

CHAPTER XII: AVALANCHE MAKES A STAND

Fort Condor didn't seem to have changed much from the last time Cloud had seen it. They still had to climb the rope to get inside, which was inconvenient, but Cloud didn't really mind. In fact, he thought it was a good thing. Of all the places they could go this would probably be the hardest one for Jenova's Disciples to penetrate.

Cloud looked around, but he didn't see the old man they had talked to the last time they were here. Instead he saw a young man in a bomber jacket coming over to them.

"Welcome," the man said. "I'm Captain Tananka. It's always a pleasure to see members of Avalanche. Is Captain Highwind with you?"

Cloud shook his head.

"No, he had something else he had to do."

Cloud wondered if the others had reached Gongaga yet. The fact that he could not be with them still did not sit well with him. He didn't like this running away. It was not his style. He was not used to sitting on the sidelines while his friends confronted danger. But he knew he could not have gone along with them.

Captain Tanaka looked disappointed.

"So what can we do for you?" he questioned.

Cloud explained what had happened to them and their purpose in coming here.

Captain Tananka nodded when he finished.

"Well, let's go talk to Otus. I'm sure we'll help you any way we can. He'll be glad to see you."

"Thanks," Cloud said.

The Captain led them across the room and up a ladder. Now they stood in the observation room high atop Fort Condor. The old man they had met the first time they had been here stood near the window. He smiled warmly when he saw them.

"Greetings, my friends," he said, walking over to them. "It is good to see you again. It seems you went on to even greater things after you helped us in our battle against Shinra. In fact, it is you we have to thank for their downfall. We are in your debt."

Cloud nodded, looking a little embarrassed. He had never gotten used to the fame they had attained for destroying Shinra and stopping meteor.

"I'm afraid Shinra wasn't the last of our problems," Captain Tananka said.

"That's right," Cloud agreed. Once more he explained what had happened to them and their reason for being here.

Otus nodded slowly when he had finished.

"I see," he said. "Well, of course we'll help as much as we can."

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"We have a well trained force, but I'm afraid it is not very large. Still, I'm sure every little bit helps. I will start to gather our people together immediately. But we are far from Cosmo Canyon. I'm afraid it will take several days for us to muster our forces and get them there."

Cloud nodded, looking at the others. None of them looked particularly happy with that news. He suspected they were of like mind with him and believed that by then the battle would already have been decided, one way or another.

"Very well," he said. "But I would appreciate it if you could speed it up as much as possible. The people of Cosmo Canyon are suffering greatly."

"Of course," Otus replied. "Unfortunately, we still have not replaced the aircraft we lost in the battle with WEAPON at Rocket Town, so our air force is depleted as well. But if it will help I will put Captain Tananka and his aircraft at your disposal immediately."

He looked at the Captain.

"How soon can you fly?"

Captain Tanaka snapped to attention.

"The Vengeful Wind is always ready," he replied with more than a hint of pride.

"Thank you, that would be very helpful," Cloud replied. With the Slipstream's sister ship at their disposal, they could get anywhere in the world within hours. The riders would never be able to catch them now.

"But come," Otus said. "You must be tired from your long journey. I'll have someone take you someplace where you can relax. You are safe from the riders here, at least."

Cloud looked at the others. They were all tired and a bit worn from their earlier encounter with the riders.

"Thanks," he replied. "That would be very kind of you."

Otus and the Captain left the room. Cloud walked over to the window and looked out. He could see the Vengful Wind parked nearby. The condor, of course, was gone. He wondered what had ever happened to it's offspring.

A few minutes later a woman came in and beckoned for them to follow. She led them downstairs once more, then through a long hallway with several doors off it.

"You may rest in these rooms," she said, indicating the doors. "Take whichever one's you wish, they are all available for guests. At the end of the hall is a large room for gathering together or eating. Are you hungry?"

There were several affirmative replies.

"I'll see that something is brought to you," she said, then turned and disappeared down the hall.

They went down to the room at the end. There was a large table in the middle of it.

"Well, at least someone is going to help us," Zack stated.

"Do you think they can get there in time to do any good?" Aeris questioned.

"I don't know," Cloud replied. It didn't look promising.

The woman came back, along with two other people bringing in soup and sandwiches. They all immediately dug in, and Cloud finished off two sandwiches before he even realized it. He must have been hungrier than he thought.

He was about to start in on a third when Captain Tananka suddenly entered the room.

"There's a young girl here who says she has an urgent message for you," he said.

Cloud looked at him in surprise, but was even more surprised when Priscilla stepped into the room a moment later.

"Priscilla!" Cloud exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

Priscilla ran over to Cloud and quickly told him what she had overheard.

"My father told me not to come," she finished. "But I knew I just had to warn you. He's gonna whup my butt when I get home."

Cloud put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"We'll talk to him for you," he said. "I'm sure he'll understand."

A look of relief passed over her face.

"Thanks," she said.

Cloud turned to the others. Aeris could see the look of concern on his face.

"They're after Tifa," he stated the obvious. "I should have stayed with her."

"Even with you there, do you seriously think the both of you would be able to stand against all four riders?" Zack stated.

Cloud did not respond.

"Well, we've got to do something," Aeris said.

Cloud suddenly turned to Captain Tananka.

"I need to get to Kalm immediately."

The Captain nodded.

"I'll prepare the Vengeful Wind," he stated. "She'll be ready to fly in fifteen minutes."

The Captain walked out the door.

"I'm going with you," Aeris stated.

"I'll go with him, you stay here," Zack said.

"I want to go," she said firmly.

"I understand your concern for your friend, and I don't want to sound like the bad guy," Zack said. "But don't you think keeping the crystal materia safe is more important than any of us?"

"I don't think it's a good idea to split up," Reeve submitted.

"It's too dangerous for you to go," Zack said, still looking at Aeris. "C'mon, you know it as well as I do."

"I'm going with you," she repeated stubbornly.

Zack looked at Cloud in exasperation.

"Can you talk some sense into her?"

Cloud stood there without answering, deep in thought. At first glance it seemed Zack was right, of course, it was much too dangerous for Aeris to go with them to confront the riders. That's probably just what the riders had in mind. The logical thing to do would be to leave Aeris here. But Aeris had a mind of her own, and he knew what she was like. If she had her mind set on going with them he didn't think even he could do much about it.

On the other hand, he agreed with Reeve, he didn't want to split them up. He was sure Priscilla was telling the truth, as far as she knew, but suppose the riders had known she was there? Suppose they had invented that story because they knew she was listening and what she would do as a result. Suppose they knew all along that Aeris was going to Fort Condor and had let Priscilla overhear them just to get the others out of the way? Not likely, he had to admit, but he couldn't rule it out entirely.

He glanced at the others. They were all looking at him, waiting for a response. In spite of all the stupid mistakes he had made, they still trusted him.

"I think we should all go," he said finally.

"I know it's a risk," he continued, seeing Zack about to protest. "But I think it's safer for Aeris to come with us, even if it is to confront the riders, than to leave her here unprotected. Even if I know we're walking into danger, I'd feel better if we kept her with us. But hopefully it won't even come to that. I'm hoping we can get to Tifa before the riders reach her."

Aeris looked at him with a satisfied expression. Zack did not look happy at all. He turned to Aeris.

"I'm just worried about you," he said.

"I know," she replied with a smile. "And I appreciate it."

There was a moment of silence while they all stood there looking at one another. Finally Reeve broke the silence.

"Well, if we're going to go, then let's do it."

Marlene had gotten to know the layout of the hospital quite well in the last few days. She had an uncommonly good sense of direction, and liked to explore. Elmyra and Tifa often had long discussions and sometimes Marlene would get bored, and after much cajoling Elmyra had agreed to let her wander around some. At first Elmyra had not let her go far, but after she had shown she was responsible about returning on time, the rules had slackened, and it wasn't long before Marlene had the run of the hospital.

Marlene liked it here. She was intensely curious, and there always seemed to be something interesting going on at the hospital. So when Elmyra stated she had to go out and run some errands earlier, Marlene had elected to stay.

She was walking near the main entrance now, having just exited from the gift shop, a diet cola for Tifa in one hand and a candy bar in the other. She saw four men standing by the front desk. They were tall and wore dark black cloaks. She stopped and stared at them. There was something about them that disturbed her, though she couldn't say what it was. It seemed like there was almost something wrong with them. They didn't look quite...human.

Suddenly one of them turned around and his eyes locked on her. For a moment she felt sudden panic, and she had an almost overwhelming urge to turn and run away from these men as fast as her feet could carry her.

But then the man turned away, showing no interest in her whatsoever, and the panic faded away.

She stood there for a moment longer, almost turning to go back the way she came. But then she proceeded forward, making sure to give the men a wide berth as she passed by them. Even as she did so she heard the receptionist they were talking to.

"She's in room 312," she said, her voice oddly flat. "The elevator is down the hall on the left."

Marlene stopped again. Almost against her will her eyes drifted toward the men once more, but they were not looking at her. Instead with a silent nod the man who had been talking to the receptionist led the others swiftly down the hall to their right.

Marlene hesitated a moment more, looking at the receptionist, who's face was oddly pale.

Tifa's room was 312.

Marlene spun about and hurried down the hall to the left, then took a sharp turn down a hallway behind the cafeteria. The receptionist had sent the men to the main elevators to the floors. They were near the center of the building, not that close to the main entrance. But Marlene knew there was a service elevator down this hallway which was much closer. It was supposed to be for employees only, but she used it all the time and no one had ever said anything to her.

She reached it a moment later, pressing the button and waiting impatiently. She didn't like the look of those men. Whoever they were, she was pretty sure they were not Tifa's friends.

The door slid open and she practically leapt inside. Fortunately there was no one coming out or she would have run right into them. Less than a minute later she was on the third floor. As she stepped into the hallway leading to Tifa's room she looked around quickly, but there was no sign of the men. She quickly made her way down to Tifa's room.

Tifa was sitting up in bed, reading a book when Marlene rushed in.

"You didn't have to rush," she said with a smile. "I'm not that thirsty."

"Aunt Tifa," Marlene said quickly, the sound of her voice instantly bringing a look of seriousness to Tifa's face. "There's some men coming up looking for you. I never saw them before and there was something about them I didn't like."

"Whoa, whoa, slow down," Tifa said. "What are you talking about? Start at the beginning."

"There's no time!" Marlene replied, grabbing hold of Tifa's hand. "They're coming up here now. I think they're bad men."

Tifa looked at her for a moment, but the look on her face convinced Tifa that whatever was going on, it had Marlene genuinely upset. She got up out of bed, wrapping the robe Elmyra had brought for her around herself, and followed Marlene out of the room.

Tifa paused and looked down the corridor. She could see no one except two women at the nurses station. One of them looked up as she came out. Marlene was practically dragging her down the hall.

"Slow down," Tifa said.

"But we've got to hurry," Marlene replied.

"And where do you think you're going?" the nurse questioned, starting over toward her.

"Just want to get a little air," Tifa replied with a weak smile.

"Now you know the Doctor's orders," the nurse admonished. "You're not supposed to be walking until at least tomorrow."

"I know," Tifa said contritely. "But I'm just soooo bored in that room. Can't I just go for a little walk? I promise it won't be far, just down to the end of the corridor, and I'll come right back. C'mon, how much could that hurt?"

Marlene was still tugging at her arm.

The nurse looked at her dubiously.

"If Doctor Samuels finds out I could get in deep trouble," she said.

"We promise not to say a word about it," Tifa responded.

The nurse looked back at the second woman, who just shrugged.

"I guess it's all right," she said, turning back towards them.

Even as she did so four men stepped around the corner at the far end of the corridor. Tifa's head jerked up, staring at the figures, as they hesitated, looking at her. Even from this far away, she could see the Mako glow in their eyes.

A smile curled on the lips of the man in front.

Tifa grabbed hold of Marlene's hand.

"Run."

She sped down the corridor, away from the men, now dragging Marlene behind her. She heard the nurse shout in protest, but then the nurse spun around in confusion as the men ran past her. A moment later Tifa had turned the corner and the others vanished from view. She raced down the hallway, running as fast as Marlene could go. They reached another intersection and Tifa turned to the right.

"No," Marlene exclaimed, "That's a dead end. This way!" she said, pointing to the left.

They ran the way Marlene indicated. Tifa glanced back the way they had come for a moment. She caught a glimpse of the men coming around the far corner, then she was running down the corridor again, this time with Marlene in front.

They came to a door and Marlene flung it open. Tifa could see a stairwell beyond.

"In here," Marlene said.

Tifa followed Marlene in and they ran down the stairs. They had only gone down one flight when they heard the door slam open above them. Marlene pulled the door to the second floor open and ran through. Tifa slipped through as well. They stood in an empty hallway.

"Which way?" Tifa questioned. She had never been out of her room since she had arrived here. She had no idea where they were.

"This way," Marlene said, running down the corridor again. Turning seemingly at random, she led them quickly through a maze of hallways. Tifa kept glancing back, but she could no longer see any sign of pursuit. They came around another turn and Tifa pulled up short, leaning forward and breathing heavily. She hadn't been out of bed for more than a few minutes in days. She felt light headed and she almost stumbled.

Marlene grabbed hold of her.

"Are you all right?" she said.

Tifa nodded, bringing her hand up to her head. She hadn't realized just how weak she was. She shook her head to clear it and looked up again.

"Yeah," she replied. "But I can't keep this up for long. We're going to have to find a place to hide."

Marlene nodded and led her further down the corridor at a cautious walk. Tifa followed, still glancing behind her every few seconds. She wondered just who these men were who were pursuing her. It seemed likely that this was related to the first attacks upon them, and the bombing. They were probably here to finish the job. She should have known, had she thought about it. Actually it was kind of surprising they had taken this long. After all, she had remained here like a sitting duck all this time.

But maybe they had gone after the others first. Maybe they were all already dead and they had saved her for last because she was such an easy target. After all she hadn't heard from any of the others in days.

She shook her head. She couldn't let herself believe that. They had tried to kill the members of Avalanche in a surprise attack and had failed, surely they couldn't have defeated them now that they were prepared.

That didn't change the fact that her situation was dire. She couldn't expect help from any of the others. She didn't know where they were, but she was sure wherever it was, it was far from here. She had no way to contact them or any reason to believe that they knew she was in the slightest danger. Whatever might happen, she was on her own.

They entered another stairway and made their way down to the first floor. Marlene opened the door at the bottom a crack and looked out, then pulled it wide when she saw the way was clear.

Tifa lowered her head and clenched her fists. Even completely healthy, she doubted she could defeat four mako enhanced warriors by herself, and in her present condition she probably wouldn't last five minutes against them.

She looked at Marlene, walking silently in front of her. If it hadn't been for her the men would have taken Tifa completely by surprise. Marlene had probably saved her life, yet she still felt a pang of guilt. The men had seen them together, and that put Marlene in danger as well. The last thing she wanted was for Barret's little girl to get hurt.

"Where's the main entrance from here?" Tifa asked.

"Down the hall and left, then left again," Marlene said.

"Let's go," Tifa said with sudden determination.

Marlene gave her a puzzled look.

"Don't you think they'll be watching there?" she asked.

Tifa shrugged. She had to get Marlene out of here safely. She was tempted to tell Marlene to go on by herself, but the men would never let her go now that they knew she was with Tifa. But if the men saw them both and they split up, she was sure the men would follow her.

"If we see any of them, I want you to run for the front entrance," she said. "No matter what happens to me. Do you understand?"

Marlene looked at her with a worried expression.

"No I don't," she said. "I thought you wanted to hide. I know a lot of good places."

For a moment Tifa didn't answer. She had to admit the idea was tempting. But she had a feeling the men would not give up, even if they had to search every inch of the place. The last thing she wanted to do was get trapped somewhere with Marlene. They were after her, but she didn't know what they would do to Marlene if they caught them both. They might just ignore her, or they might kill her too. She couldn't take the chance.

"It's too risky," she replied. "We've got to make a run for it."

The worried look on Marlene's face did not change, but she nodded and led them onward.

As they neared the front entrance they slowed, looked around carefully. The entrance fronted a large lobby leading up to the reception desk. Tifa scanned the area. There were a number of people in the room, but she could see no sign of the men who were chasing them.

She came up beside Marlene.

"Okay, let's go," she said. "Remember, if any of those men come after us, I want you to run out the door. Head back to Elmyra's house. I'll meet you there later."

"Aunt Tifa..." Marlene began.

"Just do as I say!" Tifa said sharply.

Marlene bit her lip and fell silent.

Tifa took her hand and led her out into the lobby, walking at a steady pace. She kept glancing around, but she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Miss Lockheart!"

She spun around to see Dr. Samuels striding over toward her.

"What are you doing out of bed?" he exclaimed sternly. "You know you're too weak yet to be wandering around. How did the nurse let you out of the room?"

"It's not her fault," Tifa replied. "I left on my own."

"Whatever for?" he said in exasperation. "I'm afraid you're taking this whole thing much too lightly. Don't you realize you could do yourself serious damage by getting up this soon. If you tear the sutures you could cause serious internal injuries. You may have to be operated on again, you could even die."

Tifa glanced up suddenly and saw one of the men standing in the hallway behind Dr. Samuels.

She let go of Marlene's hand and looked at her, motioning with her head toward the door.

"Go," she said.

She turned back to Dr. Samuels.

"I really don't have time for this," she said. She turned away but Dr. Samuels suddenly grappled hold of her arm.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist," he said. He looked over toward the reception desk.

"Call an orderly to get Miss Lockheart a wheelchair," he ordered.

Tifa turned and looked at Marlene, who was halfway to the door. Suddenly she spotted another one of the men. He appeared coming out of another corridor near the entrance. He was heading straight for Marlene.

Tifa pulled her arm back, jerking it out of Dr. Samuel's hand. She charged toward the man going after Marlene, who had not seen her yet.

"Hey!" she yelled.

Fielder turned to look at her and caught a foot in his face. He stumbled back, not expecting the blow. Tifa followed up her attack with half a dozen punches to his head and torso, striking as hard as she could. For a moment the man just defended himself, but he recovered quickly. Suddenly his arm shot out, striking Tifa just below her left shoulder. She flew backwards and ended up sprawled on the floor. She lifted her head and shook it to clear it. Her left shoulder felt like it had been run into a brick wall. It was the hardest she had ever felt anyone hit her in her life.

Ignoring the pain she sprang to her feet again. Her opponent was attacking now, and she dodged out of the way as he swung at her head. She kicked sharply and hit him in the leg, but it didn't seem to have much effect. She twisted back and forth as the man struck at her, missing with half a dozen blows. She didn't want to get hit again, but she didn't think she could keep dodging forever.

Even as she thought this another blow struck home, hitting her in the side of the head. And even though it was just a glancing blow, it was still strong enough to leave her head spinning. She stumbled and the man grabbed hold of her arm, his grip so tight she thought her arm was caught in a vice.

She kicked at the man again, hitting him solidly just below the knee, but he hauled her closer and grinned at her evilly. She could see the other one, the one she had seen first, was nearly upon them as well.

Suddenly the man was knocked aside, and his grip on Tifa loosened. She pulled away, and was startled to see that Dr. Samuel's had thrown himself into Fielder, knocking him off balance.

Fielder's arm shot out, and Dr. Samuels was tossed across the room like a rag doll.

Tifa turned and ran. She bolted out the door, half running, half staggering, her breath coming in ragged gasps. She shaded her eyes in the bright sunlight. She hadn't been outside in days, and the sun beat down almost directly above her. Her heart was beating a mile a minute, and she felt light headed again. The exertion of the battle had almost been too much for her. There was a strange buzzing in her ears.

"Tifa!"

She looked up, blinking in the light, to see Marlene standing at the bottom of the stairs, beckoning to her. What was she still doing here?

The doors to the hospital were suddenly flung wide. The riders came out, all four of them together now. They saw Tifa immediately, standing half way down the stairs trying to catch her breath. It was obvious to all that she could not possibly outrun them. She saw a smile form on Rios' face once more, and then the riders advanced.

Tifa ran down to the bottom of the stairs, stumbling slightly, barely able to remain erect. Marlene ran off and disappeared around a corner. Tifa reached the bottom and leaned heavily against the stone handrail. She couldn't run anymore.

She turned to face her pursuers.

"Hardly seems fair the four of you against one injured girl," she heard from behind her.

She turned around with a gasp, her heart leaping. Standing not ten feet from here were Cloud, Zack, and Reeve.

"Cloud," she said, hardly believing her own eyes.

She ran over to him, feeling renewed vigor. He reached out to her and she slipped into his arms. He looked down at her tenderly.

"Are you hurt?" he asked gently.

"I'll live," she replied, her shoulder still aching. "I feel much better now that you're here."

"I was afraid we wouldn't make it in time," he replied. He glanced at the riders, who had stopped in their tracks at the appearance of the newcomers. But Rios quickly adjusted to the new situation. He drew his sword, which had remained in its sheath during their pursuit of Tifa. His plan had worked better and faster than he had thought.

Cloud released Tifa, who turned to stand beside her friends, looking at the riders defiantly. Cloud and Zack pulled out their weapons simultaneously, while Reeve drew out his shotgun. They all assumed battle stance.

"Well, you've proven adept at hounding one young woman," Cloud said, looking at the riders with grim determination. "Now let's see how you fare in a real fight!"

The silence was broken by a series of far off explosions.

"Looks like Talon has started his attack," Ellengio observed.

They all turned and looked toward the reactor, just down the block from them now. They expected to see people coming out to look around, to see what was going on. But no one did. The street in front of them was empty.

They waited. There was the sound of more explosions. It went on for several minutes before it faded into silence, but still nothing stirred on the road in front of them. It was as if this part of town was completely deserted.

Ellengio frowned.

"Something's wrong," he said slowly. Their little diversion was supposed to have drawn the guards out of the reactor.

No one responded. They stood there in silence for a few more minutes, until the others began to look at Ellengio expectantly.

"Well, let's go take a look," he said slowly. "It's too late to turn back now."

He started down the road, the others right behind him. They covered the half block in a few minutes and walked up the stairs to the entrance of the reactor. The doors were open, but they saw no one, and the reactor was strangely silent. It appeared as if the whole operation was shut down.

"What's going on?" Elena questioned.

No one replied, but Ellengio's frown deepened. He didn't like this at all.

They stood at the top of the stairs now, the inside of the reactor in plain view. There was no one inside.

Reluctantly, Ellengio led them in.

"This place is quieter than a tomb," Vincent said.

"I wish you hadn't phrased it quite like that," Elena responded, looking around nervously. She already had her gun in her hand.

"Suppose he's not here?" Rude questioned.

"I've got a feeling we'll run into him," Ellengio replied slowly. "This way."

He started up a metal stairway that snaked toward the cavernous upper reaches of the reactor. They passed through a maze of catwalks and hanging platforms, Ellengio choosing the path slowly, always leading them upward. Eventually they reached a long straight catwalk that led to a dark corridor in the wall near the top of the structure.

It was dark in the corridor, for it was unlit, and there were no windows. The only light was what filtered in from the reactor room behind them. The walls were close and the ceiling low, so that Rude almost had to stoop to get through. Elena felt claustrophobic after the wide open space in the other room.

The corridor turned and led up a flight of stairs. Again they climbed. Elena was starting to get tired, but she knew it couldn't go on much longer. They had to be near the top.

Even as she thought this the light grew in front of them and they saw the stairway end, opening up into a room above them. As they stepped into it they saw it was a wide circular room, the walls built of glass. They must have been very high up, for they had a panoramic view of the surrounding countryside through the windows.

"I've been expecting you."

In the center of the room the Healer sat behind a desk, leaning back in a lounge chair, gazing at them with a piercing eye.

"You knew we were here," Ellengio stated.

The Healer slowly stood up.

"Of course," he replied matter-of-factly. "I detected you as soon as you set foot in Gongaga."

He looked at Ellengio

"Do you think a Destroyer could approach me without my feeling your presence?"

Ellengio did not reply. The others came up and stood beside him. Vincent and Rude both unholstered their weapons.

"Although I have to admit I'm surprised," the Healer continued. "I never thought you could even get to Gongaga without being detected. If nothing else, you've impressed me with your ingenuity."

"I didn't know there were any Destroyers left on this planet. And now you're the second one I've run into. An unpleasant surprise, but one I can deal with. Actually you've done me a favor. I would have had to eliminate you eventually, and having you come to me is much easier than chasing you down. If only you had brought the crystal materia with you, I could kill you all and call it a day. Ah well, things don't always work out the way you planned, but at least I'll have the pleasure of getting rid of you now."

"That might not be as easy as you think," Elena interjected.

The Healer turned his eyes to her.

"Ah yes, the puny humans. Always full of bravado, if nothing else. But easily manipulated. What did you do to them to get them to come along with you?"

"They came of their own free will," Ellengio replied.

"Really?" the Healer said, raising an eyebrow. "Interesting. I had no idea these humans would face death so willingly. Maybe there's more to them than meets the eye."

"Count on it," Elena replied angrily. "And you'll find out soon enough that we're not puny!"

"Is that so?" the Healer questioned, a smile forming on his face.

Suddenly his fist shot out, and though he was almost twenty feet away from her, his arm seemed to lengthen, and the fist grew as it approached, until it seemed half the size of Elena by the time it reached her. Before anyone could move the fist had slammed into her, sending her spinning backwards, her gun flying from her hand. She hit the ground hard, and lay still.

Both Vincent and Rude opened up with their weapons, and just like that, the battle was joined.

The Healer turned toward Ellengio, ignoring the gunfire. He brought his hands forward and a blast of fire shot out, totally enveloping his opponent, but when it cleared, Ellengio was unhurt, and Vincent and Rude found they were both protected by wall.

Elena stumbled to her feet. She had been momentarily stunned, and her right knee felt like it was on fire, but she ignored the pain. She reached down and pulled out a green materia orb. She concentrated on it and the Healer was hit with a blast of lightening.

Rude emptied another clip firing at the Healer, then dropped his gun, pulling out materia as well. The bullets didn't seem to be doing much damage. Vincent, however, was still blasting away with the death penalty.

The Healer unleashed a series of elemental attacks. All aimed at Ellengio. He totally ignored the others, as if they didn't matter, as if they weren't there. Ellengio slowly retreated. Wall protected him, but he had to recast once, and then again. The attacks were slowly sapping his strength, and the Healer seemed to be as strong as ever.

Vincent suddenly ran forward, blasting away at point blank range with the death penalty. For the first time since he had hit Elena, the Healer turned his attention to one of the humans. As if swatting an annoying fly, his arm swept out, hitting Vincent and sending him staggering backwards. But instead of falling to the ground as Elena had, with an animal roar he suddenly transformed into the Chaos beast.

He immediately lunged forward once again, slashing at the Healer with his huge claws. The Healer, caught by surprise by this sudden transformation, was thrown back.

Ellengio, the pressure off him for a moment, pulled out a materia orb Cloud had given him before they parted. Red light flared about him.

"Ultimate end!"

In quick succession the thirteen knights materialized and struck at the Healer, then faded quickly away. When the last had done it's damage the Healer was on his knees, but still alive. He staggered to his feet, obviously severely wounded, and cast Ellengio a look of hatred.

"I see I have underestimated you all," he said. "But you have done your worst and I still stand. You have wounded me, but not to the death, and this battle is far from over."

He looked over at the monster Vincent had transformed into.

"I didn't know humans possessed such a capability. But you're not the only one who can perform that little trick."

The Healer raised his hands above his head, and when he spoke, his voice thundered through the room.

"Jenova Cosmos!"

Captain Tananka sat with his feet propped up on the control panel in front of him. He could see the hospital in the distance, the upper floors protruding above a low hill to the north. The Vengeful Wind was parked on a baseball field at a park half a block from the hospital. It was the closest place he could find to land.

He glanced back and looked at the young woman pacing back and forth behind him, absently tossing her rod from one hand to the other. She had been doing that from the moment her friends had left the aircraft. But he had noticed that her pacing had slowly brought her closer to the front of the plane, and the exit.

She was walking right behind his chair now, concern etched on her face. It was driving him crazy, but he held his tongue. He thought he knew how worried she was about her friends.

Suddenly she stopped and looked at him.

"I've got to go after them."

He sighed.

"Cloud told you to stay here," he said.

She gave him a sharp look.

"He can't tell me what to do," she replied.

Tananka lifted his feet off the control panel and planted them firmly on the floor, swiveling around to face her.

"Look, I don't pretend to know what's going on here, but from what I understand these men you're chasing are after something you have. As long as you're in this aircraft you're safe, cause if they show up we can just take off. But if you go there there's no telling what will happen. I won't be able to protect you."

"I realize that," she stated.

"And if those guys get whatever you have, it'll be a real bad thing, won't it?" he continued. "Not just for you, but for everyone. Am I right?"

Aeris nodded slowly.

"I believe so."

"So, given all that, do you really think it's a good idea for you to go out there?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"Yes, I understand all that. But I also understand something else that's even more important. And that's that my friends need me. Now let me out."

This time it was his turn to hesitate. He had a feeling letting her go would be a very bad thing, but he really didn't have any way to keep her. She wasn't in the military, he couldn't order her to do anything. She was a grown adult who could make up her own mind.

His hand reached out and pressed a button. The door slid open.

"I've got a real bad feeling about this," he said. "Be careful, okay?"

She smiled.

"Thank you, I will."

And then she ran out the door.

Cloud and Zack sprang forward, taking their attack to their enemy, as was their style.

Reeve slowly retreated. Knowing from previous experience that his shotgun would not be of much use, they had loaded him down with materia. Now he pulled out the summon orbs and cast Bahamut ZERO, Odin and Typhoon in quick succession. The riders easily survived the attacks, which was not surprising. They had all know this would not be an easy fight. But the attacks did draw the riders attention to him, and one of them sprang forward, right at him, forcing him to abandon his materia attack and defend himself.

Unfortunately, he didn't have much defense against the riders attack except to dodge out of the way. He knew he didn't even have the skill of his companions, much less the ability to go toe to toe with the riders. He leapt to the side as Garn's sword swung, Reeve pulling out his shotgun at the same. The rider pivoted toward him and swung again, but even as he did so Reeve caught him with a blast from his gun and the man stumbled back momentarily. Reeve fired again, this time knocking Garn to his knees, but then the rider shook his head, slowly got back to his feet, and came at Reeve again.

Reeve looked around desperately, but the others were all engaged with an enemy of their own. They could not help him.

The sword flashed again, and in desperation Reeve tried to block the blow with his own weapon. The blade embedded itself in the shotgun with a crack, nearly cleaving it in half. The rider pulled the sword back, wrenching the gun out of Reeve's hands. The rider shook the sword angrily, but the gun remained stuck on the end of it. With a snort of disgust he tossed both weapons aside and came at Reeve bare handed.

Reeve brought his fists up and dropped into a boxing stance. He had taken a few boxing lessons when he had been younger, but that had been a long time ago. He knew the intelligent thing to do would be to turn around and run like hell, and not long ago that would be exactly what he would have done. But he wasn't going to do that now. He wasn't going to abandon his friends.

The rider came within range and Reeve struck, jabbing quickly with his right hand. His opponent made no attempt to evade or block the blow. It hit Garn solidly on the jaw.

Reeve pulled his hand back, crying out in pain. He felt like he had hit a brick wall. Garn, on the other hand, shrugged the blow off at if it had been nothing. Suddenly his fist shot out, striking Reeve on the left side of his face. Reeve went flying backwards and landed on the ground in a heap. In agony, he brought his hands up and wrapped them around his head. Through a fog of pain he was aware that the rider was coming toward him again. He struggled feebly to get up, but then another wave of pain swept over him. Slowly he sank back to the ground.

Zack wove a wall of solid steel in front of himself. His style was similar to Cloud's, though a tad less aggressive. Cloud went after his opponent immediately, trying to finish him off as quickly as possible, supremely confident. Zack was a bit more cautious. He could go after someone just as aggressively, but he preferred to try to learn his opponents strengths and weaknesses first. At some point a weakness always showed up, and then he would attack the weakness without mercy.

Except that this time he couldn't seem to find any weakness. His opponent was matching him stroke for stroke, parrying all of Zack's probing attacks and countering swiftly and efficiently.

Zack had started out forcing Darron back, but slowly his retreat slackened, until neither one of them was getting nor giving much ground. Zack couldn't find any weakness in his opponents attack, but his enemy couldn't seem to get at him either.

For long minutes they battled back and forth, the swords flying faster and faster. The situation appeared to be static, but Zack knew it was not that simple. He was well aware that he could not keep up this furious pace for more than a few minutes. He could feel the sweat dripping down his forehead already, while his opponent looked as fresh as when he had started.

Slowly Zack started to retreat. Darron came forward, pressing his attack even more furiously, though Zack had not thought that possible. He realized if he did not do something soon, he would not win this battle.

Summoning what was left of his strength he attacked viciously. He knew he had to end this soon if he expected to win at all, so he put all his effort into one last all out attack.

By necessity, however, the attack had to be reckless. His own attack left him vulnerable to a counter. His opponents sword suddenly slipped by him, tearing into his arm. With a cry of pain his own sword flew from his hand and he collapsed to the ground, clutching his arm.

Tifa started off in retreat. The odds had improved with the appearance of her friends, but it wasn't over yet. She had already taken on the riders, and she knew how dangerous they were. If she were at full strength, she believed herself a match for one of them, but in her weakened condition she knew she was in for a difficult fight.

Fielder came straight at her, not bothering to draw his sword. She suddenly lunged forward and struck at him, then twisted quickly out of the way before he could retaliate. She repeated this pattern several times. The man was quick, and a couple of times his fist almost struck her, but she managed to avoid it. Still, she knew it was just a matter of time before her luck ran out, and in the meantime she was trying to do as much damage as she could.

Unfortunately that seemed to be precious little. She wasn't wasting any chances. She knew she couldn't fool around with this guy. Every blow she struck was designed to be crippling, aimed at the most vulnerable parts of a human body. She wasn't pulling any punches, but even so she didn't seem to be hurting the man at all. Even blows that would have killed an ordinary man seemed to be having little effect on her enemy.

She dashed in once more, kicking sharply into Fielder's groin. The man brought his hand slashing down across her knee. She cried out and fell backwards to the ground. The man lunged for her, but she twisted out of the way, swinging her leg around and kicking him on the side of the head. He kept after her, kicking her in the small of the back and forcing another cry out of her.

She rolled out of the way and suddenly leapt up. Faster than he thought possible she dashed toward him, pummeling him with a quick combination of blows. She flipped in the air, kicking him in the face, then swept another kick into his side. She dashed to the side, then was suddenly behind him. She grabbed hold of him and lifted.

And suddenly she felt a white hot pain stabbing through her side. She collapsed to the ground, her whole left side where they had performed the surgery burning in pain. She found herself rolling on the ground, no longer concerned with her opponent, her mind totally taken over by the pain that wracked her body. She twisted on the ground, curling up into a ball, her arms clenched around her abdomen, and just tried to remain conscious.

Cloud slowly forced his opponent back. He went all out, as usual, attacking viciously with little thought of defense. Two or three times his opponents blade slipped through his defenses, but each time his cat like reflexes saved him from anything worse than a harmless small cut on his left arm. Meanwhile, he pressed the attack forward, their blades striking furiously

against one another. In spite of the savagery of his attack, his opponent continued to hold him off. Although he thought he had him several times, Cloud's sword failed to get past Rios' guard.

Rios was still retreating, but more slowly now. He could do little more than defend himself at the moment, but he knew no one could keep up an attack like that forever. Eventually Cloud would have to tire, and then he would have his chance.

Yet even after some minutes had passed, Cloud still struck at him with the same vigor he had at the beginning of the fight. The truth was Cloud was beginning to tire, but he figured his opponent had to be at least as tired as he was, and he wasn't about to let up now. He would fight as hard as he could until he either killed his opponent or fell to the floor in exhaustion.

Suddenly Rios, who was still slowly retreating, caught his foot on a tuft of grass. He stumbled slightly, righting himself immediately, but it was enough. Cloud's sword slashed in across the man's leg and came back red.

Rios jumped backwards, regaining his balance almost immediately. The wound was not fatal, but it was fairly deep and painful. Cloud knew it would hinder the man, and with that he attacked with renewed vigor, trying to finish Rios off.

His opponent continued to parry. Although he seemed to have recovered, his injury was hampering his movement. He was defending himself, but he no longer was launching any counterattacks. He had been put solely on the defensive.

Cloud slashed back and forth, pounding on the man's blade. Rios stumbled again and Cloud came forward, his own blade knocking his enemy's sword away. But even as he was poised to strike another blow he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned just in time to parry a blow from another of the riders who had been coming up behind him.

Rios leaped up, suddenly on the offensive again as Cloud tried to hold off the two of them. Cloud looked around and saw all his friends on the ground. One rider was standing over Zack, and the fourth was running toward Cloud as well.

A blade slashed at him again, drawing blood from a cut across his forehead. He parried furiously, trying to keep the two men in front of him. He jabbed at one and felt the sting of a blade once more. He leapt back, slashing furiously in front of him. Now the third one has joined his friends. Cloud slashed back and forth, trying to keep them away from him, but they pressed the attack. Cloud twisted out of the way of one blade, then caught another sword awkwardly with his own, causing him to fall to his knees. The riders closed in around him.

"Stop it!"

They all turned to see Aeris standing not far away. In her hands she was clutching a large clear jewel.

"Here it is!" she shouted, holding the jewel in front of her. "Here's the crystal materia. This is what you want, isn't it? They don't have it, I do. So leave my friends alone!"

The four riders stood there for a moment looking at her. Then, without a word or a glance back, they all started toward her.

Cloud struggled to his feet. What the hell was Aeris doing? Why hadn't she stayed in the plane like he told her. It didn't matter what happened to them. It was the crystal materia that they had to keep safe.

He scrambled forward, but he was fatigued from his attack and the numerous wounds upon him. He could see the riders converging on Aeris, who had not moved. He could not reach them before they were upon her.

He felt his heart suddenly start to beat wildly. Again Aeris was in danger, and again he could not help her. Suddenly he felt the same horrible feeling he had when he had seen Sephiroth dropping down upon her, sword poised for the kill. It couldn't happen again. It just couldn't. He wouldn't be able to bear it.

"Aeris, run!" he cried out.

Tifa had also managed to regain her feet, even though the pain nearly caused her to double over. She was looking at Aeris as well, and shared Cloud's feeling of dread. But she noticed something else as well. The expression on Aeris' face was different from anything she had ever seen. It was easy to identify, but it surprised her nonetheless, for she had never seen that expression on the young Cetra's face before.

Aeris was furious.

The riders were only a few paces away from her now. She drew her hands back, clasping them in front of her body, covering up the crystal materia. Suddenly light seemed to shimmer around her. A bright incandescent point of light appeared in front of her. It started out as a mere pinpoint, but even then it was so bright it was hard to look at. The riders saw it and hesitated.

The light suddenly grew, becoming larger and brighter still. It illuminated the riders starkly, and they cowered back from it, seeming to diminish in its presence. But Cloud and his friends suddenly felt renewed hope, just from the sight of it. They had seen that light before, when Ellengio had confronted the riders at Cosmo Canyon.

Aeris looked up at each of the riders, apparently unaffected by the blinding light that now blazed right in front of her. Her eyes were filled with a burning fire.

"Banish...."

She thrust her hands forward.

"EVIL!" she shouted.

Though Cloud had thought the light blinding before, it now increased a thousandfold. He had to shade his eyes and turn away as huge streams of incandescent light flashed outward. The beams washed over him, but caused no harm. In fact, he felt his heart lighten, even as he had in Cosmo Canyon. But this time even more so. This was stronger than when Ellengio had done it.

Tifa had turned away too. But eventually her eyes adjusted enough to look toward Aeris again. She had not moved. She was staring straight ahead, as the waves of light continued to stream out from in front of her. Tifa tried to catch a glimpse of the riders, but there was no sign of them.

She staggered over to Aeris, the pain in her side still severe. Aeris did not acknowledge her approach in any way, but just stood there, her arms out in front of her clasping the crystal materia, a look of grim concentration on her face. The light continued to shine in front of her. She seemed to be almost in a trance.

"Aeris," Tifa said.

The Ancient did not respond. Tifa could see sweat on her brow and her face was pale.

"Aeris, stop," Tifa tried again. "They're gone. You've done it. It's over."

Aeris still did not respond.

"Aeris, stop!" Tifa repeated, more sharply. "You'll kill yourself."

She grabbed hold of Aeris shoulder.

The light suddenly faded away, even more quickly than it appeared. At the same time the fire went out in Aeris eyes. She stood there blinking for a moment, then turned to Tifa and smiled.

"It's good to see you again," she said. "We were worried."

Aeris swayed unsteadily. Tifa reached out and a moment later Aeris collapsed into her friend's arms.

The room seemed to darken. The Jenova entity that had been the Healer rose up in front of them, rapidly growing until it towered over their heads. The skin turned black and huge scales appeared covering it. The arms elongated and mouths formed on the end of each one, filled with six inch long teeth. Huge claws sprung from the four feet that now supported its tremendous bulk, and a series of spikes formed running down the creatures back and long tail, which ended in a thick club.

Vincent was the first to recover. The Chaos beast launched itself forward, tearing into the flank of his opponent with its claws. The Jenova entity flicked its tail, slamming into the side of the Chaos beast and sending it tumbling across the room.

Jenova jumped forward, both mouths lunging at Ellengio, who once more became the focus of the monster's attack. Ellengio dodged out of the way, narrowly avoiding the snapping teeth.

Elena, who was too weak to cast anymore spells, pulled out her gun and started blasting away, slowly stepping back in spite of herself. She had not been in the northern crater. She had not fought Jenova the first time, not seen any of its transformations, save that of Tarkin, but he had been just a pale shadow of what stood before them now.

Rude stood nearby. He still was blasting away with ice materia, trying to draw Jenova's attention away from Ellengio. The arms and mouths of the Jenova entity continued to snap at Ellengio, but the tail swung around and both Rude and Elena had to dive to the ground to avoid being struck.

Ellengio dodged yet again, but fell to the ground in the process. One of the mouths sprang toward him, but then the Chaos beast lunged forward again, grabbing hold of the arm and ripping at it, sending a spray of blood scattering across the room. The Jenova entity roared loudly and the arm shook savagely, trying to dislodge Vincent, but he held on until the tail swung around and knocked him to the floor.

Suddenly bright pinpoints of light surrounded Ellengio. The lights swept outward toward the others, surrounding them in a strange yellow aura. One of Jenova's feet lashed out, cutting across Rude, who had ventured too close, but it had no effect.

The others charged forward, realizing they were protected by Ellengio's spell of invulnerability. But even as they attacked Jenova suddenly reared back, its arms lifting to the sky. And suddenly a wind whipped down from above them. In seconds it had grown to a whistling gale. A huge vortex of wind appeared in front of them, with the Jenova entity in the center and blowing outward.

Elena felt herself slowing as she fought the wind, leaning into it as it blew stronger and stronger, until, in spite of all her efforts, she found herself being pushed slowly back. She struggled a few moments more, firing her gun until the clip was empty. Then she dropped the gun as she found her feet being lifted off the ground. She fell to the ground, flattening herself to the ground in an effort to stay in place, but even so she found herself sliding backwards still.

The wind continued to increase, until it was a raging hurricane around them, forcing them all back. There was a tremendous crash as the windows suddenly blew out on all sides of the room. Elena felt sudden terror. She was still sliding backwards, being pushed towards the far wall, only with the glass gone there was no wall. The only thing holding up the ceiling was the metal supports that had stood between the glass frames, and none of them were close enough for her to reach. There was nothing to stop her from being thrown right out of the building into the void beyond.

She turned away, clawing desperately on the floor, trying to dig her fingernails into the polished wood. But to no avail. She looked back once again, the floor ended just a few feet away, and she was sliding even faster across the floor now. She lunged desperately toward one of the supports that had held the glass, but she knew she could not reach it. Then she shut her eyes and screamed as she felt herself going over the edge.

But even as she did she suddenly felt a strong hand grab hold of her, and her movement was arrested. She opened her eyes to find herself dangling in the air, the ground far below, held firmly in place by the clawed hand of the Chaos beast.

Elena shut her eyes again and took a deep breath, realizing that she had forgotten to do that the last few moments. She opened her eyes again, being careful not to look down this time. The Chaos beast stood unmoving right on the edge of the building, grasping her firmly with one hand. She could not see his other hand, but she supposed he had the claws of that hand firmly dug into the floor.

A few moments later the wind above them diminished, the spell finally spent. The Chaos beast lifted her up as if she were a child and dropped her down on the floor once again. She looked over to see both Ellengio and Rude standing not far away. Apparently they had found something to hold on to as well.

She didn't have time to chat with them, however, for the Jenova beast charged at them yet again, and Elena realized that the yellow aura Ellengio had cast on them had faded. Their invulnerability had worn off.

Yet again, Jenova concentrated his attacks on Ellengio, who continued to dodge out of the way, but launched no more attacks of his own. The fight had worn them all out, and Elena guessed that none of them had the strength to cast anymore spells.

Still, that gave Jenova a huge advantage. None of them, not even Vincent transformed as the Chaos beast, had the physical strength to stand up to Jenova in its present form.

Elena looked around for her gun, but she could see no sign of it. It had probably been blown to the ground below. Without either her gun or the ability to use materia, she was pretty much relegated to being a bystander.

Rude fired a few more shots out of his gun, then dropped the empty clip. He felt around for another one, but he had used his last.

Ellengio seemed in desperate trouble now. He was scrambling madly to stay out of reach of the snapping mouths at the end of both arms of the Jenova entity, but he could not keep up that kind of acrobatics forever, and his strength was rapidly diminishing. He couldn't possibly last much longer.

The Chaos beast continued to attack. The only one left who appeared to be able to do any damage to Jenova at all, but it seemed too little too late. Vincent kept springing forward to tear at Jenova, but each time he was quickly tossed away, and he was taking as much of a beating as he was giving. Elena could see numerous wounds crisscrossing his body.

Suddenly Jenova's tail swung around. Ellengio tried to dodge, but he stopped as one of the snapping mouths blocked his path. The club at the end of the tail smashed directly into him. He was flung across the room to land in a heap not far from Elena.

"No," she cried out, hurrying over to him.

She knelt down beside him, Rude coming over as well. Ellengio did not move, but a quick inspection showed he was still breathing, if barely.

Elena stood up as Jenova approached. Both she and Rude took a step forward, until they stood between Jenova and the unconscious body of Ellengio. She noticed Vincent come up beside her as well.

The Jenova entity reared it's arms up, knowing that it stood on the brink of victory, but the three companions did not flinch. Elena looked up into the cold yellow eyes of the creature in front of them, and even as she did so they all heard a low rumbling sound from outside.

"We may only be puny humans," Elena said. "But there's one thing that we can do that you can't."

The Jenova entity did not respond, but it hesitated. She could see a change in it's eyes, but she could not tell what it meant. She had a feeling, however, that it was a flicker of doubt.

"We can make really big weapons," Elena finished.

Even as she did so, directly behind her a huge black jet hovered up into view. Elena and her companions threw themselves to the ground. For a moment time seemed suspended. The Jenova entity stood in front of them, unmoving, with the Slipstream suspended in the air in front of it. The yellow eyes of their opponent focused on the jet, and for a second he could see the pilot, a blonde haired man with a cigarette in his mouth. For a moment their eyes met, locking on to each other. The expression the man wore was of a cat about to pounce on an unsuspecting mouse.

"Chew on these, you Goddamn space freak," Cid muttered and pressed the firing mechanism.

Before Jenova could react, a barrage of missiles streaked out of the Slipstream, slamming into the creature at point blank range. Elena lay on the floor, her hands covering her head as the roar of explosions sounded all around her, praying to God that the ceiling wouldn't come down on all of them. She lay there for what seemed like forever, the explosions deafening her and the floor shaking beneath her. But eventually the echoes of the explosions died away, until all that was left was the roar of the Slipstream's engines.

Slowly she lifted her head. She saw Vincent, now returned to his normal self, and Rude looking around as well. There was very little left of Jenova.

She heard a groan and turned to see Ellengio stirring. She went over to him and knelt beside him. He lifted himself up and looked around slowly.

"Did it work?" he asked groggily.

"Like a charm," she replied with a smile. "We did it. Jenova has been defeated."