

CHAPTER IX: I HATE TO SAY IT, BUT YES, IT'S MIDGAR ONCE MORE

"I'm scared," Shera said.

Aeris did not reply, but she took Shera's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. A reassurance she did not feel herself. She wondered what Zack could be up to. He had been acting like a man possessed. Dragging them relentlessly onward, east from Rocket Town, then across the ocean to Junon, and finally northeast to a city Aeris would rather forget. Back once again to Midgar.

They had reached the crumbled ruins of the city just as the sun was setting, and Aeris had been filled with foreboding. She didn't know what Zack had in mind, but returning here brought back memories of Shinra that she would just as soon forget. She couldn't help but think that the company had something to do with what was happening to Zack now, and if that were true, she knew no good could come of it.

She looked around as they walked down the broken streets, and for the first time her mind entertained thoughts of escape. Not so much for herself but for Shera. She could understand Zack wanting to keep her with them, she was a tie to his past, she could tell him things that she was sure he would want to know, if his mind wasn't clouded by what now seemed to possess him. But why had he taken Shera? He needed her for some purpose, that much was obvious. Whatever it was, Aeris knew she had to stop him somehow. She couldn't let him hurt her, she had promised Cid, yet she was sure that was exactly what Zack intended to do. She had a feeling that Shera was the key to this whole thing.

But Zack's men were gathered close together now, and Altim was not guarding her at the moment. She could see him walking near the back with another man. He looked up at her. She smiled, but he turned away. There was no opportunity to run at the moment.

She was not surprised when they headed straight for the remains of Shinra headquarters. Zack led them inside, and they swiftly walked through the building and down three floors. He seemed to know exactly where he was going. But that was no surprise. As a member of SOLDIER, he must have been here before.

He led them through a large room until they came to what appeared to be a blank wall. But then he pressed a concealed button and a hidden door in the wall opened. Aeris could see what looked like some kind of laboratory inside. Zack led them in.

The room was well lit and must have been sealed tightly, for there was little dust on the equipment. Zack turned to look at them.

"You can store all the gear over there," he said, pointing to the far wall. Then he looked at Shera.

"You, come with me."

Aeris stepped forward.

"What are you going to do with her?"

Zack looked at her, anger welling in his eyes. Suddenly everyone else fell silent. Behind her, Altim slowly started forward, his hand slipping down by his dagger.

"You'll find out soon enough," Zack replied.

"Zack, what are you doing?" Aeris said. "Don't you see that you are being controlled? Don't you realize that Shinra is manipulating you somehow. Why else would you have come here? What is left here that Zack could possibly want?"

"I am not Zack!" he replied angrily. "I am the Swordsman. And I don't have to answer to you."

He went to step around her but she blocked his path.

For a moment she saw a flicker of shock on his face. Then the anger returned to his eyes. He drew his sword.

"Get out of my way," he said emotionlessly.

"Zack, please," she replied, looking straight at him. "I know the man I cared about is still in there. I know how strong he was. There must be something of him left inside you still."

Altim was but a few paces away now. Slowly he drew out his dagger.

"I'm not going to say it again," Zack said. She saw no hint of emotion in his eyes.

"It's all right," Shera said suddenly. She stepped up to stand beside Aeris. "I'll go with him."

Aeris turned to look at her.

"Shera..." she started.

"No, it's all right," Shera said quickly. "I'll go." She looked at Zack. "Just don't hurt anyone."

Zack looked at Aeris once more, but he said nothing. Then he reached out and grabbed Shera by the arm. Altim sheathed his dagger.

Zack started to lead Shera away, but he was suddenly interrupted again.

"Let her go, Zack."

The all turned to look at the entrance to the room, Aeris heart leaping.

"Cloud!" she exclaimed.

He stood in the doorway. Tifa by his side. Zack's gang looked around in bewilderment. They had been so occupied with what was going on they had not noticed the newcomers.

Zack turned to look at them for a moment, then turned away again and continued to lead Shera away.

"Stop!" Tifa shouted. She stepped into the room and looked back at Cloud. But he did not follow, instead he bowed his head and grimaced.

"Cloud," she said. "This is not a good time."

He slowly lifted his head again. He looked at her blankly. He did not seem to be in any pain.

"Cloud, c'mon," Tifa said. She looked at Zack, who was leading Shera toward a door at the far end of the room. "He's getting away!"

She looked at Cloud again, but he did not move.

"Cloud!" she said, desperation in her voice.

He just stood there.

She turned again and suddenly ran toward Zack.

One of Zack's men lunged at her with a knife, but she twisted out of the way and drove an open palm into his face. He fell back with a cry. Zack let go of Shera's arm and pulled out his sword. He turned to face her.

"Tifa!" Aeris cried in horror.

But suddenly she saw Cloud spring forward. In a moment he was beside Tifa. She turned to look at him, and his fist shot out.

Tifa crumpled to the ground.

Zack brought his sword up.

"No," Cloud said, "Don't kill her."

Zack looked at him for a moment, then nodded. He lowered his sword and looked at his men.

"Take her and lock her up in one of the vaults." He looked at Aeris. "And lock her up too. We'll deal with them both later."

One of Zack's men came up and took Aeris by the arm. Two other men picked up Tifa. As they led Aeris out of the room, she turned and got one last glance of Zack and Cloud, both walking away with Shera between them.

~*~

The Slipstream came to a landing just outside of the wall surrounding Midgar. Barret stepped out of the plane, followed by the others. He looked around. The ruins of Midgar stood in front of them in the darkness, silent yet full of menace. He saw no sign of danger, but he knew that meant nothing. Already he was sure dark eyes were following them, dark forces

gathering.

He shook his head.

"Here we go again," he muttered.

He led them through the crumbling wall and into the streets of Midgar. The others followed slowly. Cid was last in line, walking with a slight limp. Red looked at him and seemed to want to say something, but a glare from Cid silenced him.

Barret led them down the center of the street, making his way toward Shinra headquarters. No one argued with his choice of destination.

A quarter moon hung above the buildings to the west, but the night sky was cloudy, and as they approached the building the moon was obscured, and they were shrouded in darkness.

They walked up the steps and stood at the entrance. It loomed before them like a black hole in the earth. They remained there for a moment. No one was anxious to enter.

"I'm going to be really pissed if we go in there and they're not here," Reno said.

Yuffie peered into the darkness inside the building.

"I don't see any sign of anyone," she said nervously.

Barret looked in over her shoulder. He had to admit she was right. Could it be that he had led them on a wild goose chase?

"Well, we'll never know by standing out here," Cid exclaimed, stepping forward. "C'mon, let's get this done."

He walked into the building. The others followed immediately, Cid having provided the push they needed to get past their reluctance.

They made their way slowly through the building, then down to the lower levels. The upper floors had been severely damaged, or destroyed completely, by Meteor. If anything was still intact, Barret suspected it would be underground.

When they reached the third floor below ground level they were surprised to see that the lights were on.

They stepped out of the stairway and looked around.

"Looks like something might be going on here after all," Rude commented.

They hurried down the corridor, heartened to have found some clue that they might be on the right track. They found even more evidence at the next intersection. To their left down the corridor they saw two men.

For a moment they all just stood there in surprise. Then one of the men pulled out a gun and started firing at them. They dodged back around the corner.

The party opened up with their own weapons.

Cid looked around the corner. The men had taken up defensive positions behind some machinery at the end of the corridor. They couldn't get at them without exposing themselves.

"Barret," he called, "take a couple of the others and try to get around behind them. We'll keep them occupied."

Barret nodded. He started down the hallway to the right, Red and Yuffie following, but just as they neared the end of it half a dozen ghoul like creatures came around the corner in front of them.

"Shit," Barret exclaimed. He opened up with his gun. Two of the creatures went down, but the others sprang at him. One fell from Yuffie's shuriken, the others were met by Red's claws. They could see more coming around the corner.

They retreated back down the corridor. Barret turned back to Cid.

"Looks like all the noise has brought us some company," he stated.

Cid looked back. The corridor behind them was filling with the creatures. Ahead of them waited the guns of their enemy.

"We're trapped," he said.

Tifa opened her eyes and looked around. She was lying on a cot in a small windowless room. Aeris stood beside her.

She sat up and her head spun. She brought her hands up to her throbbing temple.

"He hit me," she said in disbelief.

"He probably saved your life," Aeris stated.

Tifa looked at her with a mixture of anger and disbelief.

"Tifa, you may be a match for Zack without his weapon, but you wouldn't have stood a chance against him with his sword."

Tifa looked at the ground.

"I suppose you're right," she replied. "I just wish he could have found a less painful way to do it."

Aeris put her hand on Tifa's shoulder.

"You know he wouldn't hurt you intentionally," she said.

Tifa nodded.

"I know," she said. She stood up and looked around.

"We've got to get out of here."

"I don't think that is going to be possible," Aeris replied. "Do you know what Zack is going to do with Shera?"

"No," she replied. "But I know it isn't going to be anything good. We've got to stop them somehow."

She walked over to the door and examined it. She realized right away it was much too solid to break through.

She looked at Aeris, who stood in the corner of the room, seemingly unperturbed by all that was happening. Tifa could not understand how she could be so calm, but Aeris had always been like that. She always seemed to think that fate would provide, somehow.

They heard a noise outside, and then the door slowly opened. Altim stood in the entrance. They could see one of Zack's other men lying on the floor behind him.

"I've come to free you."

He stepped back out of the way. They walked out, Tifa last, thinking maybe there was something to this fate thing after all.

"Hurry," Altim said, leading them quickly back the way they had come. As they reached an intersection they heard the sounds of battle off to their right.

"What's going on?" Tifa asked.

"Not sure," Altim replied. "Someone's attacking us. Seems like all hell is breaking loose."

"It must be the others," she said. She looked at Aeris.

"You go on," she said. "Get back to Zack and Cloud and slow them down somehow. I'll lead the others back to you."

Aeris nodded and hurried off down the corridor, Altim beside her. Tifa turned and ran toward the sounds of battle. She didn't think they had much time left.

~*~

"Cloud," Shera said, staring at him as he finished strapping her onto the table. He did not respond, or even glance at her face. He had only one thought on his mind. Finishing the job of cloning Hojo.

The world needed Hojo. He had done great things in his time, but his greatest accomplishments were yet to come. The Jenova Project had not been completed. Cloud had not reached his full potential, and he never would without Hojo.

All these years he had misunderstood what Hojo had been trying to do. All those years he had fought against Hojo under the mistaken impression that the man would bring ruin to the planet, but the whole time he had been leading them all to

paradise.

Cloud realized it now. He realized how wrong he had been. But Hojo had foreseen this crisis, and had left them with the means to complete his mission.

Only Hojo could make him as strong as Sephiroth.

He looked at Zack, who had opened the genetic material he had taken from Nibelheim and was now filling a syringe with it.

No, it was only right that Hojo return. He was a hero. He had been the one that started the Jenova Project. The one who had started them on the road to paradise. The one who had...

ruined so many lives.

He frowned. Where had that thought come from? Of course Hojo had hurt some people, but only when it had been necessary. Only for the better good. Some sacrifices had to be made in the name of science. It's not like he...

tortured Vincent unmercifully

What is happening to me? Cloud thought. Suddenly he felt a pounding pain in his temples. Where were these thoughts coming from? Hojo was a good man. He would never hurt anyone unless absolutely necessary.

He wouldn't turn his own son into a monster.

Cloud groaned aloud. Zack turned around, syringe in hand. He looked at Cloud for a moment, but said nothing. Then he walked over to Shera.

Shera stared at him, a look of horror in her eyes.

"Cloud, help me," she pleaded.

Cloud stood there, his thoughts a mass of confusion. Hojo was a man to be admired. He had been trying to save the world, hadn't he?

He had killed Professor Gast in cold blood. He had tortured Aeris mother with his twisted experiment until she had died. He had been an insane murderer.

Cloud thought his head would explode.

Zack bent down over Shera and prepared to insert the needle.

Cloud lunged forward and knocked the needle away. It flew out of Zack's hand and shattered on the stone floor nearby. Zack turned to look at him with a snarl. He drew his weapon. Cloud stepped back and drew his as well.

For a moment they stood there staring into each others eyes. Then Zack sprang forward.

Their swords met with a thunderous clang, and sparks flew from them. Again and again they lashed out at one another, and Zack's men all fled in terror from the two, battling as if possessed by demons.

Cloud slowly retreated. His head still throbbed, and his legs felt like rubber. It almost seemed as if his body did not want to obey him. But though he was in pain he had regained a grip on himself, and once he had achieved that he would not let himself slip backwards. He gritted his teeth and fought on grimly.

His own throbbing head wasn't the only problem. He was fighting someone at least as skilled as he was, who was trying desperately to kill him, while he could only defend himself. Cloud's whole style was built around attack, to take the fight to the enemy as quickly and ferociously as possible. But he couldn't do that with Zack, he didn't want to kill his old friend.

Zack's sword slashed in, and came away red. Cloud glanced down and saw blood seeping from his left arm.

Zack's blade came at him again. He parried and slowly retreated once more, until finally he stood with his back to the wall. He could retreat no further. If something didn't happen very soon, one of them would have to die.

~*~

Cid twisted out of the way as a ghouel clawed at him. He jabbed with his spear and the ghouel went down. He sat down, his side aching. The others were all fighting furiously, some against three of four of the creatures. And he could see more

coming down the hallway.

He looked around the corner once more. He could not see the enemy, but he knew they waited there. A blast of gunfire every once in a while served as a reminder. He looked at the others. It was obvious if they stayed here they would be overwhelmed. They would have to charge the gunman and hope for the best.

He slowly got to his feet.

"Barret," he called.

Barret turned to look at him without bothering to stop firing.

"We'll have to make a run for it."

Barret nodded.

Cid turned and looked down the corridor again. It was a good thirty yards to cover. They could not possibly hope to make it without taking some hits.

He heard more gunfire, but they did not seem to be firing at him. Suddenly one of the gunman stumbled into the corridor and lay still.

Cid stood there for a moment, not sure what had happened. Then Tifa came around the corner of the hallway beside the fallen gunman. She leaned against the wall and looked at him.

"So what, are you going to stand there all day?" she questioned.

Cid grinned. He turned to the others.

"Let's get out of here!"

They ran down the hallway. When they reached Tifa she turned and led them through a doorway off to the right. Red, who was last in line, slammed the door behind them and wedged it closed.

"That'll hold them for a little while," he said.

"Yeah, but not for long," Cid stated. "Tifa, where's Cloud?"

She told them what had happened to her as she led them swiftly down the hallway.

"They're going to do something to Shera, but I don't know what," she finished, looking at Cid.

"But we do," he replied grimly. He told her what Red had discovered at Cosmo Canyon.

"So he's under some kind of computer control?" she asked when he had finished.

"Yes," Cid said. "As far as we can figure."

"So if we destroy the computer, will that bring them back to normal?"

Cid shrugged. He looked at Red, who had come up beside them.

"It seems likely," Red answered.

"Seems likely?" Tifa said. That hardly sounded like a ringing endorsement.

"It's possible that the program will so ingrained in them that even without the computer they will continue to follow the instructions. Although that is unlikely."

"Great," Barret muttered.

The came around a turn and almost ran into half a dozen of Zack's men. With a cry the battle was joined.

Tifa dodged around the man who attacked her, not even bothering to counter. She sped past two others and then she was past them. She ran down the hallway but they did not pursue her, content to battle with the others. She didn't have time to stand there and fight. She needed to find this computer and take it out. Suddenly she did hear someone coming up behind her. She turned quickly but it was only Red. Apparently he had the same idea.

"C'mon," she said. She had seen some computers in the room near where Zack had taken Shera. "I think I know where that computer is."

The main room of the lab was deserted when Aeris and Altim reached it. All Zack's men had left the area, gone to fight, or run off to save their own skins. They could hear the sounds of swords striking against one another in the next room, however.

Aeris turned to Altim.

"You better get out of here," she said. "I can take care of myself from here on in. And my friends will soon be here. I don't want them to mistake you for one of their foes."

He stood there and looked at her without moving.

"I don't want to leave you," he said.

She smiled.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine. Thank you, for everything."

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

He looked away, turning a deep shade of red.

"Go on, get out of here now, while you still can."

Then she turned and ran into the other room.

He did not move for a moment, and he had to fight the urge to follow her, but he knew somehow that she was right. He had done what he could for her. He looked around, and then ran over to get his pack. Then he looked up at the other gear lying along the wall.

Aeris saw Shera strapped in place on a table in the center of the room, Zack and Cloud locked in battle behind her. She could see that Cloud was backed against the wall.

He glanced over at her.

"Aeris," he said. "Get Shera out of here. I'll hold off Zack."

She looked at him, and even as he spoke Zack attacked savagely. Cloud defended himself, but she could see he was in an awkward position. Zack had him pinned against the wall.

She bowed her head and concentrated.

Cloud felt another slash across his leg, and he stumbled slightly. Zack's sword swung like lightening, but Cloud managed to parry it. He didn't think he could do that much longer.

Suddenly Aeris raised her arms. The room blazed with a white light, and stars flashed around them. Suddenly Cloud saw that both he and Zack were surrounded by a glowing white light.

Zack's sword flashed again. It got past Cloud's guard and slashed at his chest, but it did not make contact. It could not penetrate the magical barrier Aeris had erected.

Zack redoubled his attack, not seeming to realize that they were both protected from harm by Aeris spell. Cloud stood there and parried, trying to conserve energy. He knew Aeris protection was only temporary. Hopefully Zack would exhaust himself before it wore off.

~*~

Vincent fired and one of Zack's men went down. He turned around. Elena stood nearby, but none of the others were in sight. Two more of Zack's men suddenly sprang at him. He took one out with his gun. The other was too close. The man lunged at him with a knife, but he twisted out of the way. He brought his left arm up and felt metal strike his forehead. The man went down.

He looked around again. There were no other enemies nearby. He turned to Elena.

"Where have the others..."

The first man Vincent had shot was on the ground, directly behind him. Suddenly she saw him pull himself up and point his gun at Vincent.

She brought up her gun, but Vincent was in the way. She didn't have a clear shot. She instantly realized that he would not be able to react in time if she called out. She had to act now.

She fired.

Vincent grunted and stumbled, then sat down slowly. The man behind him dropped the gun and sank to the ground.

She ran over to Vincent.

"You shot me," he stated, looking at her. There was no anger or surprise in his voice.

She bent down and looked at his leg.

"It's only a scratch," she said. "It was the only way I could hit him. There wasn't time to do anything else."

He looked at her.

"Perhaps you're more ruthless than I thought," he observed.

"Maybe I am," she replied. "And by the way, that's not all you were wrong about. The Turks don't work for Shinra anymore. We're an independent organization. Reno's in charge now, and whether he likes it or not, things are not going to be run the way they used to. He's not going to use me, and he certainly isn't going to discard me. And if he tried to, I'd kick his ass."

"And that's not all," she continued. "You're wrong about yourself as well. You say you don't care, that you have no more feelings left, that the organization and Hojo removed all that from you, made you into some of machine. But that's bullshit. You do care. If you didn't you would never have come with us in the first place. You walked away from me at the Gold Saucer, but you came back after you talked to Reno. Why? Because you did care. You say it was just to explain why I should stay away from you, but why bother even telling me that, if you really didn't care? Why didn't you walk away after you told me? Why are you here right now? The truth is it's all just an act. The truth is you were hurt so badly in the past that you are afraid to try again. It's not that you don't have the capacity to love, it's just that you are afraid to. You don't want to be hurt again, but just because you've been hurt in the past doesn't mean it'll happen again. You can't just give up. You've got to..."

Suddenly he grabbed hold of her. He put his hand behind her head and drew her to him, pressing his lips against hers. For a moment her eyes widened in surprise. He brought his other arm around her and pulled her even closer, until their bodies were pressed against one another as tightly as their lips. Slowly her arms came up and wrapped around him as well.

"Ummm," she purred contently.

They stood there unmoving for a long time, but to Elena it seemed like forever.

Finally their lips parted, but their arms remained wrapped around one another.

"What brought that on?" she asked.

Their faces were still only inches apart. She stared into his red eyes, more human looking now than she could ever recall.

"It was the quickest way I could think of to shut you up," he replied.

She smiled.

"I see," she said. "So all I have to do to get a kiss is to talk? Well, I think I can handle that rather easily. I'm not exactly shy about opening my mouth you know. In fact, if you ask Reno..."

He pulled her to him again. They slowly sank down beside one another, and Elena did not talk again for quite some time.

~*~

Tifa walked down the hall slowly, peering into each room as she walked by. She knew she had seen a room with computers in it when she and Cloud had come down here. She was almost sure it was somewhere down this hallway.

Red followed silently behind her.

She reached the last room and looked inside. There was a line of computers along the wall.

"This is it," she said.

She walked in and saw something moving out of the corner of her eye. She turned to look, but it was only a rat running along the wall. It disappeared into a crack near one corner of the room. She looked at the computers. Some of them were running, some seemed to be doing nothing. It was all meaningless to her. She turned to look at Red.

He walked down the line, looking at each one in turn. Finally he stopped at the end.

"This one's the server," he said. "This is the one that's running the program."

She came up beside him.

"So if we shut this one down we stop the program?"

Red nodded.

"That's correct."

"Get out of the way," she said.

He stepped back. She walked to the side of the cpu, set herself, and then with all her strength drove her leg into the side of the unit. Sparks filled the air as the cpu flew across the room. It smashed against the far wall, breaking apart. Chips and circuit boards scattered across the floor.

Red looked solemnly at the broken remains, then at Tifa.

"We could have just turned it off, you know."

She turned toward him, a grim smile on her face.

"Yeah, but it wouldn't have been nearly as satisfying."

~*~

Barret rushed into the main lab, followed closely by Cid, Yuffie, Reno and Rude. They could see Aeris standing just inside the next room. Barret called out to her and ran over.

Yuffie started to follow but then spotted a pile of gear lying on the floor along the wall. One bag looked familiar. It was the bag she had seen in Bennis' tent. The one that held the materia.

She glanced at the others, but none of them seemed to be paying any attention. Then she darted over to the gear. She was about to pull open the bag when she sensed someone else behind her.

"Not so fast," Reno said.

He grabbed hold of the bag as well.

"Dio is going to pay us a lot of money for that materia," he continued.

Yuffie tried to yank the bag out of his hands.

"It's mine," she said. "I saw it first."

"We were on the trail of it long before you were," he retorted. "You wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for us."

He pulled back, harder. The bag slipped from her grasp. She turned and wrapped her arms around Reno's legs. They went down in a heap.

"What, are you kidding?" she said. "If you hadn't slowed me down I'd have had this materia long ago. Now hand it over."

"What a joke," he replied. "If it wasn't for us you'd be dead twice over all ready. You owe us."

She crawled up over him and grabbed hold of the bag. He twisted round, pulling it from her grasp again, and sending the bag sliding across the floor away from them. It stopped right at the feet of Rude, who was standing there watching them.

"There you go again," she said. "I told you I can take care of myself. I don't owe you anything. The materia is mine!"

She scrambled to her feet and lunged for the bag, but he grabbed hold of her leg and dragged her down again.

"You ungrateful little witch," he growled. "After all we've done for you."

He got a grip on her and tossed her to the side. He stood up and lunged for the materia again, but she was up in an instant, leaping onto his back and dragging him down yet again.

"All you did for me you did because you wanted me to stay with you," she shouted. "Because you knew you needed me to find the materia."

Reno looked at Rude, who had reached down and picked up the bag.

"Rude, take the materia and get out of here," he said. "I'll take care of this pest."

"Touch that and I'll hunt you down like the dog you are," Yuffie exclaimed.

Reno twisted around to face her.

"Needed you?" he blurted out. "Boy, do you have a warped view of reality. All you've been is a pain in the ass since we met you. It would have been a pleasure to get rid of you. The only reason we let you stay with us was because we knew you would just screw up the job for us if we left you running around by yourself."

"Uh, guys," Rude said.

"Screw it up for you?" she exclaimed. "I never met a bigger bunch of incompetents. All you ever did was wander around observing this and looking at that. You couldn't even keep track of where they were going."

Reno grabbed hold of her leg and pivoted, forcing her off of him. She grabbed hold of his shirt as he staggered to get up once more. There was a ripping sound.

"Oh great, my good shirt," he said disgustedly. He grabbed hold of her neck and slowly forced her away from him. She kicked at his leg, knocking him off balance. They fell once more, this time with him on top.

"Hello?" Rude tried again.

"Like you could have tracked them any better," Reno said. "We found them in the end, didn't we. No thanks to you."

"No thanks to you either," she retorted. "It was Vincent who put us on the right track. You had nothing to do with it."

"HEY!" Rude shouted.

They both stopped and turned to look at him.

He unopened the bag. A dozen chunks of concrete spilled to the floor.

"Looks like somebody beat us to it," he said.

Yuffie and Reno stared at the concrete, speechless. They slowly stood up.

Yuffie was the first to recover.

"I should have known better than to trust you guys," she said, looking accusingly at Reno. "What did you do with it?"

Reno turned toward her.

"What did we do with it? Why you little cheat. You knew it wasn't in there all the time, didn't you?"

Rude turned away and shook his head.

"Oh brother," he muttered.

~*~

Cloud parried yet another blow from Zack, and even as he did so he saw the aura fading from around them. Aeris barrier was gone.

Zack raised his sword over his head. But then he stopped.

Pain had been throbbing through Cloud's head, creating a fog that he could barely function with. But suddenly it was gone.

His head was clear. There was no more pain.

Zack lowered his sword and looked around, his gaze falling on Cloud, then Aeris, and then Shera still lying on the table. His eyes widened with realization.

"What have I done," he said softly.

Aeris came up beside him and took him by the arm. Just as she did so Barret came in the room, followed by the others. Cid ran up and released Shera, then swept her up into his arms. They could hear her sobbing once again, but this time with joy.

Barret turned as Tifa and Red came in.

"You took out the computer," he said.

Tifa nodded.

Barret took one more look around.

"Looks like the party's over," he proclaimed. "Now let's get out of here before every monster in Midgar decides to show up."