

CHAPTER VI: SEARCHING FOR CLUES

"Stop following me."

Ichiero showed no inclination to listen to Yuffie's suggestion. Instead he sped up to keep in step with her. Ichiero

"Your father told me to keep an eye on you."

"All the more reason for you to go away," she replied. "My father has enough spies following me around. He doesn't need you doing it too."

"I'm not spying on you," Ichiero told her. "I just want to get to know you better. You told me you don't want to get married because you don't know me well enough. Well, how are you going to *get* to know me if I'm not here with you?"

Yuffie just looked at him irritably.

"I also told you I'm too immature to get married," she pointed out.

"Yes, and you said if I stuck around long enough I'd find out for myself, so that's what I want to do."

Yuffie glared but did not reply. Ichiero had been following her around like a puppy dog for two days now, ever since they had got back to Wutai. Talking with Godo had done no good. Well, actually having a huge screaming match with Godo had done no good, she corrected. The man was just as stubborn as she was. He seemed to think that Ichiero would be just a wonderful match for her and it soon became obvious that nothing in the world was going to change his mind, no matter what his daughter might think, or in spite of it. She had insisted Godo make Ichiero go away and he had been just as adamant he would do no such thing and that had been about as far as they had gotten, in spite of all the screaming and yelling. She hadn't spoken to Godo since.

And ever since Ichiero had stuck to her like glue. Nothing she said or did seemed to phase him in the least. Even insulting him hadn't gotten him to leave her alone. It was driving her crazy. She should have gone with Cloud and the others. It had been a waste of time to come back to Wutai. She should have known Godo wouldn't listen to reason.

"You're just wasting your time," she told him.

"It's my time to waste," he replied.

Yuffie walked faster, figuring it probably wouldn't do much good. If he hadn't taken her hint yet it seemed unlikely he was going to now, and indeed, he just sped up to keep up with her.

"Look, just because you want to get to know me better doesn't mean you have to follow me around twenty four hours a day! I need my space!"

"The more I'm with you, the better we will get to know each other," he replied.

"Grrrrr."

"And it may be none of my business, but I think you would do well to learn how to control your temper a little better," he went on.

"You're right, it's none of your business!" she snapped.

She was still speeding up as she walked. Now she was practically running, but he stubbornly refused to fall behind.

"Just leave me alone!"

"I don't understand why you're being so hostile."

"Because I don't like you?"

"How can you say that, you don't even know me."

"You've been following me around everywhere I go for the last two days. I already know you better than I ever wanted to! Go away!"

"You really need to learn how to let go of this anger," he said. "It would help you with your relationship with your father as well."

"I don't need any help with my relationship with my father!" she snapped.

"Oh, it didn't seem that way to me, considering how you addressed him when we came here. Have you spoken to him since?"

"We have a perfect relationship!" Yuffie snapped. "We both know where we stand. We can't stand each other! No of course I haven't spoken...why am I telling you this? It's none of your business! Go away I said!"

"I think it would be much more profitable for both of you if you both sat down and talked in a calm and rational manner," Ichiero went on.

Yuffie stopped suddenly, looking at him. What was wrong with this guy? Hadn't he heard anything she'd said at all!

She looked up. They were standing at the base of Da-Chao. The carved figures loomed over them, looking down with what Yuffie had always thought of as a frown, as if they didn't approve of what had happened to Wutai. A steep trail led up into the hills.

"You want to follow me? Fine! See if you can keep up!"

With that she turned and ran up the trail as fast as she could.

Turning left at the first branch in the trail she turned to look back. He was not far behind her, gamely racing up the trail behind. She smiled inwardly and increased her speed. She was a trained ninja, nimble and quick, perfectly at ease on the steep slopes. He looked fit, but he had the disadvantage of his heavy armor and sword weighing him down. Perhaps if she could leave him in the dust he'd be embarrassed enough to give up on her.

She scrambled up the slope, so steep in places she was more climbing than running. Eventually she reached a spot where the trail abruptly ended at a vertical cliff face.

She leapt up, and, making use of barely visible handholds, continued up the cliff. It didn't take her long to reach the top. She pulled herself onto a wide ledge, bare except for a minton leaf tree growing on the edge. She turned and looked down. Ichiero had reached the cliff and was coming up. She noted with some satisfaction that he was going much more slowly than she had.

"You'll have to do better than that!" she called down.

Then she turned and ran again, along the ledge, up to another steep slope. She started up that too. She was heading for a depression between the shoulders of two of the carved figures. She had been up here many times before. She knew the place better than the back of her hand. Though there were no marked trails up here, she knew there was a way down on the other side if she could get over the top between the two figures. If she was far enough ahead when she got to the top, he'd never be able to catch her.

A noise behind her made her turn her head. She saw Ichiero pull himself over the top of the ledge she had just left. Damn, he had gotten up there faster than she thought.

She redoubled her effort. The cliff was nearly vertical, and she was pulling herself up again by tiny hand holds. He was making a challenge of it, but it didn't matter. She knew he couldn't possibly catch her. She knew the area too well and was too skilled...

In her rush she grabbed for one handhold and missed.

She fell down the slope, tumbling to the ground at the bottom. With a curse she tried to stand again, but that only caused her to cry out as pain shot through her ankle.

"Are you all right?" Ichiero questioned, coming to stand beside her.

"No, I'm not all right!" she snapped, holding her ankle. "Do I look all right to you? I've twisted my ankle and it's all your fault!"

He stooped down beside her.

"Let me take a look at it."

"There's nothing to see," Yuffie protested. "It's twisted, probably broken."

"Does it hurt when I do this?"

"Owwwww!"

"Sorry."

"Would you leave me alone. If you had just gone away when I asked you to this would never have happened."

"If I leave you alone now, how will you get back down?"

She glared at him.

"I don't need your help!"

"You're not going to make it back by yourself."

He reached down to give her a hand but she pushed it aside.

"I can manage!"

She tried to pull herself to her feet. With a few grunts and groans she finally managed it. She stood there for a moment, balancing with most of her weight on her good foot. She took a step forward, then cried out and nearly fell.

Ichiero immediately grabbed hold of her.

"I'm sorry, but you are being foolish," he said.

For a moment she said nothing, just stood there trembling with anger and frustration. She had come up here with the idea of getting rid of him, and here she was, dependent on him instead, and it was her own stupid fault, not that she'd ever admit that.

Still, it was either accept his help or crawl back down the mountain. It was a long way...

"Very well," she conceded.

To her surprise he lifted her up into his arms. Carrying her with apparent ease, he started back down. She knew she wasn't very heavy, but she'd thought he'd have a harder time than that. He was stronger than he looked.

The only difficult spot was the lower cliff, by the minton tree. They had to climb down, and he couldn't do that holding onto her. He set her down and climbed down by himself. She sat there by the tree, wondering what he was doing.

"How am I supposed to get down?" she said.

He didn't answer. Reaching the bottom, he turned and looked up at her, holding out his arms.

"Jump."

She looked down at him. It had to be a good fifteen feet.

"No way!"

"Don't worry. I'll catch you," he reassured her.

"It feels like it's a little better..."

"I won't drop you."

She looked down at him dubiously. She wasn't worried about him dropping her. She was worried about squashing him like a bug. It may not be that far, but it sure looked like far.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

She crawled over until she was poised right on the edge. He looked up at her, arms out. It still seemed like a long way down.

"Are you sure?" she repeated.

"You just asked that."

"I know. I just..."

She didn't finish, just looked at him.

He waited patiently.

"All right, but you better not drop me!"

"I won't."

She hesitated a moment more, then pushed herself off.

She pushed a little too far. He had expected her to drop straight down but she had pushed herself outward. He had to quickly adjust to get under her again. That threw him off balance a bit. He managed to get underneath her, but when she landed on top of him he fell to the ground with a grunt.

Yuffie untangled herself from him and pulled herself up to a sitting position. She wasn't hurt. She turned to look at her companion.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes fine," he said, getting up and dusting himself off. After he was done he lifted Yuffie up again and continued on his way.

The young ninja kept her mouth shut. She looked displeased, but she didn't feel quite as bad as she had before. She had to admit this wasn't so bad. She could get used to being carried around.

As they reached the bottom of the hill and she saw the town once more in front of her she began to get antsy. She didn't want anyone to see him carrying her. She didn't want to give anyone any ideas.

"Okay, you can let me go now," she said.

"But we're not even to the town yet," he protested.

"It's all right, my foot feels much better," she told him.

"It's okay, I'll carry you the rest of the way," he insisted.

"You really don't have to," she replied. "I can walk."

"It's okay," he said firmly. "I insist."

"I said put me down!"

He didn't reply.

"I said *put - me - down!*"

Yuffie squirmed in his arms, struggling to get away. He tried to hold on but she was pretty slippery. She managed to get half loose and he had to grab hold of her quickly again. This knocked him off balance, and they both fell to the ground one more time.

Yuffie manage to pull free, but pain shot through her foot again as she did so.

"Owww. See, you made me hurt myself again!" she snapped. Why did he have to be so stubborn? For a moment there, she had almost started to like him. "Why can't you just leave me alone!"

He just looked at her for a moment.

"You know, you are a very contrary girl."

"You can say that again."

Yuffie's head jerked around at the sound of the new voice to see a red haired Turk standing a few paces away, looking at them with his arms folded across his chest and a bemused look on his face.

"Reno, what the hell are you doing here?" she barked.

"Nice to see you too," the Turk replied. "I'm here on business of course, Avalanche business to be precise."

"What?" Yuffie questioned as she and Ichiero pulled themselves to their feet. Yuffie stepped gingerly down on her injured foot, but it really was feeling better. She could walk.

"The Turks have been hired by Avalanche to see if any gold chocobos have gone missing," Reno told her.

"Why would they do that?"

"You know, for a card carrying member of Avalanche, you are woefully uninformed," Reno took pleasure in saying.

"Oh just shut up and tell me," she snapped.

Resisting the urge to ask her how he could simultaneously shut up and tell her, Reno recounted how Reeve had gotten in touch with them about looking into people with gold chocobos, and what he knew about Tifa's encounter with the mysterious stranger.

"Well it just so happens that one of the few people who happen to own a gold chocobo is Doro Takana, a rather well known businessman from Wutai."

"Yeah, I know, I've heard of him," Yuffie said, and continued indigently. "And hey, if they needed to talk to someone in Wutai, why didn't they ask me?"

"Don't ask me babe," Reno replied.

"Don't talk to Lady Yuffie in such a disrespectful manner," Ichiero cut in.

Reno gave him a look.

"I see Samurai boy is still following you around," he said. "So when's the big day?"

"What big day?"

"The wedding day of course," Reno replied.

Yuffie glared at him.

"What, does that bother you?" she said suddenly. "Are you jealous?"

Reno snorted.

"Yeah, right," he said sardonically.

"Well, there are people in other towns who have gold chocobos too," she said. "What made you come here first?"

"I had to start somewhere," he replied. "Besides, what made you think I came here first anyway."

"Why would he be jealous?" Ichiero said suddenly, stepping forward.

Yuffie looked at him with a frown on her face, seemingly about to give a curt reply, but then the frown vanished, suddenly replaced by an evil grin.

"Of course he's jealous, he's my boyfriend," she said.

"*What?*" Reno snapped.

"He's my boyfriend," Yuffie repeated. "It's okay, you can tell him."

"I am *not*."

"Are too."

"Not!"

Yuffie walked over to him.

"Ah, you don't have to be shy about it," she said, giving him a wink that Ichiero couldn't see.

"I'm gong to kill you," Reno muttered.

"Wait, I thought you told me you didn't have a boyfriend," Ichiero said, looking confused and angry.

"Well, I didn't know how you would take it," Yuffie said quickly. "But I see now there's no hiding it."

"In that case," Ichiero said. He suddenly pulled out his sword and pointed it at Reno. "I challenge you to honorable combat for the hand of the flower of Wutai, Yuffie Kisaragi!"

Reno just looked at him for a moment.

"Oh get real," he said finally.

Ichiero stepped closer. The blade was now right under Reno's chin.

"You refuse to fight?" he questioned.

Reno lifted his hand and pushed the blade aside.

"Why don't you put that thing away before you hurt yourself," he offered.

"You are a coward!" Ichiero proclaimed.

"Now now, Ichiero, you're so old fashioned," Yuffie said, pulling Ichiero's arm down. "I like that. But there's no need to kill anyone. Just yet, anyway. Reno's ways are just different from yours."

"You can say that again," Reno concurred.

"Besides, Lord Godo frowns upon people killing each other in Wutai," Yuffie continued. "I'm afraid you'll just have to put up with one another for now."

"No we don't," Reno said. "I didn't come here to play games with you Yuffie. I've got work to do. You and Ichiero can play all you want. I'm outta here."

"Not so fast," Yuffie told him. "You're going to see Doro Takana and I'm coming with you!"

"Oh really?" he replied.

"Yes, you said you were hired by Avalanche. That makes this an Avalanche matter and as you reminded us before, I'm a member of Avalanche. This concerns me as well."

"Oh Yuffie you are so pathetic," Reno stated. "I bet your getting a real kick out of Ichiero following you around like this treating you like some kind of princess. Well, you're not going to drag me into this."

He turned and started to walk off, but Yuffie was right behind him, and Ichiero behind her.

"I'm coming whether you like it or not," she said.

"No you're not," he said.

"Yes I am!" she insisted.

"Go away!"

"I'm coming and there's not anything you can do about it!"

Reno glared at her for a moment. . Unfortunately he realized, what she was saying was true.

"Fine," he said finally

"Fine," she agreed.

It didn't take them long to get to the Tanaka residence. Seeing that the Lord of Godo's daughter was with them, they were ushered into the businessman presence almost immediately. At least there was some good to having Yuffie along, Reno had to admit, but when they questioned the man about his gold chocobo he said it was safe in it's stable and he had had no problems with it. Reno asked a few more questions and then they bade the man goodbye.

"Well, that was easy," Reno said as the walked back outside.

"And unproductive," Yuffie added. "So where do we go from here?"

"Dio has a gold chocobo at..." Reno started. "Wait a second. What do you mean we?"

"Just what I said," Yuffie said. "I'm coming with you."

"No wait just one minute..."

"I already told you, this is an Avalanche matter and I'm a member of Avalanche."

"No way!" Reno protested. "You wanting to tag along here in Wutai is one thing, but I'm *not* taking you to the Gold Saucer with me.

"I'm coming whether you like it or not."

"You are not!"

"Are too!"

"Are not!"

"Are *too*!"

~*~

"We come in peace. Owwww! Would you watch it with that thing?"

Cloud glared at the Goblin that had prodded him with the spear. The small green creature shrank back fearfully at the look, while the others pointed their spears at Cloud as well.

"Relax, relax," Cloud grumbled. "I'm not gonna hurt anyone. I told you, we come in peace."

They were walking through the forest. The Goblin's had let them out of the pit after they had reluctantly surrendered their weapons. Ten Goblin surrounded them now, with four more trailing behind, carrying their confiscated weapons. It took two of them to haul Cloud's sword, and even so they could barely lift it, holding the handle and dragging it along behind them.

He hadn't been all that anxious to hand over their weapons, especially considering what Tifa had told them. If it was all a big hoax, then how did they know this wasn't part of it? He had told Tifa forewarned was forearmed. Had he just given away their only advantage?

In the end though, he had agreed to surrendering the weapons. The Goblins weren't very good fighters. They trudged along with no organization. Their eyes wandered, they often lowered their weapons as if they weren't paying much attention. Cloud thought that even with the spears, he and the others could overpower them if they needed to. He suspected Cait could take out three of them with just one swipe of that Mog paw and the one's holding his sword weren't far behind him. It would only take him a moment to retrieve it.

Besides, it wasn't like they had had much choice. It was either surrender the weapons or fight, and they would never find out anything from the Goblins if they chose the latter.

Not that it seemed they were going to find out anything anyway. So far, the Goblins had given no indication they had any idea what Cloud was trying to say.

"I thought Red said they could speak our language," he said.

"He did," Aeris said.

"Then why won't they talk?"

"Maybe they have nothing to say," Cid suggested.

Cloud just gave him a look.

"Where are you taking us?" Cloud tried again.

He received no reply except for a few grunts, which seemed to be what passed for a language to these creatures.

Cloud sighed and fell silent, resigned to just going along and waiting to see what developed, even though he didn't like that idea at all. The Goblin's hadn't tried to kill them outright, and had made it clear from their poking and grunting that they wanted them to go *somewhere*.

If they were going to try to kill them, they would have done it already. Or so Cloud hoped.

They were well into the forest. Cloud saw no trails, but the Goblins seemed to know exactly where they were going. They walked in twilight, the trees looming up over their heads cutting off the sunlight. Cloud looked up and saw only broad green leaves striking out in all directions from huge trunks that shot up into the canopy above. He had never seen trees quite like them.

The going had been easy at first. There hadn't been much ground cover, but as they progressed the going became more difficult, at least for the captives. A brown thorny brush soon began to cover the ground around them. At first in small clumps, but rapidly growing ever more plentiful, until now it completely surrounded them. It was difficult to get through, and tore at their clothes whenever they came into contact with it. As they proceeded further it grew higher, until now it grew above the head of even Cait. It seemed impenetrable, but the Goblins somehow seemed to find a way. The problem

was that often the way was a tunnel directly through the brush, a tunnel meant for Goblin sized creatures. Soon Cloud and the others found themselves bending down to squeeze underneath the canopy, sometimes even having to crawl on their hands and knees to get through.

Cait had it the worst, a couple of times his Mog fur getting stuck as he passed through a narrow opening, and the others had to resort to prying and pushing to get him through. Soon his fur was torn and ragged in places, and Cloud figured Reeve would have a job sprucing him back up once they got back to civilization. He was lucky in one aspect at least, he couldn't feel any pain, Cloud thought as he looked down at the scraps from the thorny bushes that ran along his bare arms.

Abruptly the bushes let out into a large clearing and Cloud could see that they had reached some sort of village. Huts of mud and branches filled the center of the clearing, and dozens more Goblins, noticing the newcomers, ran over and stared at them curiously.

"Looks like we've arrived at Goblin central," Cid muttered. "I thought they lived in caves."

Cloud nodded but said nothing. Their captors led them into the middle of the clearing, to a hut that was larger than all the rest. In front of it stood perhaps a dozen Goblins, but one in the center of the group caught their attention. He was broad of shoulder and big for a Goblin, bigger than most of the others, but the thing that most stood out about him was the mantle of chocobo feathers he wore over his shoulders.

"Must be the head honcho," Cid observed.

Their captors led them forward and stopped in front of the hut.

Cloud stepped forward.

"We come in peace," he said. "We just want to talk."

No response.

"We're looking for the Cetra Sage," Cloud tried again, trying to hide his frustration. "The Chocobo Sage sent us."

Finally the Goblins spoke. The words were heavily accented, much more guttural than a human. Cloud could barely understand him.

"You invaders."

"No," Cloud said. "We just came to ask some questions. Then we'll go. We don't want any trouble."

"You kill many last time you come," the chief said.

Cloud just looked at him for a moment. Apparently they had made an impression the last time they had been here. Somehow he didn't think that saying they were only defending themselves would be very helpful.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It was all just a big misunderstanding."

The Chief pondered this for an annoyingly long time.

"You no kill no one?" he finally asked.

"No, we no kill anyone," Cloud said. "We just ask questions."

"Then you go?"

"Yes, then we go," Cloud readily agreed. "We'll be happy to go. The sooner the better."

The Chief looked at them as if he didn't quite trust them, and Cloud supposed he wouldn't either if their positions were reversed. It was obvious that even though the captives had no weapons and were surrounded by armed Goblins they were all still afraid, including the Chief.

"What you ask?"

"We're looking for the Cetra Sage," Aeris said.

Again the Chief did not reply for a long time. Instead he grunted with the men who stood beside him.

"Cetra Sage gone," he said finally.

"Gone?" Cloud said. "Gone where?"

"We no know," the Chief replied. "Gone long ago."

"Long ago? How long?" Cloud pressed,

The Chief shrugged.

"Long ago. Only spoken of in old stories," he said.

Cloud glanced at the others.

"Like a legend?" he suggested.

Again the Chief shrugged.

"Old stories," he repeated.

"But he was here once?" Aeris pressed.

"No, not here," the Chief replied. "On other land across water. That way," he continued, pointing north.

"The next island to the north?" Cloud asked.

This time the Chief didn't bother to shrug. He just looked at Cloud.

"Has anyone ever actually seen him?" Cid asked.

The Chief stood there for a moment, then shook his head.

"He gone long ago."

"But he was there?" Cloud said.

"That is what stories say."

Cloud looked at the others again.

"At least they've heard of him," Aeris said.

"In old stories, like a legend," Cloud replied, not very hopefully. "Maybe he wasn't real after all."

"Maybe, but the Chocobo Sage and the Goblins have both heard of him. Even if it is legend, a lot of legends are based on fact."

"Which might be just what our unknown enemy is counting on us believing," Cloud said.

"So in other words were no better off than we were before we came here," Cid said pessimistically.

"I don't think so," Aeris replied. "We're narrowing thing down. We know where he was at least."

"I don't see how that helps us much," Cid responded. "According to them he's not there anymore, hasn't been for along time. How does that help us?"

"He may have left some kind of clue behind," Aeris said. "We won't know until we go there and look."

"The island to the north?" Cloud asked. "The next one over?"

The Chief just pointed again.

"I guess we'll have to find out for ourselves," he sighed.

"You go now?" the Chief asked.

"Oh, uh, yes, we go," Cloud said. "Thank you very much for the information."

The Chief did not respond, just waved his hand.

"Go."

"Okay, we're going," Cloud said. "Oh wait, what about the Goblins on that island? How do we tell them we don't want to fight?"

"No Goblins there," the Chief replied.

"No Goblins?"

"No. Island sacred. No Goblins go there. All that do don't come back."

Cid rubbed the back of his neck.

"If none go there, how do they know the Cetra Sage is gone?" he questioned rhetorically.

The Goblins who had lead them in now turned and started back the way they came. The talk with their Chief seemed to have allayed their fears some, for they seemed more relaxed, no longer keeping their weapons ready, but they still refused to give Cloud and his friends their own weapons back. Cloud didn't mind the escort this time. He wasn't sure they'd be able to find their way out of the mass of brambles without it. If the Goblins were using the plants as a defensive barrier around their village, and it was obvious they were, they had made a good choice.

Eventually they emerged from the thorn bushes, scratched and tired. As soon as they were out the Goblins turned around and vanished, leaving Cloud and his companions weapons behind. Cloud looked around for a moment as they gathered them up, then started back for the beach and the Slipstream. It was already late afternoon. They weren't going to have much more time to look before it got dark.

By the time they got back to the ship and climbed aboard they were all hot and tired and grateful to get out from under the sun.

"There are a number of islands to the north of there," Cid said as they gained altitude. "How do we know which one they were talking about?"

"I don't know, the nearest one I guess," Cloud said, not very happily. He had to admit the Goblins hadn't given them much to go on. According to them the Sage was gone, that was, assuming he had ever been there in the first place. Even if he wasn't a myth and had been there, what did they expect to find? If he was gone as long as they said then it seemed unlikely there would be any clues to his present whereabouts. They weren't even sure what island exactly the Goblins were referring too. He had to admit he felt like Cid was right, they seemed to have gotten nowhere.

Cid looked the islands over carefully ahead of them, then picked the one that seemed to closest. It was small, no more than a mile or two across, he thought, and was almost round except on the southern side, where there was a semicircular indentation, almost as if a bite had been taken out of it. He slowly circled around it, looking for an adequate place to land as well as any sign of habitation.

"Looks like there's a spot over there by the beach where I can set her down," he commented.

"What's that?" Aeris questioned.

"What?" the pilot responded.

"Over there," she said. He glanced back and saw her pointing to the left. He looked over that way.

"Over where?"

"Right there, down on the beach," she replied. "It looks like some kind of tracks or something."

Cid squinted and tried to look down at the beach where she was pointing.

"I see it," Cloud said. "You're right."

"I don't see anything," the pilot said, "but I'll bring us down as close to here as I can."

Cid landed the Slipstream in a small clearing off the beach, just to the west of where Aeris and Cloud had seen the tracks. They disembarked once again. Cid looked up unhappily at the sun as they did so. It was late evening now, and the yellow orb of the sun was hovering low above the horizon, but it still seemed as hot as ever.

Cloud didn't take out his sword, but his hand hovered by the hilt. There were a lot of things about this that made him edgy. He had seen the tracks Aeris had pointed out. There had been a number of parallel lines in the sand, the kind a wheeled vehicle would make. The Goblin chief had said the Goblins didn't come here, and they didn't have any vehicles anyway, so where did the tracks come from then? He didn't know of any humans living out here on these islands. Was this the trap that Tifa had told them about?

They reached the area in question, but Cloud saw no sign anyone was waiting in ambush. There were a number of tracks, and it did look like it was made by some kind of wheeled device, but the tracks were too close together for it to be a

vehicle, or so it seemed to Cloud. They led from what the young warrior saw was a cave and converged on the beach not far from them. He walked over to that point and looked around. This close, he could see that the tracks weren't the only marks left behind, there were footprints too, lots of them.

"Looks like someone was here all right," Cid commented.

"Yeah," Cloud agreed, stooping down to examine the tracks more closely. "But it wasn't that recent. The impressions are almost worn away. I wonder what they were doing here?"

"The answers might be in that cave," Cait said.

Cloud stood up again and looked at the dark opening of the cave.

"Only one way to find out," he said.

They made their way to the cave entrance. The tracks led straight in beneath them. Cid looked at the cave entrance then back at the beach.

"It looks like the tracks were made by some kind of carts," he said. "I think whoever they were, they were mining something."

"Mining what?" Aeris asked.

Cloud peered into the cave. It wasn't completely dark. He could see a faint but familiar glow from deep inside.

"I've got a feeling I know," he said. "C'mon."

Cid hesitated.

"Are you sure it's a good idea to go in there?" he questioned. "Seems like the perfect place for a trap."

Cloud stood there for a moment, then pulled out his sword.

"Whoever they were, it looks like they haven't been here in a while," he said. "If there is someone in there, we'll be ready for them."

With that he stalked into the cave. The others followed behind.

It didn't take Cloud long to see that his hunch had been right. They hadn't progressed very far into the cave before they could plainly see the faint glow of the rocks that lined the wall. They had all seen it before.

"Mako," Aeris said slowly.

Cloud nodded and continued on. A short time later the narrow passage opened out into a much larger cavern. Some of the rocks in the walls still glowed with mako, but it was obvious that someone had been in here cutting out the stone. The walls were covered with scour marks from some kind of machinery. The entire cavern seemed to have been dug out of raw mako.

"Looks like somebody was doing a little mako mining," Cid observed.

"Yeah," Cloud agreed. He didn't like this. He didn't like this one bit. By now everyone knew the dangers inherent in using mako, the damage it could do to the planet. No one used Mako reactors anymore, or made materia. Whoever was doing this, it seemed likely they were up to no good.

"Damn," Cid muttered.

Had someone built a clandestine mako reactor somewhere? Was that what this was all about? But they were after Aeris. What could she possibly have to do with this?

"Aeris, if someone built a mako reactor, would you be able to tell somehow? Like, would there be some disturbance in the lifestream or anything that you could feel?"

Aeris looked thoughtful.

"No, not really," she replied. "At least, I don't think so."

Cloud frowned. He was certain this had something to do with why they were here, but it still didn't seem to make much sense. They were supposedly being led into a trap, so why lead them here? Did their unknown adversary want them to

know about this? If so, to what purpose? Or had this all been unintentional? Was someone really using a mako reactor, or were they using the mako for some other purpose, and what did it all have to do with Aeris?

They wandered around the cavern looking for clues, but saw nothing else of interest. Finally Cloud led them back the way they had come.

He was looking for answers, and all they kept getting was more questions.

"So what do you make of it all?" Cid questioned as they exited the cave.

"I don't know," Cloud said, frustrated. "There's just too many things we don't know."

He followed the tracks back down to the beach.

"What did they do with the mako once they took it out?" he questioned. "How did they get it out of here?"

The tracks ended at the beach, fading into the sand, leaving them with nothing but guesses.

"They must have taken it out by boat or aircraft," Cid spoke up. "Can't say for sure because the tide has washed away the tracks."

"So someone is mining mako," Cait summarized. "We don't know who, and we don't know where."

"And there's still no sign of the Cetra Sage," Aeris pointed out.

Cloud, engrossed in the latest mystery, had almost forgotten why they had originally come here. This obviously didn't have anything to do with the Cetra Sage, or at least, he didn't think so. Not that he had much hope they'd find anything.

"I know," he said. "We've still got to..."

He turned at the sound of the crunch of underbrush. The others turned as well to see a gold chocobo emerge from out from under the trees of the nearby forest.

"What the..." Cid muttered.

The bird stopped, stared at them, warked, then walked over to stand in front of Aeris.

She just looked at it for a moment, a smile forming on her face.

"He's so pretty!" she said.

The bird warked again in a friendly manner, then nuzzled Aeris hand.

Aeris giggled.

"I think he likes you," Cid stated.

Cloud was the only one who didn't seem amused.

"Be careful Aeris," he said.

"Careful?" Aeris questioned. She reached out and patted the bird. "Relax Cloud, it's just a chocobo."

"A gold chocobo," he replied. "The man who Tifa chased rode away on a gold chocobo, remember?"

"You think it might be the same bird?" Cid questioned in surprise.

"I don't know," Cloud said. "It seems a strange coincidence, don't you think?"

"Well, there's no one on it now," Aeris pointed out.

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean the rider is far away," Cloud retorted.

Cloud walked over for a closer inspection. As soon as he got close the chocobo warked angrily and pecked viciously at his head.

"Ack!" he yelled, losing his balance trying to avoid the attack, he fell back onto his butt on the sand.

The chocobo stepped away from him, back beside Aeris, and warked pleasantly, nuzzling her arm.

"Apparently it doesn't like you," Cid said, looking at Cloud while he lit up another cigarette.

Cloud stared at the bird, and the bemused expression on Aeris face, though she did not say anything. He pulled himself to his feet.

"The feelings mutual," he muttered.

"I don't think it has a rider," Aeris said. "It has no harness. I think it might be wild."

"Are there wild gold chocobos?" Cid questioned.

"Why not?" Aeris answered.

"I don't know," Cid replied. "All the gold chocobos I've seen have been the result of a careful breeding process. I didn't think it could happen naturally."

"It could happen by chance," Cait said. "But it's not likely. Kind of like winning the lottery."

"I don't believe in that kind of luck," Cloud said.

"You're being silly," Aeris told him. "If it is our mysterious opponents chocobo, why would he let it wander over to us like this."

"I don't know," Cloud said, looking around slowly. "To distract us, perhaps."

He scanned the trees around them, but saw no sign of anyone. She was right, it didn't make sense. If it was someone's chocobo, why would they let it just wander over to them? On the other hand Gold chocobos were almost impossible to find. The odds of them just running into one of them by chance was one in a million, or more.

"I don't think..." he began. Turning back toward them, he saw Aeris climbing up on the chocobo's back. "Aeris, what are you doing!"

"It's all right, I'm just...whoa!"

As soon as she was mounted the chocobo broke into a run, turning away from them.

"Aeris, what are you doing? Where are you going?" Cloud shouted, taking off in pursuit.

"I didn't do it!" Aeris called out. "I can't stop him!"

"Cait, stop that bird!" Cloud yelled.

Cait was closer than the others, near the beach, the direction the bird was running. Cait ran toward it, causing it to stop. He grabbed for it, but it changed direction and easily evaded him. However, the hesitation allowed Cloud to catch up. He leapt on the back of the creature behind Aeris.

The chocobo let out a loud wark to show it's displeasure, but did not stop. It raced down the beach toward the ocean.

"Aeris, jump off!" Cloud yelled, grabbing hold of her.

"No, wait!" she yelled.

The chocobo had reached the waterline.

"It might be taking us to the Cetra Sage!" she said.

It took Cloud a moment to process this.

"And it might be taking us right into a trap!" he countered.

The chocobo turned its head and tried to peck at Cloud without slowing down, but it couldn't reach him.

Cloud glared at it.

"Aeris, this is too risky! We have to get off before it's too late."

Already the chocobo was skimming along the surface of the water, it's feet touching down lightly as if on solid ground. The shoreline falling rapidly behind them. If they wanted to get off now, they'd have to swim.

"This may be our only chance to find him," Aeris said doggedly. "Even if it is a trap, I think the chocobo was only supposed to carry me. They won't be expecting you. And besides, Cid can follow us in the Slipstream."

Cloud looked back and saw that the others had gotten on board and the Slipstream was indeed lifting into the air. Wherever the chocobo was going, the aircraft would be right behind. Cloud didn't think this chocobo was sent by the Cetra sage. It seemed much more likely that they were walking right into a trap, or riding rather. He wasn't sure, however, if he could convince Aeris of that. It was too late anyway. The chocobo was amazingly fast, not surprising considering its color. It had only been seconds, but they were far from shore now, it was receding by the moment. He wasn't anxious to try to swim back. His hesitation had cost him his opportunity to get them off. He looked up and saw the Slipstream approaching from behind. Even the speed of a gold chocobo was no match for the sleek black jet. At least they had some company. If this was a trap, perhaps their adversaries were biting off more than they could chew.

~*~

"Where the hell are they going?" Cid growled.

Cait sat beside him in the copilots seat.

"They're headed due east," he said. "I know of no record of any land in that direction."

"Great," Cid muttered. He had been surprised as hell when the chocobo had taken off. There hadn't seemed to be much else to do but follow in the Slipstream.

He wondered what the hell was going on. At first he thought the chocobo really was wild and had just panicked when Aeris had gotten on it. Now he wasn't so sure. The chocobo hadn't tried to buck her off, and it was headed in a straight line, as if it had some definite destination in mind.

A beeping noise brought his attention to the controls.

"Whaa?," he snapped.

"What is it?" Cait questioned.

"We've got something on radar," he said. "Another aircraft. Coming up behind us *fast*."

Cait turned around, but there was no way to see something behind them. He craned his neck to see out the side window, but all he saw was sky.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Cid muttered.

Instinctively Cid turned the plane sharply. He didn't know who was behind them, but until he found out he wasn't going to take any chance. It was evasive maneuvers until he could assess the threat.

It was a good thing he did, because a moment later a streak of light flashed past the ship and they heard a loud explosion.

"They're not friendlies!" Cid yelled anticlimactically.

They had turned around now to face their enemy. Cid prided himself on keeping up with all the latest aircraft technologies, and he had an encyclopedic knowledge of any ship ever built or even in design. Whatever it was that was behind them, however, he had never seen before.

It was yellow, and oval, shaped very similar to an egg, in fact, though perhaps a bit elongated. Cid could see windows in the front, and small fins on either side and in the back. Other than that there didn't seem to be much else attached to the main body. He couldn't see any weapons, or even an exhaust or telltale signs of an engine, for that matter. It was like nothing he had seen before.

"What the hell is that?" he muttered.

A beam of light shot out from the front of the craft, just missing the Slipstream.

"Whatever is it, it don't like us," he announced.

He put the Slipstream into a gut wrenching climb, then turned the plane over in a loop, twisting round and righting itself, coming down from above at the target that now hung in the air below them. Missiles streaked from underneath the Slipstream's wings, heading straight for the enemy airship. Cid was sure he had a hit, but the shout of triumph died in his throat as the target veered suddenly to the side, changing direction more quickly than Cid thought possible for an aircraft. The missiles couldn't adjust in time, and flew harmlessly by.

"What the hell was that?" Cid snapped. "No airship can turn that quickly. It's not possible!"

The Slipstream was still diving down, and now shot past their adversary. A moment later it changed direction again, following them down. Again, it was a maneuver Cid didn't think an aircraft could make.

More energy beams flashed past the ship. Cid pulled back on the stick, pulling the plan up again, then made a gut wrenching turn, trying to shake their pursuer, but every move he made was easily matched by the ship behind him. Even Cid's formidable flying skills could not make up for the difference in maneuverability.

A moment later there was a loud retort and the ship bucked underneath them. Cait, who was not seat belted in, fell to the floor.

"Shit!" Cid shouted.

The pilot fought with the controls as the aircraft continued to jerk and twist. One of the control panels in front of him sparked and went dark.

"Damn, we've been hit!" Cid snapped.

The ship turned sharply, and Cid managed to pull them out of the death dive they had been in. They were still going down however. Cait could see the ocean approaching more rapidly than he liked.

The island was ahead of them now. Cid seemed to be making for that. Or trying to.

"Hang on," the pilot announced. "We're goin' down!"