

CHAPTER XIV: THE ANCIENT CITY

"Are we ready to go?"

Cloud looked at the others. Dawn had just broken outside, the light of the early morning sun filtering in through the cavern entrance. Even so all of them were already up. The anxiety to be on their way coupled with the excitement of what lay ahead, not to mention the fact that the cave floor wasn't all that comfortable, had left them with only fitful snatches of sleep at best. Tifa stretched, adjusted her gloves, and nodded.

"Ready as we'll ever be, I suppose," Reeve said.

Cloud looked at the Cetra Sage.

"So which way do we go?"

The Cetra Sage nodded toward the back of the cavern.

"We can get through from back there," he stated. "It's a long and twisting route into the city. We go mostly down from here."

He walked over to the fire and picked up a faggot of wood from the small stockpile beside it.

"I suggest we each take some wood for torches along with us," he said. "Once we get to the city the Cetra glow will light the way, but the caves leading to it are long and utterly dark. We will need some light."

The others followed suit as the Cetra Sage lit the end of his makeshift torch.

"All right then, let's get going," Cloud said when they were all equipped.

As the Cetra Sage started to lead them away Tifa spoke up.

"Excuse me, Mr. Sage? Do you have a real name?" Cloud had been with the man since yesterday and had not thought to ask that question for some reason.

"I mean, it's kind of awkward calling you Mr. Sage," Tifa continued after a moment.

The Cetra Sage just stood there. He seemed to ponder this for a long time. Cloud found that curious.

"I've gone by many names," the man said eventually. "You can call me... Dannin. Yes, Dannin should do."

Without further discussion he led them into a narrow passage at the back of the cavern. After just a short time they found themselves forced to move in single file. The Cetra Sage led the way, followed by Cloud. His sword was still slung over his back, but he could have it out in an instant. His eyes scanned the way in front of them looking for any sign of trouble. Tifa came behind him, walking nimbly yet silently, a look of resolution on her face. Reeve followed lastly, acting as rearguard.

Before long the trail began to lead steeply downward. In addition to that the walls began to get damp and soon they found their hands coming away wet whenever they touched the wall. If slippery walls weren't bad enough, as they progressed water began to drip down the walls to form pools and rivulets on the ground beneath them, making keeping their footing on the steep slope difficult and forcing them to move more slowly than they would have liked.

Cloud wasn't sure how long they proceeded, all he knew was that it seemed like hours with no change in the passage around them. The tunnel branched at intervals, splitting off into the darkness, sometimes in a few directions at once. The Cetra Sage seemed to know where he was going, turning down each path without hesitation. Cloud wondered how he could be so sure. Everything down here looked the same to him, but he didn't question it.

Even though it was downhill and they were going slowly, the fact that they had to watch their step so carefully made it fatiguing, perhaps more mentally than physically. Still, Cloud could hear Tifa panting softly behind him now, and looking back Reeve seemed just as tired. Cloud wasn't exactly in tip top shape himself. He was still a bit weak from his illness. He looked forward again. He could only see the Cetra Sage's back, yet to his surprise the man did not seem fatigued at all. He didn't exactly give the impression of a spring chicken, yet it was obvious there was a lot more to the man than appeared. Cloud had a feeling Dannin would be able to keep this pace up indefinitely if he was by himself.

Still, the passage was narrow and wet, hardly the best conditions for taking a break. No one looked ready to collapse from exhaustion just yet. Perhaps they would find a more suitable place to rest up ahead.

Eventually the ground did level off in front of them. Cloud breathed a silent sigh of relief at this event. He had feared the whole way down the slope someone was going to slip and fall. Had that happened it would have difficult to stop, and if someone fell behind him, they could take the whole party down with them.

That, however, did not happen. Once or twice one of them had lost their balance and slid forward, but they had always managed to right themselves in time, whether through their own efforts or with a helping hand from one of the others and no disaster occurred.

At least, not yet. There was still plenty of time for that, Cloud thought.

The passage had become more or less level, but the dampness remained. In fact, it became more pronounced as they proceeded. The rivulets of water beneath their feet coalesced into a stream, soon coming up almost to their ankles. There was no way to avoid it, it covered the floor beneath them, and the passage was still as narrow as it had been before. It was deep enough so that their walking splashed some up where it seeped into their shoes and boots, and soon wet feet was added to the list of things that were annoying them.

After a while Tifa stopped suddenly.

"What's that sound?"

"What sound?"

"Listen."

They came to a halt. No longer splashing through the water the sound was easy to hear.

"It's water," Dannin announced. "Running water."

"Great," Reeve muttered from the back. "We're not going to run into a river, are we?"

"Actually yes," the Cetra Sage replied, glancing back at them. "But don't worry, we can go around it. We won't be doing any swimming."

They started forward once again. The sound quickly grew until it was unmistakable. Eventually, and quite suddenly, the tunnel opened up into a huge chamber, so large they couldn't see either the ceiling nor the far wall in the feeble light of the Cetra Sage's torch. The sound of the water was so loud now that it impeded speech, and it was easy to see why. A torrent of water cascaded down the rock face to their right, falling from some unknown height above. Striking the rocks as it fell, it sent out a spray of mist that wet their faces and filled the air around them. At the base of the rock face the water formed a pool that filled most of the chamber. A narrow path of rock led along side it into the darkness to their left. The water in the lake foamed and bubbled where the water cascaded into it, but farther away it was calm. A dim green glow illuminated the lake from below.

Tifa stared down into the water.

"What's that light?" she asked.

"I don't know," Dannin replied. "Although it looks similar to the glow given off by the Cetra buildings, I don't think it's related. The Cetra did not live in this area. I believe it's some kind of indigenous life form, a small animal or a plant."

Tifa would have stopped to admire the view, but Dannin quickly urged them on, afraid that the misty air would douse the torch and leave them in darkness. He led them toward the far end of the chamber.

At first Cloud couldn't see where they were going. From where they entered, it looked like the lake went all the way to the far wall, but as they got closer he saw there was a low opening in the rock face ahead through which the water drained out of the lake, and indeed, the chamber itself. Cloud looked at the passage ahead distastefully. Before the passage had been narrow, in some places leaving them barely enough room to squeeze through. Now, however, they were going to be cramped in the opposite dimension. This passage was wide and low. Only Tifa was able to walk through it without stooping, and even she had to be careful for the ceiling was uneven.

The outflow of the lake ran along beside them, filling most of the tunnel, but there was a band of solid ground on the left side they could walk on. The Cetra Sage extinguished his torch, for the light still emanated from the water that flowed beside them. The water was shallower here and Cloud could see the rocky bottom. He stared down at it trying to distinguish just where the light originated, but he could see nothing out of the ordinary. As far as he could tell, it was the stone at the bottom of the river itself that was aglow.

The floor was no longer wet, but their shoes were still soggy with moisture. Cloud could feel his feet squishing in the water in his shoes with every step. That plus the lower ceiling made this portion of the chamber even more uncomfortable than they had been on the way down. Before continuing much farther Cloud suggested they stop for a break and Dannin agreed. The first thing they all did was sit down and pull off their shoes to drain the water out of them.

"Two bad we can't start a fire," Reeve muttered, looking at his wet footwear. Cloud nodded. They all knew they didn't have enough wood for that. The Cetra Sage had told them the journey would take at least a day, and perhaps quite a bit longer depending on what kind of obstacles they encountered. He had filled a pouch hanging from his belt with some food that he had gathered recently, and now he broke it out for anyone who might be hungry. There wasn't much, and it was all fruits and vegetables. Not really Cloud's kind of meal, but it was better than nothing. Dannin hadn't brought much, but he said they would be able to forage once they reached the old Cetra city. Cloud hadn't forgotten the warning about their being fauna down there too. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing to run into something. Who knows, it might be edible.

After eating her fill, Tifa sat down by the river looking down into the slow moving water. She let her hand dangle in the current. Cloud slid over beside her.

"How's the water?"

"Cold," she replied. "I wonder what makes that glow?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I was looking before but I don't see anything except the bottom."

Tifa didn't reply, just stared at the water below, making little ripples with her hand.

"When we get to the city, it's going to be up to you and Reeve to get Aeris out," Cloud said.

Tifa said nothing, just shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"I don't even know why I'm along," Cloud continued. "I'll be a danger just being near Aeris. Perhaps I should have stayed behind."

Tifa looked up at him. Cloud had been more anxious to get going than any of them. Was he just looking for some reassurance?

"You wouldn't have stayed behind," she said simply.

Cloud returned her gaze for a moment, then nodded.

"I guess not," he admitted. "That doesn't... bother you, does it?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"I don't know, I do care about Aeris a lot. You know that. I'm always running off to protect her. If I hadn't done that, we wouldn't be in this mess. You're not like, jealous or anything, are you?"

Tifa looked surprised. Cloud had never asked her anything like that before.

"I guess..." she began slowly. "I guess I'll always be a little jealous of Aeris. She's so pretty and personable. She's so much more open with her feelings than I can be. I don't know, she can walk into a room and brighten it with her mere presence."

She fell silent, giving him a sort of wistful look then turning to look down at the water again.

Cloud reached out and touched her arm.

"Teef..."

She gave a quick shake of her head.

"No, it's okay. We're just different people, that's all. I understand that. I don't begrudge you coming here, or I or Reeve. I want to see her rescued as much as you do Cloud. She's my best friend."

Cloud looked at her for a moment more, then nodded.

"Well, that's good, cause I'm just along for the ride on this one."

"Okay so you can't help Aeris directly. That doesn't mean you'll be useless."

"Yeah, maybe I can scare the other Cetra away, thinking I'll give them the plague."

"That's if they even know you have it," Tifa replied.

"True."

"So you can create a diversion for us," Tifa continued. "Start up a ruckus somewhere to keep their attention. You're pretty good at that sort of thing."

"Are you saying I'm a troublemaker?" he questioned.

"Are you saying you're not?"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," he replied after a moment.

"Besides, we're not at the Cetra city yet," Tifa said. "Dannin said we might run into all kinds of trouble on the way there. We may need you to help us get through."

"So I'm reduced to causing trouble and chopping up a few monsters that get in the way," Cloud stated, sounding very unimpressed.

"Oh stop. You may not have always been right in the head, but when it comes to fighting we know we can always count on you. How many times have you saved one of us at one time or another, or all of us at once? Well all depend on you. Hey, you know how I swoon over that big sword of yours."

Cloud looked at her for a moment, then suddenly burst out laughing. Tifa frowned, then, realizing what she had said, turned a deep shade of red.

"I didn't mean it that way!" she protested. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Cloud Strife!"

"Hey, you're the one who said it, not me!" he returned.

Tifa looked at him for a moment but didn't deign to reply. She had to admit it was good to see him laugh though. He had been so morose lately. They both had actually. Not that they didn't have good reason.

"Hey, what's that?" she asked.

"What's what?"

"That right there," Tifa said, pointing to the bottom of the river with her hand that was in the water.

Cloud bent closer.

"I don't see anyth..."

Her hand suddenly jerked up, splashing him in the face. She rolled away and onto her feet, scooting away from him.

"Hey!" Cloud sputtered, shaking his head, the water dripping from his face.

Tifa stopped when she reached the far wall, turning to look at him, a grin on her face.

"I'll get you for that!" Cloud threatened.

She clasped her hands behind her back, lifting one foot behind her to tap her toe lightly on the ground. She tilted her head and looked at him.

"Who? Li'l ole me?" she said innocently.

"Yes you!" Cloud growled, but with a smile on his face. "And don't try to give me that innocent routine. I know you better."

"Why I don't know what you mean," she replied.

"Well, you seem to have recovered your energy quickly enough," the Cetra Sage spoke up, getting to his feet. "Shall we proceed?"

Cloud nodded, getting up as well.

"All right, let's get going then," Reeve rejoined. "And who knows, maybe we can find something for Cloud to use his big sword for other than making Tifa swoon."

"Oh shuddap!" Tifa retorted, smacking him playfully in the back of the head.

At they proceeded things seemed to go downhill, though not in a literal sense this time. The ceiling above their head slowly sank down lower, and soon even Tifa had to stoop. For a while they had to almost drop down on their hands and knees to get through, which slowed their progress to barely more than a crawl. Reeve asked Dannin how bad it was going to get and the Cetra Sage told them it would get better ahead. Even so, making their way through the cramped space almost made Cloud fond of the slippery steep passage they had traversed earlier.

However, as the Cetra Sage had said, the tunnel soon widened, the ceiling lifting up above them and soon they could all stand once more. The passage had resumed its downhill slope, though not nearly as sharply as before. For the first time, they started to make good time through the tunnels.

Eventually they parted ways with the river, turning off into a side tunnel and Dannin had to once more light his torch. From here they found themselves in a maze of tunnels, coming across branches leading off in different directions practically every few steps. They seemed to go on and on for hours. Twice more they stopped to rest before continuing. All the tunnels looked alike to Cloud, and it often seemed to him they were just going in circles. Indeed, a few times the Cetra Sage had stopped at a juncture, looking carefully in all directions before proceeding, as if unsure of the way. Cloud hoped he knew what he was doing. The place seemed huge, someplace they could wander around in for days or weeks without finding their way out if they got lost.

Finally, after traveling for many hours Cloud saw a glimmer of the familiar Cetra glow in front of them. It rapidly grew and after just a short time they emerged from the tunnel into another chamber and found themselves on the outskirts of the ancient Cetra city.

It wasn't much different from Ifalna, or the City of the Ancients, as it had been called before it had been repopulated, though somehow Cloud got the impression this place was much older. The dim Cetra glow was the same, as was the odd crystalline structure of the buildings. They couldn't see very far. The glow of the buildings wasn't very bright. Dannin had told them this had been the capital city of the Cetra, that it was the greatest of the Cetra cities, but from where they stood they could only see a small portion, they couldn't grasp the full grandeur of the place, or the grandeur it once might have had. So the only difference from Ifalna that was obvious from where they stood was the fact that most the buildings around them seemed to be overgrown with some sort of vine like plant.

The Cetra Sage led them among the buildings. Tifa inspected the plants growing up around one of the buildings as they passed by. The flora that grew around Ifalna was different from anything she had ever seen. Indeed, she could remember quite well the awe the forest around the Ancients City had inspired in her when she had first laid eyes upon it. The plants there had had an otherworldly feel to them, and if anything, that feeling was even stronger now. She had taken walks in the forest around Ifalna with Aeris sometimes, looking at the plants and categorizing them. Aeris had known most of them but a few she hadn't, and had always been delighted upon finding something new. Tifa thought she would be overcome with rapture to see this place. None of the plants here resembled what they had seen around Ifalna, which surprised her. She thought she'd find the same plants around any Cetra city.

"I don't recognize any of these plants," she said.

"Not surprising," the Cetra Sage replied. "Most of the flora and fauna you'll find here are unique to this city."

"Yeah, well, I'm more interested in the fauna than the flora," Cloud stated, fingering the hilt of his sword.

"As well you should be," Dannin responded.

Tifa stopped for a moment and reached out to touch one of the leaves of a nearby plant. Almost immediately she pulled her hand back.

"Ouch!"

"What is it?" Cloud said sharply.

She grimaced then showed him her hand. Blood seeped from one of her fingers.

"The edges of the leaves are sharp," she told him. "They're like glass."

"You cut yourself," Cloud said slowly, feeling panic suddenly welling up in him. "Dannin, could the Jenova plague be down here too?"

The Cetra Sage looked thoughtful for a moment.

"There's no way to really tell," he replied. "It's possible, although as I mentioned to you it is rare. The chances of both of you becoming infected are infinitesimal."

That reassured Cloud, but not much. Their luck hadn't been the greatest in the world of late. If Tifa caught the virus, Zangan would be without both his parents.

Tifa was just staring at him, her face pale. She hadn't thought of that. Quickly she stopped and opened the medical kit she had brought from the helicopter. She washed the wound and applied antiseptic and a band aid.

Cloud watched her, feeling his stomach churn. This was not good. This was not good at all. They were traveling over unknown and often rough terrain. They didn't know the area or what to expect. Scraps and cuts were going to happen. It was unavoidable. They couldn't stop to worry about every little injury they got. They wouldn't be able to function that way.

Tifa looked at him, worry etched plainly on her face.

"It's all right," he reassured her.

The injury treated there was nothing they could do but go on.

In spite of Dannin's warning, they met no living thing save the plants as they continued on their way. Cloud had thought traveling would get easier once they reached the city, and in a way that was true. Seeing the buildings ahead they had some reference point as to which direction they were going. But if Cloud thought they could just make a beeline through the city he was very much mistaken. The roads through the city did not run in straight lines, or at least, they didn't in this portion of the city. Instead they weaved this way and that in what seemed like a haphazard fashion, and often they could be walking down one street only to find it slowly curving around to turn back in the direction they had come from.

"Was the city planner drunk when they built this?" Reeve questioned.

"We're in one of the older sections of the city," the Cetra Sage told them. "When the city was first built, there was no plan. At first they just build what ever and where ever they felt like. By the time they realized it was a city and needed to be organized, it was too late to do much about it except tear everything down and start over, and obviously that would have been a rather drastic solution."

Reeve nodded. He had to remind himself that this was a truly ancient city. If it sprang up at the dawn of the Cetra civilization it could very well have been here long before city planning had even become a concept in someone's mind.

Cloud stared around them as they walked. The city was deathly silent. Yet even so, an uneasy feeling had been growing in him since they had entered the city. Cloud had a feeling something was out there, waiting for them. Watching them. Accessing them. He stopped suddenly, scanning the buildings around them.

"What is it?" Tifa asked.

Cloud didn't reply immediately, just stood there, his eyes trained on the nearby buildings.

"I feel like we're being watched."

They all stopped and looked around at that, but none of them saw anything out of the ordinary. Well, not out of the ordinary considering they were walking through an Ancient Cetra city the like of which none of them save the Cetra Sage had ever seen before.

"C'mon," Dannin said and led them onward.

Coming around a bend another obstacle suddenly presented itself in front of them. One of the buildings had collapsed, spilling rubble across the road ahead. As they walked up closer they saw it covered the entire road in front of them. If they were going to proceed in this direction they would have to climb over it.

Normally this wouldn't have presented a problem. The mound of rubble did not look difficult to climb over. They were all in good shape. Even Reeve had benefited from the year he had spent with the group and was in much better shape physically than he had been on his first adventure with them when they had gone looking for Nipala. The Cetra Sage had the appearance of an old man, yet he didn't seem fatigued in the least by their travels and Cloud suspected he would be able to go on long after all the others had collapsed in exhaustion. No, exertion was not a problem here, the problem was that the rubble from the collapsed building had both the look and feel of shattered glass. Huge broken shards shot up in all directions, the wicked looking edges appearing ready to slice through anything at the slightest touch. Beyond that, the plants that Tifa had cut her finger on seemed to have infested the area, intermingling with the rubble. Cloud was quite sure

that if they were reasonably careful they could make it over the obstacle. Making it over unscathed, however, was an entirely different proposition.

He could see the others eyeing the rubble in front of them just as dubiously as he was. It was apparent the same thoughts were circulating through their heads.

"Can we go around?" Reeve questioned.

"Of course," the Cetra Sage replied. "But it will delay us."

Cloud saw the others look at him and knew this was his decision to make. He didn't want to delay. He felt an urgent need to rescue Aeris as quickly as possible. On the other hand he was acutely aware of the danger of even the slightest cut with the threat of the Jenova virus lurking here. If Tifa should come down with the virus as well... well, he didn't even want to consider that.

"I think it might be best if we go around," he said after a moment.

Was he being too paranoid? He couldn't help worrying, but the Cetra Sage had said that his getting the disease had been one in a million. It wasn't all that likely that anyone else would get it too, but could he take that chance?

The Cetra Sage nodded and turned to lead them back the way they had come. Cloud glanced over at Tifa, but she wasn't looking at him. He had to wonder if he would have made the same decision if she wasn't with them.

They all started to follow the Cetra Sage, but stopped and spun around at a sudden sound behind them.

Cloud had his sword out in an instant. There was something there, something moving up near the top of the rubble heap. They could see the plants moving, though they could not see the creature itself. It couldn't be very big, for the plants were not very big, and would not provide cover for a large animal. Nevertheless, it was the first animal life they had come into contact with down here.

"What is it?" he heard Tifa ask.

"I don't know, I can't see it," Cloud replied.

Cloud had his sword out, ready for whatever it was to suddenly leap of the plants and into their midst. Yet, though they continued to see movement that did not happen.

"I don't think that whatever it is has much interest in us," Dannin eventually spoke up.

No one replied. Slowly Dannin started to lead them away again. Cloud kept his eye on the rubble as they walked away, but no threat appeared.

They turned the corner once more, leaving the rubble and whatever danger it might contain behind them. Cloud wasn't ready to breath a sigh of relief just yet. The oppressive feeling of being watched hadn't left him, but he still could spot no sign of a watcher, or anything else to indicate they were being observed.

They hadn't gone very far, however, when they were stopped in their tracks again, this time not by an obstacle in their way but instead a sound that suddenly echoed through the air around them. Cloud couldn't tell where it was coming from, nor exactly what might be making it. He couldn't even tell for sure if it was the howl of an animal or the blaring of some kind of strange horn. He had never heard anything like it before and it was almost impossible to describe. The sound was low pitched, and he seemed to feel it coming up the soles of his feet more than hear it with his ears. It was a haunting sound, an unearthly sound. In other words, it was just like something he would expect to hear here.

It went on for quite some time before finally fading away. They stood there, transfixed, until the final note had ended.

"What the hell was that?" Reeve blurted out when silence returned.

"It's either a horn that's way off key or the moan of a dying dog," Cloud muttered.

Ignoring Cloud's comment, the others looked at Dannin.

"I don't know," the Cetra Sage said.

"Was that some kind of animal?" Reeve pressed. "Was it a horn? I couldn't even tell. Are there intelligent creatures down here?"

"As I said, I do not know," Dannin replied. "There were none last I came down here, but that was a very long time ago. Much may have changed."

"Could anyone tell even which direction it was coming from?" Reeve inquired.

No one replied. Cloud slowly shook his head.

"Something's... out there."

They all turned to look at him.

"What do you mean?" Tifa asked with just a hint of nervousness.

"Something's been watching us. I can feel it. That sound, it was some kind of communication. They're letting each other know we're here."

They all just stood there for some time.

"How could you possibly know that?" Reeve finally asked.

"I don't," Cloud replied. "Not for sure. It's just a feeling. Nothing more."

"Well, maybe you should keep your feeling to yourself," Reeve suggested. "You're freaking me out with talk like that."

Cloud didn't reply. He could see from the look on Tifa's face she probably agreed with Reeve.

There was nothing for them to do but continue on their way. Dannin seemed to be having trouble getting them back on track since their little detour. He kept looking around with that lost kind of expression on his face, and more than once they had to backtrack after running into a dead end.

They continued to hear the howl or call or horn or whatever it was periodically. Each time it gave them pause, made them stop in their tracks as the noise sent a shiver through their bodies, even after they came to expect it. The pitch changed, warbling up and down the scale, different each time. They still couldn't tell which direction it was coming from. It echoed off the buildings around them, seeming to come from every direction at once. The only thing they could tell for certain was that each time they heard it, it seemed to be getting closer.

They made their way quickly down the block, following Dannin. Cloud couldn't tell if the Cetra Sage was as perturbed by the sound as the rest of them obviously were. His face was expressionless, but he seemed to have picked up his pace. Cloud felt a strong urge to turn around and run in the opposite direction to where they were going. Silly really, since they couldn't tell which direction the sound was coming from.

The wail filled the air again, this time so close that it seemed to be coming from just around the corner, yet which corner, whether in front of them or behind, Cloud still couldn't tell. Once again they stopped, and from the look on his face it seemed the sound was even affecting the Cetra Sage.

They just stood there looking at one another.

"What should we do?" Reeve asked, and edge in his voice.

No one had an answer.

Cloud looked around. They stood at mid block, the rows of buildings lining the street on both sides of them with no space in between them. Forward or back were the only choices at this point, unless they decided to seek shelter within one of the buildings themselves. Cloud was tempted. Whatever was seeking them might miss them if they hid in a building, and even if they were found, they might have a better chance in the limited confines of a room instead of out here in the open.

In the end their indecision rendered the point moot, for a moment later something came around the corner ahead of them. 'Something' was the exact word that came to Cloud's mind when he saw the creatures. Humanoid in size, though squat in shape, they skittered along the ground with a peculiar jerky sideways motion that looked completely unnatural, like some kind of demented crab. The closest thing that Cloud could think of that they reminded him of was some kind of insect. Their arms and legs were black and spindly, and as they got closer he could see they were covered with coarse black hairs, their arms ending in long pincer like objects that seemed designed for stabbing. Their bodies were round and seemed to be encased in some kind of brown shell. Their heads were small and bobbed up and down in a most peculiar manner as the creatures ran forward, two yellow eyes peering from above a round orifice that Cloud could only assume was a mouth. The entire effect was both revolting and unnerving.

There were five or six of them and they moved with surprising speed. Cloud glanced behind and saw that more of them were coming from the other direction.

Trapped.

Cloud looked around quickly, spotting a nearby alcove that led to the entrance to one of the buildings he ran toward it.

"This way!" he called out.

The others followed instantly. When they reached the entrance way Cloud spun around, sword poised in front of him.

"Get behind me," Cloud said. "Protect Dannin."

Tifa and Reeve obediently took up positions to either side and slightly behind Cloud, with the Cetra Sage behind them all. In the narrow confines of the alcove their opponents could only come at them a few at a time, and they couldn't be flanked.

There wasn't any time for Cloud to issue any other orders before the creatures were upon them.

A blast from Reeve shotgun signaled the first blow, sending one of the creatures flying backwards. Cloud's sword whistled through the air a moment later, through air at first, but then through flesh and bone.

Beside him one of the creatures drove its knife-like pincer straight at Tifa. At the last second she suddenly ducked underneath it. Turning and stepping forward, she unleashed a kick directly into the creatures midsection. There was a loud crack and the shell that covered the creatures body shattered. Tifa saw a white puss-like substance splash on her leg as the beast fell backwards.

"Oh gross!" she muttered.

The next few minutes were a blur of motion as they three teammates defended themselves. Cloud and Tifa fell into their well practiced routine, Cloud in the center, pressing the attack, the Ultima weapon weaving a wedge of death in front of him, Tifa protecting him from any attacks from the side, the two of them moving as if they were one. Reeve protected Cloud's other side, admittedly not as smoothly as Tifa, yet he had been with them long enough and was smart enough to have found his place in the team. He fired his gun until out of shells, then quickly switched to materia. The fight was intense, but only lasted a few minutes before the last creature fell.

Tifa lowered her hands, looking around at the pile of bodies and the white goo that had splattered over the three of them. Cloud stood beside her and, finding himself with no more adversaries to fight, drove his sword into the ground in front of him and turned toward the others.

"Piece of cake."

The sound came again, so loud this time they all jumped. It sounded like it was coming from right about the corner. Yet even so, even when it seemed so close by, they still couldn't tell what direction it was coming from.

They all just stood there, frozen in place as the sound slowly faded away. A moment later they heard something else, or felt it really. A vibration. Just for a moment, but then it was repeated. Cloud looked down at the ground. Each time the sound came, he saw the dirt by his feet dance with the vibration.

"Then again, maybe not," he said slowly.

The sound was growing louder now, and the vibration was getting worse. This sound they could locate. It was coming from somewhere down the road ahead of them, the way they were headed. The buildings around them were shaking now with each vibration. It was obvious to them all by now that the sound they were hearing was footsteps. Something else was coming. Something.. big.

"What's that?" Reeve said.

Cloud wasn't sure if it was a rhetorical question. He looked at the Cetra Sage, who just shrugged.

Reeve stepped forward, looking down the street.

"It's coming from that way," he said, pointing. "Maybe it would be best if we went this way." He turned and pointed in the other direction.

"Perhaps retreat might be prudent," the Cetra Sage agreed.

Without waiting for consensus they started walking slowly back the way they had come, all of them that is, except for Cloud, who walked out in the center of the street and stopped, facing ahead.

The others stopped as well when they saw him. Slowly they walked over to him.

"Do you really think this is wise?" Reeve asked uncertainly.

"We have to know what we're facing," Cloud responded.

The others fell silent. In spite of their instincts telling them to flee, no one was about to argue with him.

The creature that came around the corner this time was very similar to the beasts they had just fought, except that everything about it was supersized. Twenty meters, thirty meters, Cloud wasn't sure how big the thing was, all he knew was that it towered over them, that it was enormous.

"Looks like mommy has arrived," Cloud heard Reeve comment behind him.

"Yeah, and I don't think she's gonna be too happy about what we did to her kids," Tifa added.

Cloud stood there for a moment, then he brought his sword up, a smoldering gleam in his eye.

Tifa, standing beside him, didn't miss it.

"Cloud...", she said slowly.

He turned toward her and gave her a wicked smile.

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

And then he ran forward.