

CHAPTER V: ARE ALL POLITICIANS CROOKED?

Cloud was surrounded by white light. He looked down to see the world far below his feet. He was suspended in the air far above the planet, but he felt no fear or discomfort.

He looked up and saw Aeris standing a few paces away. He reached out to her and tried to call out her name, but he heard no sound. Still, she seemed to understand, for she looked at him and smiled. Then she looked down.

He followed her gaze and saw a large island below them. He recognized it as one of the southern islands, the one that had held the Temple of the Ancients, in fact, for he could just barely make out the small clearing where it had once stood.

He looked back up at her. She looked at him expectantly, her face showing no emotion except for her calm smile. It seemed she was trying to tell him something, but he had no clue what. He tried to ask, but again no sound came out. Then she looked down again and pointed.

He looked down one more time. And then suddenly he was falling. He looked up to see her disappearing rapidly into the distance, the calm smile still on her face. He looked down and saw that he was dropping not onto the island but towards the water off it's southern shore.

He felt no impact as he hit the water, but suddenly he was below it, sinking rapidly into the depths. He sank for a long time, but he still felt no discomfort or need for breath. The sea was filled with life, but none of it paid any attention to him. He looked down and saw that the bottom was now in view, and then he saw a cave on a small rise in front of him, a faint green glow emanated from it.

He drifted down to the bottom right in front of it, and then slowly felt himself being drawn in. The glow grew brighter and sparkled in a familiar way, and suddenly he realized it was the glow of the lifestream. It filled the air all around him as he slowly drifted into the cave.

He felt the tug of the current become stronger. The cave seemed to be filled with shadows that moved around him like living things. He had felt nothing but peaceful contentment up to this point, but suddenly he felt uneasy. The current grew stronger still, and for the first time he tried to resist. He made an attempt to swim back the way he had come, but it had no effect. He felt the current grow stronger still and now he was being pulled swiftly through the tunnel. Suddenly he saw the lifestream fade away into darkness and a black vortex opened up in front of him. He desperately tried to halt his progress, for he knew that if he was sucked into the dark abyss he would never return. His efforts were useless, and even as he felt himself being swept helplessly to his doom, he heard a familiar laughter ringing in his ears.

~*~

Cloud woke up with a start. He thought he had cried out, although he could not be certain. He sat up in the bed, looking around the room for a minute, confused. In a moment he remembered he and the others had headed back to Kalm after their little excursion to Midgar, and he was now sitting up in a bed in the backroom of Tifa's bar.

The sun was shining brightly through the window, and he wondered how late it was. He got up and a short time later strolled into the bar proper. The others were gathered around one of the tables in the center of the room.

Tifa came over to him as soon as she saw him.

"We knew how exhausted you were from the battle and didn't want to disturb you," she said. "Sleep well?"

He looked at her for a moment. It was obvious that she knew more about his dreams than he had thought, and he wondered now if she was somehow aware of his most recent one, but he could read nothing in her face.

"Well enough," he replied.

"Good," she said. "We've been waiting for you to get up so we can decide on the next step."

They walked over and the others greeted him. He and Tifa both sat down.

"Well, we've got the Crystal Materia," he said. "So I guess you're all wondering where do we go from here. Red?"

"I'm afraid we don't have much to go on," Red replied. "I've been working on translating the book but it is difficult work. From what I have deciphered so far the Crystal Materia can only be used successfully in certain locations on the planet."

"And where might that be?" Barret questioned.

"There are several places mentioned," he replied, "but I have never heard of any of them, nor can I find any reference to them in any other book. I think this is because that they are not actually on the planet."

"What do you mean?" Yuffie asked, puzzled.

"I don't think the locations mentioned are geographical locations on the surface of the planet, rather they appear to be locations within the lifestream."

"What exactly does that mean?" Tifa asked.

"It's kind of hard to explain," Red answered. "There are certain places within the lifestream that are places of power. They are not tied to one geographical location on the planet, but rather represent crossroads in the flow of the lifestream."

"So if they're not always in the same place, then how are we supposed to find them?" Cait asked quite reasonably.

"I said that they are not tied to one place," Red replied. "But that doesn't mean they move. It just means they could move. If I understand correctly, some do not move at all, or move only after thousands of years. If we found a reference to the location of even one on the planet, chances are it would still be there."

"But we don't know where one is," Cait pointed out.

"No," Red answered.

"It doesn't sound like we have much at all," Barret commented. "We don't even know how to get into the lifestream itself, much less find a major intersection."

"We were in the lifestream once before," Tifa pointed out, looking at Cloud.

He said nothing, but just sat there, apparently deep in thought.

"That's right, at Mideel," Barret spoke up.

"Perhaps that would be a logical starting place for us then," Red suggested.

"No," Cloud said suddenly.

They all looked at him.

"No?" Tifa said.

"No," he repeated. "We have to go to Junon."

"Junon?" Cait and Yuffie said at once.

They waited for him to explain.

"Cloud?" Tifa prompted, a look of puzzlement and concern mixed on her face.

He hesitated a moment more, then told them about the vision he had had that morning.

"So what are you trying to tell us," Cait asked when he had finished. "That the dream was real?"

"It wasn't a dream," Cloud said sharply. "It was more than that. It was so vivid, so real. I've never had dreams like this before. I can't explain how I know, but I just know. Aeris showed me the entrance to the lifestream. It's not in Mideel, it's in an underwater cave off the coast. If we go to Mideel we'll just be wasting our time."

Some of the others looked skeptical, but none of them doubted Cloud's sincerity. Whether it was true or not, it was certain that Cloud believed what he had seen was the truth. Tifa just sat silently beside him, staring off into space.

"So, even if you are right," Barret commented slowly. "Why do you want to go to Junon?"

"In my vision," Cloud replied, "I could travel underwater with no ill effects, but I doubt if that will occur in reality. We left the submarine at Junon."

"Red."

Red turned as Tifa walked up beside him. They were alone in the bar now, the others preparing for the trip to Junon.

"Do you think Cloud's visions are real?" she asked.

"I don't know," Red replied with a shrug. "As I said before, most of what we once knew about the Ancients is lost. It is clear, however, that Cloud believes they are real."

Tifa did not respond. She sat down at the table and stared out the window.

"What's troubling you?" Red asked.

She sighed.

"I think he blames himself for her death," she said finally.

Red wasn't surprised.

"That's nonsense," he replied.

Tifa shrugged.

"I think he believes he could have stopped it, should have stopped it," she continued. "I think he feels guilty that he didn't. I think..."

She stopped. He waited patiently for her to continue.

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly. "I'm ranting. Sometimes I think he's losing his mind. Other times, I think I am."

Red looked at her with a sympathetic eye.

"You think he's having these visions because he blames himself for her death," he said slowly.

She looked at him for a moment, then looked down at the floor.

"I guess so," she said softly. "I've really tried to believe that she is trying to contact him, but I can't. She's dead, Red. Much as it hurts to say so, but that is what I really believe in my heart. Does that make me a terrible person?"

"Not at all," he answered immediately. "To tell you the truth, I had a suspicion you might feel that way. You were the only one who did not hesitate when Aeris's vision appeared in the Gi cave."

"So what do I do Red?" she asked, turning to look at him once more. "What do I do?"

He smiled.

"I'm afraid I don't have much in the way of advice," he replied. "I would say that you should just keep on doing what you have been. I have a feeling that in the end it will all work out for you. In the meantime, the only thing I can tell you is to take your own advice."

She looked at him, puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"There was a time in our last adventure when all of the people with Hojo's tattoos seemed to be going mad. I was afraid that it would happen to me too. Do you remember what you told me then?"

She paused for a moment in thought. Then she smiled.

"I told you to be strong," she said finally.

He placed a reassuring paw on her shoulder.

"Be strong, Tifa, be strong."

~*~

They reached the dockyard on the outskirts of Junon early the next morning. None of them had been back here since their

last adventure. After all, it's not everyday you need the use of a submarine. Things didn't look much different at first, but as they neared the docks they were surprised to find that it was surrounded by a fence. In front of them at the end of the road was a large gate with two guards on either side.

"That's new," Barret commented.

They walked up to the gate. A guard came forward and held up his hand for them to halt.

"Do you have business here?" he questioned.

"We need to get into the dockyard," Cloud replied.

The guard nodded.

"Certainly, if you'll just show me your clearance."

The look they gave him made it obvious that they were lacking in that regard. The guard looked at them sternly and shook his head.

"You can't pass without clearance."

"Clearance from who?" Barret growled.

"Why, Mayor Hart, of course," the guard replied. "We've had a lot of cases of unauthorized use of government property. Mayor Hart is cracking down. You can't go onto the docks without his permission."

"Hart?" Cait said. "What happened to the old Mayor?"

"He retired about six months ago," the guard replied. "Hart is the Mayor now. He's started a lot of innovative programs."

"I'll bet," Barret replied. "Look, we just need to use the submarine. We're not here to mess with anything else. We're from Avalanche, and I'm sure your Mayor won't mind."

"You guys are from Avalanche?" the guard said, his eyes widening. "I heard it was you who beat Sephiroth. I didn't think anyone would be able to do that."

"Great," Cloud replied. "Now can we pass?"

The guard hesitated and looked at them, embarrassed.

"I'm afraid I really can't let you through without permission," he said hesitantly.

"Oh good grief," Barret exclaimed, obviously starting to lose his temper. "This is ridiculous. We're not thieves, and we need the sub. Now let us through."

The guard stepped back as the second guard came over slowly. They both realized that they would be no match for this group if it came to a fight.

"I'm sorry," he stammered. "I'm just doing my job. I'm sure if you go see the Mayor you will have no problem getting clearance. But I can't let you through without it."

Barret just stared at them with his hands on his hips.

"It's all right," Tifa said, walking over to Barret. "We can go talk to the Mayor. C'mon, Barret. It's not their fault."

For a moment longer Barret glared at the guards, then he turned and looked at Cloud.

"Tifa's right," Cloud said finally. "C'mon, let's go pay the Mayor a visit."

They walked back down the road and turned north. In a few minutes they were in Junon proper. The city itself didn't seem to have changed much since their last visit. The cannon was gone, of course, decaying now in the ruins of Midgar, but otherwise the city appeared virtually unchanged. It turned out the Mayor had his office in the old Shinra headquarters, and Tifa shuddered for a moment as they walked by the room that held the gas chamber where she had almost perished. This was another place that she had hoped to never see again.

They reached the Mayor's office and entered. The waiting room was empty, except for a secretary at a desk in the front of the room. She looked at them as they walked up to her.

"Can I help you?"

"We need to see the Mayor," Cloud said.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked.

"No," Cloud replied. "We need to use the submarine and we were told we had to get clearance from the Mayor first."

"I'll go see if he's available," she said, and got up.

"Tell him we're from Avalanche," Barret added.

She raised her eyebrows at this, but said nothing. She walked into the next room.

"Let's hope this doesn't take long," Barret muttered.

She came out again in a moment.

"The Mayor will see you shortly, please have a seat."

Barret grumbled, but then they all sat down and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Barret fidgeted and grumbled the entire time. He kept giving the secretary glaring looks, but she did her best to ignore them. Finally even the others started to get impatient.

"How much longer is this going to take?" Cloud asked.

"The Mayor is a very busy man," the secretary responded.

"Busy?" Barret exclaimed, "there's not even anyone else here!"

The secretary gave him an exasperated look.

"Considering the fact that you don't have an appointment, you're lucky that he agreed to see you at all," she answered.

"Yeah, real lucky," Yuffie chimed in.

"Did you tell him that we were from Avalanche," Barret asked. "Remember, the people who stopped Meteor and saved the planet?"

"Yes, I told him," she answered with a sigh.

They sat back down and waited a little while longer. But then Cloud looked at Barret and without saying a word they suddenly all got up and walked toward the door to the Mayor's chambers.

The secretary stood up in surprise.

"You can't go in there!" she cried.

"Not likely you're going to stop us, sister," Yuffie exclaimed and took a menacing step toward her. The secretary stepped back.

"The Mayor isn't going to like this," she said lamely as they filed by.

"You can say that again," Barret growled.

The Mayor's office was a large well furnished room. There was a huge desk at the far end of it. Behind the desk sat the Mayor with a young woman in his lap. He looked up startled as they came in, then stood up abruptly, almost dumping the woman on the floor. She righted herself and gave him a dirty look.

"I thought I told April that I was not to be disturbed," he said, somewhat flustered.

"I'm afraid we took the liberty of coming in on our own," Cloud replied. "And since we're here now and it doesn't look like you're all that busy after all, perhaps you could find the time to have a little discussion with Avalanche."

The Mayor looked like he would get angry for a moment, but then, seeing the look on the faces of the six well armed people in front of him, appeared to change his mind.

"Of course," he replied with a smile. "Sorry to have kept you waiting."

He turned toward the woman. "I'll continue my dictation later on, Selene. You can go."

With a smile at the others, she turned and walked out of the room.

"So what can I do for you, my friends?" the Mayor asked.

Cloud explained the situation.

"Oh, so you need to use the submarine," Hart said when he had finished. "I see. Well, this is a very serious request. I'm afraid I just can't give you use of the submarine on a spur of the moment. We're conducting some very important research right now, and I don't know whether it can be interrupted."

"What sort of research is that, exactly?" Red questioned.

"Well, I'm afraid I can't say. It's all hush, hush, and all that. You know."

"No we don't know," Barret said sharply. "We're not going to need it for long. Besides, we were the ones who acquired the ship from Shinra, so it's basically our submarine."

"Well, " Hart responded, searching for a moment for a response. "As private citizens, you can't really own the submarine. It was property of Shinra, and once that company was dissolved it reverted to the state."

"But I'm not a private citizen, " Barret responded with a sudden smile. "I'm the Mayor of Corel And as such I believe I have the right to claim the submarine as property of that city."

Hart looked at him for a moment.

"But you were not Mayor when you acquired the ship. I don't think your claim would hold up."

"Look," Cloud interrupted. He really was not interested in discussing the finer points of any legal battle they might have over the submarine. "Are you going to let us use it or not?"

The Mayor looked around his office for a moment, as if trying to think of the proper way to respond.

"All right, I may be able to swing it," he said finally. "But you have to do something for me in return."

Barret looked at him skeptically.

"And what might that be?"

"I need you to get something for me," he said.

They did not respond, but waited for him to say more.

"I need you to get me the plans for the Mako reactor underneath Junon." he continued.

"Whatever for?" Tifa exclaimed. "Surely you're not thinking of building another Mako reactor?"

"No, not at all," Hart replied quickly. "It's just that some of my engineers believe that they can use the plans to build a conventional reactor that's more efficient."

Cloud looked at the others. They seemed as doubtful as he about this new development. Tifa in particular did not look like she liked this idea one bit. He turned back to the Mayor.

"Assuming we agree," he said, "just where are these plans?"

"Why, in the reactor, of course," Hart replied.

"Somehow I knew you were going to say that," Cloud said softly.

~*~

Mako created monsters had continued to haunt the city of Junon even after the fall of Shinra. Some brave people had entered the reactor itself to try to clean out this scourge, but none had ever returned. In the end it had been decided it would be better to simply seal off the reactor and let the monsters rot inside. Now Cloud and his friends found themselves standing in the underwater passageway just outside the huge steel doors that the Mayor's assistants were in the process of unbolting.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Tifa asked, not for the first time.

"No, I'm not," Cloud replied. "But it doesn't look like we have much choice. It's either this or take the submarine by force and probably have the entire city of Junon after us."

"For all we know," Yuffie said, "the city might be glad to get rid of this guy. I'm beginning to wonder how he ever got elected in the first place."

"And besides," Cait added, "how do we know he's telling the truth when he says he only wants the plans to build an improved conventional reactor? I don't trust him."

"After all that's happened," Tifa said, "the people would never let him build another Mako reactor. They'd kick him right out of office. That kind of greed almost destroyed the planet once already."

"Most people thought Shinra should have been kicked out long before it was," Barret observed, "but it took a long time for it to happen."

"I don't trust him either," Cloud said. "And I'm open to any suggestions, if anyone has got one. I think we have little choice but to take his word for it, and if we find out later on that he's lying, well, the citizens of Junon won't be the only people he has to deal with. I'm sure that you haven't forgotten that we have some experience at taking out Mako reactors."

No one had forgotten.

The assistants completed unbolting the doors and now nervously opened them just far enough for someone to pass through. They looked at Cloud and his friends anxiously,

"All right, let's get this over with," Cloud said. He walked over and slipped through the doors. The others followed. As soon as they were all inside the doors were slammed ominously behind them.

"I got a feeling they're not expecting us back," Cait commented.

They looked around. They were in a large passageway. Machinery lined the walls and a catwalk ran along the wall to their right. Except for themselves, it seemed deserted.

"Well, I don't see any sign of Mako monsters," Barret observed. "This place has been sealed up for almost a year, maybe they all turned on each other."

"Maybe," Cloud replied, the doubt in his voice obvious.

"So where do we go from here?" Tifa asked.

Hart had told him where the plans could be found, if of course they hadn't been moved. Cloud thought that unlikely. The plans weren't something that would be of interest to anyone, or anything, for that matter.

"This way," he said, and started walking to the left.

There was a corridor off in that direction and Cloud led them down it. This led into another room filled with machinery. Tifa kept her eyes open as they walked, but she saw no hint that the place was occupied. Nor did she sense that they were being watched or followed. She felt that they were completely alone down here.

Cloud led them down two more levels, and still they met no opposition. Tifa was beginning to believe that maybe Barret was right, and the only thing they had to worry about was getting lost. They had made a dozen turns already, and without the others she would have no clue where she was going, but Cloud seemed to know the way and he led them unhesitantly.

They entered the largest room they had seen yet. They stood on a metal grating about six feet wide that ran along the wall on this side of the room. Below them the rest of the room was filled with a clear green liquid. A metal stairway led up to a catwalk that ran above the pool across the room and into another corridor twenty feet above the pool on the opposite wall.

"Must be coolant for the reactor," Red observed, looking at the liquid.

Cloud nodded and led them single file up the stairway and onto the catwalk. They had still seen no sign of an enemy, and he had unconsciously begun to relax a little. Even if he had been alert, he was looking for some enemy, and not at the structure on which they walked. The reactor had had no maintenance done on it in almost a year, and if anyone had looked closely they might have been concerned by the rust covering the metal struts supporting the catwalk.

But no one did notice, and the first hint they had was the grating sound of metal on metal and a sudden shudder as one of

the supports gave way.

"Get back!" Cloud shouted in the instant he had before the section they were standing on collapsed.

The catwalk gave way at one end and swung down like a trapdoor opening. Yuffie, who was last in line, scrambled back madly and managed to make it to an undamaged section. Red, who was next, made a tremendous leap as the walk gave way and landed halfway on the undamaged part. For a moment he balanced there, his paws flailing wildly to gain a grip, then Yuffie grabbed hold of him and hauled him up.

The others were too far along to jump back. Cloud grabbed Tifa's arm with one hand, then lunged and managed to grasp the swinging handrail. Barret and Cait slid down, desperately reaching for the railing as they fell. Barret managed to grab it and hold on at the last moment. He hung there slowly swinging back and forth above the coolant. Cait scrambled to get a handhold as well, but couldn't quite manage it. He fell into the coolant below with a loud splash.

He came up gasping.

"Is this stuff poisonous?" he yelled anxiously.

"I don't think so," Red replied. "Just swim back to the platform and you'll be fine."

Cait paddled back toward the metal grating. Cloud hauled himself up the handrail, thinking at any moment the rest of the catwalk would give way and they would all end up in the drink. But he climbed up without incident, then turned and helped Tifa and Barret.

They stood up and looked back at Yuffie and Red. A good fifteen feet now separated them.

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

Cloud shrugged.

"I guess we'll go on," he answered. "I don't see how you can get across, so wait here until we get back."

She held out her arms and gave him a look of exasperation.

"So I'm just supposed to wait here with the furballs?" she said.

Cloud just shook his head.

"Let's get going," he said to Tifa and Barret.

They move forward cautiously, but they reached the end of the catwalk without further incident. They disappeared into the corridor beyond.

Yuffie and Red walked back down to the platform and helped Cait climb out of the coolant. He shook his huge Mog body, and Yuffie cried in protest as he showered them with water.

"Cut it out," she exclaimed. "If you weren't such a big lug the catwalk probably wouldn't have fallen in the first place."

"Hey, don't try to blame it on me," Cait answered defensively. "This body is big but it's very light. I bet it doesn't weigh much more than you do."

Yuffie said nothing but looked at him skeptically. Then she turned and walked back toward the doorway.

"Cloud told us to wait here," Red said.

"Well, I'm not going to just stand around here waiting for them," she replied. "Suppose they get in trouble and need our help? I'm going to see if there is another way through."

"You're more likely to just get yourself hopelessly lost," Red said.

"You're welcome to come if you want," she said sharply. "But I'm going, regardless."

Red and Cait looked at each other, then turned and started after her.

"I've got a feeling we're going to regret this," Red said resignedly.

Cloud led them through two more rooms and down a flight of steps which led into yet another large room. He stopped for a moment to get his bearings. Then he pointed to the right.

"The reactor core is right in there," he said. "The plans are in an office above them. C'mon, we're almost there."

They took a few steps but then stopped. A sound came from their left. A rapping sound, as if someone was banging on metal. It was not loud, and seemed to be coming from a corridor that led off to their left. It went on for a minute and paused, then started up again.

Barret looked at Cloud.

"Should we go check it out?" he asked softly.

Cloud stood listening for a few more minutes. The sound faded away, and this time did not return.

He shook his head.

"I think in this case we'd be better off leaving well enough alone," he said. "Let's just get the plans and get out of here."

He led them to the right and into the next room. The opposite wall in the room was a convex semicircle. A large metal door stood on the wall with the words 'CAUTION: REACTOR CORE' in red above it. A metal stairway led up to another catwalk that ran along the wall above them. The upper portion of the wall was covered with windows of offices that lined the area above them. The glass in all the windows was smashed and scattered across the floor. The metal stair was bent and twisted, although it still looked serviceable. The dozens of machines that stood in the room were broken and in some cases torn to pieces. The door below the sign was dented and appeared to have large claw marks across it. The entire room was filled with debris. They looked at it for a few moments in shocked silence.

"Whatever it was that came through here was real angry," Barret finally stated.

"Yeah," Cloud agreed, looking around carefully. "But it doesn't seem to be around anymore. Let's get those plans and get out of here before it decides to come back."

They made their way carefully up the stairs. Cloud was worried now that the plans would not be there. If whatever had come through had destroyed the offices the plans might be nothing more than twisted fragments of paper scattered on the floor. But when they got to the top of the catwalk he saw that the offices were relatively undamaged.

They walked over to the third office and entered. Cloud quickly went over to the desk and started to rummage through it as the others kept an eye out for any visitors. With a grunt of satisfaction Cloud stood up, the plans in his hands. They quickly strode back along the catwalk and down the stair. He was sure that something would happen before they got out of the room, but they made it without incident. Cloud wasn't about to say so out loud, and they still had a long way to go, but in spite of that he was thinking that maybe for just this once their little mission would go off without a hitch.

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Red was trying his hardest to keep track of the way back, but it was difficult. There seemed to be no pattern to Yuffie's meandering. She appeared to turn right or left as the mood took her. They reached another intersection and Yuffie turned left.

"I think we're going in the wrong direction," Red said.

Yuffie did not respond, but just kept walking.

"Maybe we should just let her go on by herself," Cait suggested.

"No," Red replied. "We better stay with her. I just wish she wasn't so stubborn."

They entered another room that appeared to have no other exit. Red and Cait waited by the door while Yuffie wandered around. Maybe now they would turn around, Red thought, but his thinking was premature.

Yuffie was at the far end of the room looking at a large piece of machinery.

"It looks like there's a door behind here," she said. "Give me a hand with this."

Red walked over, followed by Cait. He could see the partial outline of a door behind the machine. Red looked around.

There was a trail of scrape marks on the floor leading from the wall on their left over to the machine.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Yuffie questioned impatiently. "Help me move this."

"Can't we just go back," Cait finally asked. "This seems like an awful lot of work just to get lost."

"Nobody is stopping you from going back," Yuffie replied sharply. "But you sure aren't going to help the others that way."

"It looks like somebody dragged this machine over here from the far wall," Red observed. "Why would they do that?"

"How should I know," Yuffie replied. "And I don't really care. Now, are you going to give me a hand or not?"

The three of them together moved the machinery with little difficulty, even though Red had a feeling that this was an extremely bad idea. He could only think that the machinery had been put there so that no one could get in or out of the door behind it.

Once the machinery was out of the way they saw a solid barred metal door. Yuffie walked up and lifted off the bar.

"I really don't think we should go in there," Red tried again, even though he knew it was hopeless.

It was.

Yuffie opened the door and walked in. The others waited a moment and followed. There was a large room inside. Yuffie stood a few steps in. She turned around and looked at them.

"See," she said, "there's nothing to be afraid of. Now C'mon, you scardy cats, lets go find the..."

She stopped as she saw the look on their faces. Their eyes were wide, and they were looking up. She turned and saw...

Knees?

She looked up.

Then she looked up higher.

"Oh boy," she said softly.

~*~

Cloud led them back as fast as he dared. With each step he expected something to leap out of the shadows at them, but they made it back to the coolant room undisturbed.

"Looks like the place might be deserted after all," Barret finally said.

"We're not out of here yet," Tifa said quickly, even though she had been thinking the same thing.

They walked along the catwalk above the pool until they reached the point where it had collapsed.

"Where are the others?" Tifa asked with some concern.

"I don't know," Cloud replied. He had expected them to be waiting here. "I hope they haven't gotten themselves in some kind of trouble."

No one spoke for a moment as they look across at the other end of the catwalk. They all knew the only way across was into the pool.

"Well, we won't find out by standing here," Barret said finally and launched himself off the catwalk. He hit the water with a tremendous splash and headed for the platform.

Cloud looked at Tifa, who was looking down at the water. It was a good fifteen foot drop.

"Barret's right," he said. He grabbed hold of her.

"No, wait, I'm..." she began, but then they were plunging downward. They hit the water and it was cold! She came up sputtering.

"I wasn't ready!" she cried, but he was already swimming for the platform. She followed and Cloud and Barret hauled her up.

"Now where the hell did they go?" Cloud muttered, walking out into the hall. He looked both ways as the others came out behind him. He was just about to complain about the fact that they hadn't stayed put when they heard sounds down the hallway to the left.

Cloud felt relief when he saw Yuffie come around the corner, with Red and Cait not far behind.

"Good, you're back," Yuffie said, rushing right past them. "C'mon, let's get out of here. We don't have all day, you know."

They looked at her for a moment, then turned as Red and Cait came up.

"You have the plans?" Red questioned.

"Yes," Cloud responded. "What's going on?"

A deep growl echoed down the hallway from the direction they had just come.

"I'm afraid something followed us home," Red said.

Cloud had his sword out in an instant. A moment later he saw a huge clawed hand at the end of the hallway. It was attached to a gorilla-like beast that growled again as soon as it saw them.

Cloud took a step forward.

"It's big, but it doesn't seem to be very fast," Red suggested from behind him. "Perhaps it might be wise to retreat."

Cloud did not respond but stopped his advance.

"Red's right, Cloud," Tifa said. "We've got the plans, let's just get out of here."

He glanced at them, then turned to look at the beast. It was still a good twenty feet away. He took a step backwards, then turned and they ran down the hall after the others.

~*~

"Yuffie, the next time we need directions somewhere, remind me not to ask you," Barret said with a smile.

"Very funny," she answered sharply. "I'm sure if it had been you leading the group we'd still be lost down there."

"You may be right," Barret answered, refusing to be baited. "But I gotta take my hat off to you. I don't think anyone else could have led us straight to what was probably the only monster left alive down in that maze."

Yuffie gave him a dark look, but said nothing more.

"Well, no harm done," Cloud said philosophically. "I just hope that the next time I tell you to wait you'll do just that."

"Yes sir, General Cloud," Yuffie muttered with a quick salute.

They had been walking down the road to the dockyards, and now they stopped as they once more stood in front of the gates. A guard came over to them, different from the last one. They showed him their clearance from the Mayor and the guards swung open the gates.

"That's more like it," Barret said with satisfaction.

They walked out onto the docks. The sub was tied up at the second dock. The area was completely deserted.

"Cloud, do you think you still remember how to run this thing?" Cait asked as they walked aboard.

"We'll find out soon enough," he replied. He pulled on the main hatch and it opened with a grating sound.

"Doesn't sound good," Barret remarked. "You know, it looks like this thing hasn't been used since the last time we used it. Must of been some interesting research they were conducting."

"Yeah, I'm sure," Cloud muttered.

They entered the sub and Cloud had to agree with Barret's assessment. The place looked completely unused. There were even cobwebs covering some of the instrument panels. A minor nuisance, but a short time later he discovered a real problem. The engines wouldn't start.

He related that information to the others, and then he and Red went back to the engine room to take a look around.

Barret sat down unhappily in the helmsman's seat.

"I'll bet that lousy excuse for a Mayor knew the sub wasn't working all the time," he said angrily. "I think we should go back there and kick his ass."

"Satisfying as that may be," Tifa replied, "it's not going to get us a working submarine. But let's not jump to conclusions. Maybe it's something simple and Cloud and Red can fix it."

"Even if they can," Barret answered, "I'd still like to kick his ass."

It was quite a while before Cloud and Red returned, and when they did they did not have good news.

"I'm afraid it's beyond our expertise to fix it," Red said. "We just don't know that much about submarine engines."

"So what do we do now?" Yuffie asked. It seemed they had come an awful long way to get stuck.

"We need someone to help us," Red replied. "Someone who knows about engines."

They all looked at each other for a moment.

"Cid," Cloud, Barret and Yuffie all said at once.