed beneath him, more of a threat than before. "Let go!"

But Reno was past listening to what anyone had to say. Cloud could hear the other man's breaths coming in hard, fast gasps as his fingers scraped across the skin of Cloud's arms, searching in blind terror for some sort of leverage to save him

from the abyss. Cloud grit his teeth in pain as he realized that Reno was clinging to him like a drowning victim would cling to a lifeguard, trying to save his own life at the expense of the one that was trying to rescue him...

Cloud fastened his arms around Reno's back, his fingers digging into the waterlogged suit. Whether he was trying to help him along or shove him off, Cloud himself didn't know because the anaconda, drawn to all the sudden movement, suddenly let out a loud hiss and bared its fangs, which dripped perpetually with acidic venom that smelled so foul that Cloud felt his stomach churn with nausea.

Slitted bestial eyes suddenly locked onto wide Mako blue eyes, and the hunger Cloud saw in those yellow orbs was an almost tangible thing in the air between them, making his heart pound in terror. He suddenly knew that the snake was about to attack, and there was nothing he could do about it with Reno pinning him like this.

Is this...the end?

"Yeeesssss," the snake seemed to hiss as it drew back its head to strike, opening its mouth wide so that Cloud could see the hungry lining on the inside, pulsating and quivering.

Then...Tifa...goodbye...

"Bolt 3!!!" Red suddenly cried, and the tunnel was filled with light so blinding that Cloud had to shut his eyes. The smell of ozone seared his nostrils, overpowering even the rank stench coming from Reno's jacket and tangled hair. And over the pounding of his own heart, the roar of the lightening, he could hear the pained screech of the anaconda rising so loudly that he could almost feel the very bones in his body quaking, as if in the grips of the same terror that inundated his heart.

"Reno! Cloud!" he suddenly heard Elena yell from somewhere to his left. "Hurry up and pull back! Rude and Tifa are ready to close the hatch!"

Tifa...she's safe, then. Rude and she managed to get Elena out of the tunnel...it's just me and Reno, then...

"Elena!" Red suddenly cried. "Grab Cloud and pull them away from the tunnel's entrance! He's about to fall in!"

I am? Cloud wondered in confusion as the Bolt 3 attack started to fade, spots dancing before his eyes. Then he realized that his feet weren't touching the floor anymore, and the only thing keeping him from falling was the fact that Reno was balancing out the weight on his back and Cloud's belt buckle was rammed against the tunnel's edge, preventing him from sliding further.

He was about to try and move back from the edge when he suddenly felt small hands bury themselves in the back of his shirt and tug hard. The next thing Cloud knew, he was spread-eagled on the floor of the lab, staring up at the dark, deteriorating ceiling with Reno lying a few feet away from him, his face pressed against the floor.

Hey, he thought, I'm alive!

"Shut the hatch!" Elena suddenly cried, bringing Cloud back to earth. The battle was still not over.

As Cloud lurched to his feet, he saw Tifa and Rude behind the hatch and shoving it with their arms, faces creased in concentration. The heavy metal hatch moved with agonizing slowness at first, and Cloud was all too aware of the fact that the snake was still in the open tunnel and could come bursting through into the lab at any moment. He was about to go and help them when the hatch lid suddenly pitched forward and began to slide shut using its own momentum.

But just as it was about to hit the edge of the "well" and consummate their safety, a shadow with luminescent slitted pupils suddenly shot upwards and slammed into the lid, stopping it in its tracks with a hiss. The giant snake's eyes glittered in the darkness that had nearly shut it off from its meal with an anger that seemed to be almost human. It was not pleased.

"That damn snake!" Cloud cried, anger rising in his throat. "Just die, dammit!"

Never, the snake's eyes mocked him. Its forked tongue suddenly lashed out from underneath the hatch resting on its head, tasting the air of the lab.

With a loud cry, Tifa suddenly leapt onto the top of the hatch, slamming her boots into the metal with a bang. The lid dropped a few inches as the snake hissed in surprise at the sudden added weight on its skull. Before it could recover, Rude threw himself on the lid next to Tifa, and the hatch dropped a few more inches. It was almost shut now.

Then the snake recovered its dignity - if such creatures even had dignity - and suddenly pushed upwards with a violent thrust, almost flinging Tifa and Rude off of the hatch.

"Help, you guys!" Tifa cried, falling to her knees and grabbing a hold of the edge of the lid to keep her balance. Rude reached out a hand to steady her.

"We're coming!" Elena cried as she and Red rushed up to the hatch. The snake almost seemed to sense what they were doing and hissed loudly, its tongue flailing in the air and lashing out at them as they ran by. Undaunted, Elena and Red flung themselves onto the hatch lid with Tifa and Rude, adding about two hundred more pounds to the weight already resting on the snake's head. The lid dropped violently this time, until it was inches from closing. But it stopped there, and there was now no more room on the hatch lid. The only thing Cloud could see of the snake was its forked tongue still lashing out in the air beyond the hatch, whipping back and forth as if searching for something.

Ignoring the pronounced ache in his arms, Cloud reached behind himself and pulled the Ultima Weapon from its sheathe in one deft motion, the weight of it settling easily into his hands as he gripped the hilt. The screams of the snake and his friends filled the lab, and his eyes narrowed with determination; he was going to end this battle right here and now. He had had enough of fighting with this damn monstrosity!

But just as he was about to rush forward and slice off the snake's tongue, he suddenly felt something run past him and towards the hatch.

"Reno!" he cried in surprise, shocked at the Turk's speed as much as he was by the fact that he saw Reno was wielding a shattered beaker as a makeshift weapon. Cloud briefly wondered what happened to Reno's nightstick, but all rational thought was suddenly obliterated when he saw the meager light in the lab flash across the beaker as Reno raised it high over his head and brought it down with all his might on the snake's lashing tongue, grinding the piece of red flesh into the floor of the lab.

From underneath the hatch, the snake let out a high-pitched shriek that Cloud was to remember for the rest of his life. He could see it trying to desperately retract its tongue, but Reno was ruthless, twisting the razor sharp beaker from side to side even as blood spewed from the wounded tongue and splattered his face and clothes, drops of brightness against his pale skin.

The snake began to thrash wildly, the lid of the hatch jerking up and down as it tried to yank its bleeding limb from Reno's hold, but to no avail. Reno refused to let up. He kept the ripped tongue pinned to the floor, and the blood leaking onto the floor of the lab was as red as his hair, as red as the rage that Cloud perceived in his mind. Finally, it seemed as if the snake knew it had lost to an opponent more ruthless than itself. The tongue suddenly became taut, and then ripped off as the snake gave an agonized shriek, retracting its severed tongue underneath the hatch lid, its cries becoming fainter as the lid suddenly crashed down on the edge of the hatch, an automatic lock clicking in place, consummating their safety.

The smell of sweat, blood, fear, and sewage hung heavily in the air of the lab long after the snake's cries had faded as it retreated back to its habitat. Cloud dropped to his knees in sheer exhaustion as the adrenaline in his system ebbed, leaving his body feeling watery and weak. Driving the tip of his sword into the floor of the lab, he rested his forehead against the hilt, the cool metal soothing his overheated skin. Tifa and the others were lying in a tangled heap on top of the hatch, gasping for air as they let the silence cleanse them of their fear. Reno was sitting on the floor of the lab next to the snake's severed tongue, oblivious to the blood staining his face and hands. His head was lowered, and his hair was in such wild disarray, clinging to the sides of his scarred cheeks so that Cloud couldn't tell whether there were streaks of blood or strands of hair plastered to his pale face. His sweat-soaked chest heaved for breath, the air whooshing in and out of his lungs so raggedly that Cloud was afraid the Turk was going to faint on them.

But it turned out that Reno was the first to recover from their ordeal.

Slowly, he lifted his bloodstained face and said flatly, "Guys? Can we get the hell outta here now?"

And Cloud was no one to argue.