

CHAPTER IV: MIDGAR AGAIN

Tarkin sat unmoving in his chair. His training at SOLDIER had given him the discipline to ignore minor irritations and sit for hours while remaining utterly still, especially when he was thinking, and right now he had a lot to think about.

His spies had informed him the failed experiment was finally on the move. It had taken much longer than he had thought. Cloud was apparently stronger than he suspected, but he should have known. He realized he had underestimated the young warrior, and he would have to be careful not to do that again. Even a failed Shinra experiment still had power. After all, he had managed, obviously by some fluke, to have defeated the mighty Sephiroth.

He felt anger inside him at that. He considered it for a moment and decided it was proper. Sephiroth would have been pleased with his loyalty, and slowly the anger dissipated to be replaced by satisfaction of what was to come. He reached over and picked up the yellow materia orb from the pedestal beside his chair, the last gift given to him by the great Sephiroth.

He would have to monitor things carefully from now on. Very carefully indeed. He needed someone to get close and report to him of Cloud's every movement. He was pretty sure he knew just who could handle that job.

A smile slowly grew on his face. He looked at the materia carefully, stroking it as if it were a small pet. As he did so his sleeve slipped partway down his arm, revealing an old tattoo. It was faded now from wear but still visible. It was the number 3.

"Very soon, my dear master," he said softly to himself, "you shall have your revenge."

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Tifa did not feel good as they passed through the crumbling walls and into the streets of Midgar. She had had some good times here at her bar in the early days with Avalanche, but she would never forget the poverty of the slums or the horror she had felt at the destruction of Sector 7 and the death of her friends. On the whole she would rather never have had to see this place again, she decided. True, things had changed radically since then. Midgar was mostly ruins now. Meteor had done such fearsome damage that it was decided it would be easier to just abandon the city than to attempt to rebuild it. The streets were choked with rubble, and vegetation had overgrown most the buildings that still stood. The streets were deserted for the moment, but they were all on guard, for they knew that all sort of strange creatures now inhabited the city.

Still, nothing seemed anxious to bother the well armed group as it traveled down the center of the road in broad daylight. Tifa thought this would chance quickly if they wandered very far into any of the old buildings, or after night fell. She sincerely hoped that they would be done and far away before the sun sunk below the horizon.

Though many of the buildings had been utterly destroyed, there were still enough standing that they were in no danger of getting lost. Tifa kept her eyes open as they headed unerringly toward Shinra Headquarters. She saw movement once or twice in the rubble around them, but nothing challenged them.

A short time later they stood in front of their destination. The building was still standing, although the top floors had been torn off and now lay in a pile of rubble completely covering the street to the north. Perhaps the bottom twenty floors were still intact.

"It's a good thing the vault was down in the basement and not up on the top floors," Barret remarked, looking up.

They walked up the cracked concrete steps that marked the entrance. The doors of the main entrance lay twisted and broken on the ground in front of them. Carefully they stepped over them and into the building.

The lobby was dark after the bright sunlight. Cloud looked around, but he saw no sign that anyone, or anything, had passed through recently. Still, he had a feeling that danger was not far away. He slowly drew his sword and held it at the ready as he advanced through the lobby. He knew they had been watched on the way here, and he had no doubt that even now a trap was hastily being laid for them, a trap somewhere in an area where they would be most vulnerable. The dark corridors of Shinra Headquarters seemed to be the perfect place to him.

"So where do we go from here?" Yuffie asked tentatively.

"Not sure," Cloud replied. Though he had been a member of SOLDIER, he had rarely been at Shinra Headquarters. And in his few visits here with Avalanche he had had other things on his mind besides taking a tour.

"We'll just have to wander around and see what we can find," he continued. "Stay together, and be ready for anything."

"Just look for anything that leads down," Barret suggested, not very helpfully.

It took them a while, but eventually they found a narrow stairway leading down into darkness near the back of the building.

"Why do I get the feeling we are walking right into the lion's den?" Cloud asked before he started slowly down the steps.

The stairs led down into a large room full of machinery. The floor was covered with about an inch of water, and they could hear dripping off to the left. There was a door at the far end of the room.

They started in that direction but hadn't gotten very far when they heard some high pitched sounds off to the left. Cloud stopped them and turned that way. He saw something scurry between two pieces of machinery off in that direction. The others took up battle positions without saying a word.

The giant rats struck quickly from two different directions. As soon as he had a clear shot Cloud sprang forward and swung his sword in a murderous arc. Two of the rats instantly lost their lives. The others scattered around him and tried to get at his friends, but Cloud flicked his sword like lightening and took out another as they went by. The others were met with a flurry of blows from Tifa to his right and the razor sharp claws of Red to his left. In minutes all but two rats were laying unmoving on the floor, and those two were scurrying off into the darkness to lick their wounds.

Cloud turned to see Yuffie fling her shuriken unerring at the last rat that still remained on the other side of them. Barret turned around to look at him, and they realized that the battle was over.

"Nothing to it," Barret said confidently. "We didn't even have to use our materia."

"Not yet, anyway," Red commented. "Somehow, I think this may have just been a warm up."

"That's what I like about you, Red," Yuffie said. "You're always such an optimist."

"C'mon," was all Cloud said.

They walked on. They reached the door and opened it to see a narrow corridor that went on for as far as they could see in the dim light. Both walls of the corridor held numerous doors.

"If we have to search through all these rooms we could be here a very long time," Barret said with little enthusiasm.

Cloud silently agreed, but he didn't see much of an alternative. He was just about to say as much when they heard a commotion behind them. It sounded like it was coming from near the stairs they had come down. They heard the high pitched squeaks of the rats, and the unmistakable sounds of battle.

"Looks like we're not the only thing on the rats menu today," Yuffie said.

In spite of the fact that it was most likely none of their business and it would probably just cause more trouble, Cloud could not stop his curiosity from getting the better of him. He headed back toward the sounds of the fight.

"Umm, I think we're supposed to be going this way," he heard Yuffie protest, pointing down the corridor. He ignored her.

"Shut up, Yuffie," Tifa said as she walked past her after Cloud.

The others followed, Yuffie last.

Cloud swiftly went down the corridor until the sounds came from just around a large heavily damaged and unrecognizable machine. He quickly glanced around the corner of the machine then ducked back. He looked at Tifa.

"I don't believe it," he said.

Tifa slipped past him and looked around as well. There she saw none other than Cait Sith backed into a corner with three giant rats closing in on him.

~*~

"Boy, am I glad to see you guys" Cait exclaimed. They all came up and stood around him, ignoring the bodies of the three rats they had just dispatched.

"It was quite a surprise to see you," Cloud replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Actually I was looking for you," Cait replied.

"Huh?" Cloud questioned.

"I got a message from Wutai," Cait explained. "I assumed it was from your father, Yuffie. It said that you were headed for Midgar and needed my help. Here, I have it here somewhere."

He fished around for a moment and then pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. Yuffie took it from him and gave it a hard look.

"This isn't my father's handwriting," she said after a moment.

"So who could have written it?" Tifa questioned.

"Could someone else have written it for your father?" Red suggested.

"I suppose," Yuffie replied.

"Well, who else knew where we were going?" Barret pointed out.

Cloud took the note and looked it over. It didn't say much, just that he and his friends were headed for Midgar and urgently needed Cait's help.

"When did you get this?" he asked.

"Two days ago," Cait replied. "I set off right away."

"Two days ago," Barret repeated. "The day after we left Wutai. If this wasn't from Godo, whoever sent it found out where we were going pretty quickly."

"Well," Cloud said thoughtfully, "we didn't make any secret about where we were going while we were in Wutai. Someone might easily have overheard us."

"But who, and why?" Tifa questioned. "And if it's not from a friend, then what purpose could there be in sending Cait to us?"

"I don't know," Cloud replied, "but I don't like it."

"Cait, do you know where the vaults are where Shinra kept all their Ancient artifacts?" Red suddenly asked.

Cait turned to look at him.

"Sure," he said, "why do you ask?"

Cloud briefly explained the mission they were on.

"So maybe my father realized that we may need help finding the vault, and thought Cait could help us," Yuffie said after Cloud had finished. "Which would mean the message really is from him."

Cloud shrugged, somehow not satisfied with the explanation. If it was true that Cait knew where the vaults were then he would be very useful, and it would have made sense for a friend to summon him. Still, something just didn't seem right, but he couldn't think of any better explanation at the moment. One thing was for sure, they would have to be more careful about who they said things in front of.

"We could debate who sent you for as long as we want," he said to Cait, "but it's just slowing us down. The fact of the matter is you are here and can help us. Why don't we get on with it before every monster in Midgar decides to pay us a visit."

They could all see the wisdom in that. They headed back through the room once more, this time with Cait walking in front with Cloud. In this way they worked their way slowly down four more levels. They were attacked three more times, twice by packs of rats and once by some large spider like creatures, but each time they beat them off easily. Still, Cloud had an uneasy feeling. It seemed to him that the attacks were somehow coordinated. As if an intelligence was feeling them out, sending lesser forces against them to test their strength, while all the time it was gathering it's strongest forces for an all out attack that would come.... when? Well, he didn't really know, but he felt that it would be sometime soon. He tried to hurry them on, thinking if they reached their goal soon enough the enemy would have to be forced to attack sooner, before it was completely ready, or risk the chance of them slipping away.

They descended yet another set of steps. When they reached the bottom they gathered in a large vestibule whose only exit was a large steel door opposite the stairs.

"This is it," Cait said. "The vaults are behind this door."

"I hope it's open," Tifa said.

"Easy enough to find out," Cait replied. He walked up to the door and pulled on the handle. It did not budge. He let go and examined the door. There was no sign of a lock, just an electronic key card mechanism.

"It's locked, and it opens with a key card," Cait said, shaking his head.

"Not likely we're going to find one of them around," Barret observed.

"It wouldn't do us any good even if we did," Red stated. "The key card mechanism runs on electricity, and there is no power."

They all stood looking at each other for a moment, but no one came up with any brilliant ideas.

"Well," Barret said finally, looking at the door dubiously. "Let's try it the hard way. Cloud, give me a hand, will you?"

Cloud walked up next to Barret as the others moved out of the way. The door looked much too solid for them to force, but he figured they had to give it a try.

Barret counted to three and they both flung themselves shoulder first into the door. They fell back, Barret grunting loudly, but the door didn't even shudder. Cloud knew right away that this would get them nothing but sore.

"Forget it, Barret, it's too heavy," he said. He suddenly produced an orb and held it up for Barret to see. It glowed a faint green.

"I guess we'll have to use this," he said, "though it will let every monster within a mile of us know that we are here."

"Yeah," Barret agreed, "but after they see that power they might think twice before taking us on."

"You may be right at that," Cloud responded. "Get back, everyone."

Barret led the others back up into the stairwell. Cloud waited until he was sure they were a safe distance away. Then he turned toward the door. He held up the Ultima materia and concentrated on it. In seconds a green mist seemed to fill the air around him. He felt heat build up inside him. The green mist coalesced into a ball of green fire which rapidly expanded until it was almost blinding. Cloud took a single step forward and released. With a roar that rung in his ears the door was engulfed in the blast of raw power, which tore it asunder.

The echoes died away quickly, leaving an eerie silence. After a moment the others filed back into the vestibule.

Cait strode forward through the wreckage of the door. The others followed. Inside was another corridor which led in two directions.

"Which way do we go now?" Red asked.

"Not sure," Cait replied. "These are the vaults. The artifact you're looking for could be in any of these rooms. We'll just have to look through them all."

"Great," Barret said unhappily. "There must be a dozen rooms here. You told us you knew where to go."

"I told you I knew where the vault was" Cait replied testily. "This is it, but I don't have an inventory of it, if that's what you're asking. Perhaps there is one around somewhere if you care to look for it."

"We don't have time to argue," Cloud cut in. He felt more strongly than ever that they had to get out of here as fast as possible. "We'll have to split up into two groups. I don't really like the idea, but we can search a lot more quickly that way. Tifa and Cait, come with me. Barret, you take the others and look in the other direction."

Barret was going to protest about bringing Yuffie with him, but then thought better of it.

"All right," he said. "Just don't get yourselves lost."

"You either," Tifa replied as she followed Cloud. The corridor went perhaps ten feet and then made a left in front of them, but there were three doors before then, one on the left and two on the right. Cloud reached the first one on the right and grabbed the knob. He could see there was no lock, and these were simple wooden doors anyway and he knew they would have no trouble getting through them even if they were locked. But the door opened easily.

There was a large storage room inside. Boxes lined the walls and were piled up on shelves. They started methodically hunting through them.

"Most of these boxes are empty," Tifa said after a few minutes, holding one in her hand for Cloud to see.

"Most of these too," Cloud remarked sourly. "I hope someone didn't come through here earlier and beat us to it."

Tifa thought about that for a moment.

"But we just found out about it ourselves," she pointed out. "Who would have known?"

Cloud shrugged.

"I don't think they knew what to do with most of the stuff they had down here," Cait suggested "but they knew it could be valuable. Perhaps someone came down here right before Meteor struck and just grabbed whatever they could."

"That's possible," he answered. "Either way, all we can do is look."

It didn't take them long to finish with that room. They moved on to the next, and then the next. Red had explained that the crystal materia did not look like any other materia. It was not round but looked like a large multifaceted jewel. And instead of the soft colored glow that emanated from all other materia it was completely clear. But in each room they searched they saw nothing that looked anything like that.

Each empty room they left behind made Cloud more and more uneasy. He kept his ears open for any sounds in the corridors outside, and even though he heard nothing he could not help but feel that the enemy was closing in rapidly.

They searched through three more rooms with no luck. When Cloud went to open the next door he was surprised to find that it was locked.

He pointed it out to the others.

"Maybe that's a good sign," Tifa said "Perhaps there's something important inside."

Cloud took a step back and then lunged forward. His shoulder hit the door solidly and it flew open. They stepped inside.

This room was smaller than the others. It only held one shelf along the back wall. The only thing on the shelf was a metal box.

"At least this won't take long," Cloud said.

He reached over and lifted the box off the shelf. There was a key hole set in the front of the box, and Cloud thought it would be locked, but it opened easily.

He didn't say anything for a moment, then he looked at them and smiled.

"Jackpot."

"All right," Tifa said. "Let's get the others and get out of here."

They started for the door when Cait, who was closest to it, stopped and tensed. Even before he spoke the others heard the sounds in the corridor outside. Cait looked out the door and then turned toward them.

"We've got company," he stated.

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"This is hopeless," Barret snarled, knocking some empty boxes across the room.

They had already searched through four rooms and found nothing.

"I don't think getting angry will help the situation," Red observed.

Barret just grumbled in response

They were almost done with this room. Barret walked out into the corridor, leaving the last corner of the room for the others. Just as he came out something off to his right caught his eye. He turned to see something vanish around the corner. He didn't see much, just a flash of blue.

"There's something out here," he called out.

The others came out and he explained what he had seen. Yuffie boldly walked down the corridor and looked around the corner, but the hallway was empty. At the end of the corridor stood another metal door, slightly ajar.

"It looks like whoever or whatever it was went in there," Yuffie said, pointing to the door. "Should we follow?"

Barret thought for a moment. There didn't seem to be much point in it. They were here to get the Crystal materia, not chase around after some Shinra monsters. Still, perhaps this would give them some clue. It would only take a moment to look, and he had to admit their search so far had been fruitless.

"Yeah, why not," he said finally.

As they walked toward the door they heard the sound of rushing water behind it. It echoed strangely in the corridor around them.

They reached the door and pulled it open. It seemed to lead into some kind of service tunnel. There was a channel down the center of the tunnel, and this was where the sound of the rushing water was coming from. A narrow concrete path ran down the tunnel on either side of the channel.

They stepped over and looked down. The water rushed swiftly through the narrow channel. The tunnel was not long, and the water passed through a grate at the northern end of it and disappeared into a narrow opening at the southern. The concrete path ended blindly at either end of the tunnel. There was a rusty ladder leading up into the darkness on the other side of the channel, but no way for them to get to it.

"Well, if anyone came in here they either flew out or swam out, and either way I don't think we can follow," Red said.

"I suppose," Barret replied. He looked at the water again. The rushing current would quickly sweep them away if they attempted to cross. Not that he had any desire to. It now appeared to him that whatever he had seen had not gone this way at all.

"All right, I guess we better..." he began.

Suddenly there was a loud thump as the door to the room was slammed shut!

"Hey!" Barret exclaimed.

They ran over to the door, but it did not budge when they tried to open it. Barret slammed up against it. The door shuddered slightly, but held.

"DAMN!"

~*~

They were some type of zombie like creatures. Perhaps the residual Mako energy from Meteor had reanimated them. Some of them still wore tattered rags of what appeared to have once been Shinra uniforms. Whatever they were, there were half a dozen of them in the corridor, and Cait could see more coming around the corner.

He had just settled into his fighting stance when Cloud burst past him, sword flashing. Three of the zombies went down before they had a chance to react, and the others hesitated, surprised by the ferocity of the attack. But as more and more of them came around the corner their boldness grew, until once again they surged forward.

In moments the battle was joined in earnest. Tifa held back a little, using his materia to cast defensive spells around herself and her partners, only moving forward to attack when she was sure they were well protected. Cloud fought with no thought of defense, always advancing, always striking for the kill, and even though this tactic usually caused havoc among their enemies, it left Cloud dangerously exposed. It was usually up to Tifa or one of the other more methodical members of the party to protect him when he did.

Cait was more deliberate, only advancing when the enemy was off balance or at a disadvantage. His huge Mog body could take as well as dish out an enormous amount of punishment. Not many of the zombies could stand in front of him for long.

But in spite of their fighting skills they found themselves slowly being forced back. There seemed to be no end to their enemy, and for every one that fell two or three replaced them. It seemed that every creature in Midgar had been called to

the attack.

"There are too many of them," Tifa shouted.

Cloud swung viciously and another zombie went down. He glanced around quickly.

"You're right," he called back. "Get back into the room. I'll slow them down a little."

Cloud held up a green materia orb as Tifa and Cait bolted for the room. They stepped to either side of the door once inside and stopped.

There was a flash of blinding green light from the corridor and a tremendous roar, and then Cloud burst into the room.

He slammed the door.

"That won't hold them for long," he said, panting. "And neither will this door. I wonder where the others are?"

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Barret paced back and forth in front of the door, feeling like a caged tiger.

"Damn, " he said again.

"That's not going to help," Yuffie pointed out.

"I don't hear you coming up with any ideas," he snapped in return.

"At least I'm not using up all my energy pacing and cursing," she answered.

"And a fat lot of good all your energy is going to do you if we can't get out of here," he replied.

Red ignored their repartee and looked at the water. He had to agree that their original assessment was correct. It was running much too swiftly for them to get across before they were dragged away. As he studied the water he caught a glimpse of a dark shadow beneath the foam, and suddenly the water started to bubble even more fiercely near the center of the channel.

He stepped back.

"I think there's something...." he began.

The giant serpent burst up from beneath the foam with an ear splitting cry, showering them in a spray of foam. Even though Red had been prepared, he still was stunned momentarily. The creature reached back and swung a huge clawed hand at him. He recovered quickly enough to attempt to jump out of the way, but was not entirely successful. The hand struck him a glancing blow, yet it was still strong enough to toss him hard against the stone wall. He slumped to the ground.

"Shit," Barret exclaimed. He opened up with his gun, blasting away at the creature. He saw Red go down but didn't get much of a look before the creature swung at him. He dodged and then moved back to the wall to stay as far away from the creature's claws as possible. He saw Yuffie fling her shuriken and then run swiftly in the other direction.

The creature reared back and then let out another screaming cry. Then it struck again, this time swinging at Yuffie, who stood there unmoving for a moment, then desperately flung herself out of the way just in time.

Barret shook the cobwebs out of his head.

"It's using some kind of sonic attack, " he shouted over to Yuffie. "Try to stay away from it when it screams!"

"If you see a place to hide, let me know," she called in return.

He had to admit she had a point. The path on either side of the channel was narrow, barely six feet across. Well within the range of the huge serpents claws. There was no place to hide.

Barret let go another blast, backing away slowly. They didn't seem to be doing much damage. He had his share of materia, but what spell would be best to use? The creature seemed to be at home in the water, so fire would seem the appropriate choice. But he knew he didn't have the fire materia. Who did?

He looked at Red, who still lay stunned on the floor in the center of the tunnel. He pulled out a green materia.

"Yuffie," he called, "keep it occupied!"

She looked at him a moment, then threw her shuriken again and stepped right to the edge of the channel. The creature turned and lunged toward her. She dodged so desperately that she tumbled and nearly fell into the churning water. In an instant she was back on her feet scrambling away.

"Thanks a lot!" she called back to him.

Barret did not respond, for he was concentrating on the green materia in his hand.

Red felt a surge of energy when he was hit with the cure spell. He shook his head and got up, feeling his mind clear.

"Red, use fire!" he heard Barret call.

The creature screamed at them again. Barret covered his ears, but it didn't seem to help much. The serpent turned and slammed both claws down on Yuffie, and for a moment Barret was certain she'd been crushed, but then he saw her scrambling away again, apparently unhurt.

The creature screamed again, but this time in pain as it was hit by a huge ball of fire. Barret stepped forward and started to blast away with his gun again. There was a flash of light as Yuffie hit the creature with a lightning spell.

The creature reeled back as Yuffie and Red hit it repeatedly with their spells while Barret continued firing. With one final scream it twisted around and sunk down below the raging water.

"We toasted him," Yuffie yelled with glee.

Barret sat down for a moment to catch his breath. They had killed the beast but they were still trapped.

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It only took a minute for the zombies to break through the door, but if they thought at all it was likely they regretted it. For when they opened it they were met by Cloud's flashing sword. The party was making its stand just inside the entrance, which was narrow and easily defended. The zombies could only come at them two or three at a time, and for a long time they stood their ground. But there seemed to be no end to their enemy. Even after there was a pile of bodies in front of them that almost formed a solid wall, they still kept coming.

Slowly the party was forced back in spite of all their attempts to prevent it. Cloud continued to swing his sword viciously at any zombie foolish enough to come within reach, but both Tifa and Cait had long ago resorted to casting spells that caused as much damage to as many zombies as possible.

Tifa risked a glance behind her and saw that the back wall was just a few feet away. They could not retreat much further. She cast an ice spell and stepped backwards, almost stumbling with weariness. They were all exhausted, and she knew she would not have the strength to continue for much longer. It seemed impossible that they could have attracted so much attention without Barret and the others hearing or seeing something. Or perhaps they were in the same situation somewhere else in the vaults. She was just beginning to feel desperate about their situation when the seemingly endless line of zombies suddenly petered out. Cloud swung his sword one more time and the final zombie fell. Then they all stood in silence, hardly believing that the battle was finally over.

"We did it," Cloud said weakly, leaning on his sword for support. Cait sat down while Tifa leaned against the wall. They were too tired to respond.

"Looks like we caught you at a bad time," said a strange yet familiar voice. They all looked up to see a man in a neat blue suit standing in the doorway. Behind him two other people stepped into view.

"Turks," Cloud said softly. "Great."

"So what do we do now?" Yuffie asked.

Barret sat with his back against the wall, while Yuffie, without realizing it, was now pacing back and forth. Red was wandering around staring at the tunnel around them.

"I'm thinking," Barret replied.

"In that case we could be here a very long time," she remarked.

Barret did not answer. He was too worried to be baited by her verbal sparring. Someone had deliberately locked them in here, and the only reason he could think of someone doing that was to get them out of the way. He felt that Cloud and the others were in desperate trouble.

"We have to get out of here," he muttered.

Red strode over to them.

"Perhaps we can," he said. "Look at those pipes."

Barret followed Red's gaze. In the corner near one end of the tunnel, almost hidden in the shadows, two narrow pipes ran up the wall. He looked up and saw that they ran into the ceiling above, but another pipe ran out of the wall not too far from them. This one ran across to the other side of the tunnel into the far wall right next to the ladder.

He looked at Red.

"Someone might be able to make that," he said slowly.

"But those pipes would never support your weight," Red pointed out.

"And you, of course, have already mentioned that climbing is not one of your talents," Barret returned.

They both turned to look at Yuffie, who had stopped pacing and was looking at the water now, unaware of their conversation.

"Oh Yuffie," Barret called pleasantly. "We've got a little job that requires your ninja skills. It'll also give you a chance to get over your fear of heights."

~*~

"Did somebody take out an advertisement in the paper announcing we would be in Midgar today?" Tifa questioned.

Reno stepped into the room and looked them over, a sly look on his face. Rude and Elena followed.

"I wouldn't know about that," Reno said casually. "The truth of the matter is we have no quarrel with you. We were sent here to obtain a particular item. An item that seems likely now to be in your possession. If you would be kind enough to hand it over we can all avoid an unseemly altercation."

Cloud gave a short bark of laughter.

"I seem to recall that the last time we had an unseemly altercation the Turks came up at the short end of it," he said fiercely.

Elena stepped forward.

"I told you they wouldn't listen," she said sharply. "C'mon, let's just finish them."

Reno held up his hand.

"Control yourself, Elena," he answered calmly. "In their weakened condition it would hardly be a fair fight. Besides, they were kind enough to open up the vault for us and eliminate any other opposition. We owe them a debt of gratitude. Give us the Crystal Materia and I give you my word as a Turk that you will not be harmed."

"And if you are hoping that your friends will show up to give you a hand," Elena added, "then you are in for a disappointment."

"What did you do to them!" Tifa exclaimed.

"Just led them astray with a simple ruse," Reno replied. "I assure you they were unharmed when we left them. Now, I'm afraid I can't wait any longer. Will you give us the materia?"

Cloud lifted up his sword and held it in front of himself.

"Not likely," he answered grimly.

"So be it," Reno stated, as if he had known all along.

The Turks attacked simultaneously. This fight was considerably different from their battle with the zombies, who had used brute force and large numbers to try to overpower them. The Turks attacked with a coordinated well thought out plan. They did not press the attack at close range, preferring to hold back and pummel Cloud and his friends with magic spells. Tifa realized the wisdom in this. In their exhausted state they would soon be too weak to use their own spells, and this was a safer course than a direct physical confrontation, where even in his weakened state Cloud was still capable of doing serious damage with his weapon.

Tifa saw Cloud fall backward as he was hit by a blast from Reno's electro-mag rod. She turned to cast a cure spell but nothing happened. She realized she no longer had the strength to use her materia. With a sinking feeling she realized they could not win this battle.

As if they could feel Cloud and his friends weakening, the Turks pressed forward, increasing the power of their attacks. Suddenly Tifa felt burning pain as fire flashed around them. She stumbled backwards and fell. She looked over to see the other members of the party down as well. With sudden resolve they all slowly got up, and stood with their backs literally to the wall. If they were going to lose, they would sell themselves dearly, she thought.

The Turks started forward but were interrupted by a blast of gunfire. With a shout Yuffie and Red ran past Barret and threw themselves into the fray. The Turks were instantly demoralized by the sudden appearance of reinforcements, and immediately were put on the defensive. With renewed vigor Cloud, Tifa and Cait sprang forward to join their friends, but the Turks gave way, knowing that the battle was hopeless now. They turned and retreated into the corridor, and Cloud was too tired to pursue them. Reno stopped and turned toward them.

"Apparently our simple ruse was a little too simple," he said. "You've won this round, but you know this isn't the end of it. We'll see you again soon enough."

Cloud knew that was true, but he said nothing as they turned and disappeared down the corridor.

"You guys got here just in a nick of time," Tifa exclaimed.

"That's apparent," Yuffie said, seeing their obvious exhaustion.

Barret resisted the urge to snap at her. After all, she had climbed across those pipes in the tunnel and gotten out quickly enough to release them and get them here in time. In spite of her character, she did have her uses.

"Well, it's all over now," Cloud said. "We have the Crystal. I suggest we follow the Turks example and get out of here as fast as possible."