

### CHAPTER III: I THINK I'VE CREATED A MONSTER, OR TWO

"Mr. Strife."

Cloud looked up to see two men approaching. One was the doctor he had spoken to after Tifa's surgery. The second man he did not recognize.

Cloud stood up.

"This is Dr. Nathan," the doctor said, indicating the second man. "He's the specialist from Mideel I told you about."

They shook hands.

Dr. Nathan motioned to the chairs.

"Come, sit down," he said.

They all sat down. Cloud looked at the man nervously.

"As I'm sure my colleague has already told you, Miss. Lockhart's condition is quite serious. We'd done everything we can using conventional means, but I'm afraid it is not going to be enough. It is my opinion that without drastic intervention she will not survive more than twenty four to forty eight hours."

Cloud's face went pale.

"What do you mean by drastic intervention?" he questioned slowly. "Using materia?"

Dr. Nathan shook his head.

"We've tried using cure spells, but the damage is too severe. I'm afraid that normal use of materia is not going to help us."

Cloud said nothing and bit his lower lip. He could feel his heart constricting in his chest, but he couldn't give up hope yet. These men obviously had something in mind.

"So what are you suggesting?" he asked.

Dr. Nathan hesitated for a moment, looking at his colleague, but then he spoke.

"It's my opinion that the only chance we have of saving her is with a Mako infusion."

Cloud's eyes widened in surprise.

"A Mako infusion?" he repeated.

Dr. Nathan nodded and looked at the other man again.

"Dr. Samuels does not agree," he said. "But it is my belief that it's the only way."

They were all silent for a moment.

"But don't you need a Mako reactor to do that?" Cloud asked.

Dr. Nathan shook his head.

"If we were trying to create an army, yes, but for one person, we can use the energy stored in materia."

Cloud looked from one to the other.

"But it's dangerous," Dr. Samuels spoke up. "The infusion process is stressful to the body. In Tifa's weakened condition, she might not survive the infusion. We could end up killing her."

"I've been working on this process for quite some time," Dr. Nathan replied. "The technique I use is a lot less stressful than it was when the procedure was first attempted. I think there's a fair chance she will survive."

"A fair chance?" Cloud repeated. Somehow that statement did not inspire much confidence in him.

Dr. Nathan looked at him grimly.

"It's a risk, yes, but I believe it is her best chance at survival. If we don't do anything at all, she will almost assuredly die."

"Almost?" Cloud said. "Is there a chance she could pull through, even without the infusion?"

Dr. Nathan hesitated and glanced over at Dr. Samuels again.

"Dr. Samuels believes so," he said. "But I do not."

Cloud looked at the other man.

"She's been badly hurt," Dr. Samuels said. "I admit she is not doing well, but I believe that we have a slim chance of saving her using normal intervention."

"A slim chance, a fair chance?" Cloud said, looking from one to the other angrily. "Is that all you can tell me? I need something better than that. You're Doctors, tell me what I have to do to save her!"

The two men looked at him for a moment, but neither one spoke. Dr. Nathan took a deep breath.

"We're Doctors, we're not God," he said. "In spite of all our knowledge and technology there are just some things that we do not know. Every person is different. We don't know how any particular individual is going to react to injury. Some people have recovered from injuries when all their Doctors said there was no hope. We can only try our best."

Cloud did not reply, but his anger faded away. Dr. Nathan was right. It was not their fault, what had happened. They were only doing what they could. But that still didn't help Cloud.

He looked at Dr. Nathan.

"Has this ever been tried before?"

"Yes," the doctor replied. "There were a few cases of Mako infusion from materia tried by Shinra."

"And they were successful?"

"Most of them, yes," Dr. Nathan answered. "But this is a unique situation. Most of the others it was tried on were male, and all of them were healthy. I know of only one instance where the infusion was attempted with a female."

Dr. Nathan looked at him once again. He could see the next question forming on Cloud's lips.

"She did not survive," he said.

"Even if we are successful," Dr. Samuels cut in. "We don't know what long term effects this may have on her. As Dr. Nathan just pointed out, no woman has ever survived the process. We just don't know what it will do to her."

Cloud looked down at the floor. They were asking him to make a decision that could end up killing her. How could he choose? He had failed his friends so many times before, how could he possibly make a decision like this?

"Can we just wait and see?" he questioned slowly. "Can we just use normal intervention and if she starts to go downhill, then can we infuse her?"

"She's already weak as it is," Dr. Nathan replied sympathetically. "The longer we wait the weaker she will get, and we need her as strong as possible. If we're going to infuse her, we should be doing it now."

Cloud stood up and looked away from them, out a nearby window. How could he make a decision like this? What they were asking was impossible! He stood there looking out the window for a long time, then he slowly turned back toward the doctors.

"I need to see her."

Dr. Samuels nodded.

"Of course," he said.

Cloud walked back to the room. He sat down on the bed and looked down at Tifa. She hadn't moved since the last time he had seen her. Her face was grey. She looked worse.

Cloud took a deep breath. He couldn't face the possibility that he could lose her. Even more so now that it could be by his decision. He fervently wished that this burden could be passed to someone else.

"How can I do this Tifa?" he asked. "How can I make a decision like this when all of my others have gone so wrong?"

He reached out and took hold of her hand.

"I don't know what to do," he said softly.

He sat there in silence, looking at her. The only sound around them the faint hum of the machinery. Cloud lowered his head. For a fleeting moment he had hoped somehow to have received some indication, some sign from her what he should do, but she remained motionless, almost as if she were already dead.

He felt tears forming in his eyes again, and then a rush of anger as he held them back. He would not cry again! Not now, not until it was over, one way or another. He would be strong, just as he knew she was. In their battles with Sephiroth, in the lifestream, she had always been there, encouraging them on, always fighting, never giving up. She had been so strong for all of them for so long. Perhaps now it was his turn.

He looked at her again.

"I know you can hear me," he said. "I know you're still there, still hanging on. I need you to hear what I'm telling you now. We're going to help you, but I need you to be strong. I know it's hard, but it's just for a little while longer. Just hang on for a little while longer, and it'll all be okay. I'll be right by your side if you need me. I'll be right here, and I swear to you, I won't let you die!"

He looked at her face, hoping for some indication that she had heard, but she did not move. He released her hand and slowly stood up.

It didn't matter. Even if she could not reply, he knew she heard him. He knew he had gotten through, and that she would fight. He couldn't bear seeing her like this any longer. He knew what he had to do.

He walked back out of the room. Both doctors were standing in the hall waiting for him. They looked at him expectantly.

"Do it."

"I'm going to Gongaga and see what I can find out," Zack said.

"I'm going with you," Aeris said immediately.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Zack replied.

"Why not?" Aeris said.

Zack hesitated a moment, looking at her thoughtfully.

"I have a feeling it's going to be dangerous."

Aeris shrugged.

"So?"

"I'd just feel better if you stayed here," he reiterated.

"But I want to come," she replied stubbornly.

Zack looked annoyed.

"Just do as I say," he replied sharply.

He turned away from her and walked over to the others.

Reno and Rude stepped forward.

"Well, we're coming with you," Reno said. "Shera said Cid's plane had been headed south. Someone in Gongaga might have seen it."

Zack nodded and looked at the others.

"The rest of you stay here and help Red."

He fixed his gaze on the red beast.

"What's the situation like?"

Red padded over. They could see the scrape marks along his back from yesterday's battle. The skin had been healed with the help of a cure spell, but the hair had not yet grown back.

"All's quiet right now," Red replied. "But I am troubled nevertheless. There were more attacks last night, worse than ever. I'm afraid we're going to have to start evacuating all the homesteads and farms in the south. I haven't seen this much monster activity since before the fall of Shinra."

Zack nodded. Something was going on. He had a feeling they had only seen the tip of the iceberg.

"Are you sure you can spare us?" Zack asked.

Red nodded.

"We'll be fine," he replied. "But you be careful. Whatever is happening, it seems to be centered in the south. You may be walking right into something."

"We will," Zack assured him.

Red nodded.

"Just in case, I think I can give you something that will help you on your way," he stated. "We've got some chocobo's that I think we can spare. It'll make the trip a lot quicker, and just might help you avoid some danger."

Zack looked at him gratefully.

"That would be a big help," he said. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Red replied. "I'll have someone meet you with them at the entrance to the canyon."

Zack nodded and Red trotted away. Zack looked around, but Aeris was nowhere to be seen. He was kind of surprised. Was she so angry that she had told her not to come that she wasn't even going to say goodbye?

He stood there for a moment, then shrugged and turned toward the others.

"Let's get going."

"Good luck," Barret said. "And take care."

"We'll see you soon," Zack replied. He took one last look around, then led Reno and Rude down the steps that led out of the canyon. When they reached the bottom they saw four chocobos standing nearby. Three were riderless, but there was someone mounted on the fourth. Zack frowned and walked over.

"I thought I told you I didn't want you to come," he exclaimed.

Aeris sat there looking at him impassively.

"I'm coming along and I don't think there's much you can do about it, so you might as well just get used to the idea," she said calmly.

Zack stepped forward and grabbed hold of her reins.

"Aeris!"

He looked up at her angrily, but she sat there, just looking at him without saying anything. He stood there for a moment, first looking at her, then back at the canyon. His mouth opened, and then it shut again. Finally he let go of the reins and turned to Reno and Rude.

"Is she always like this?" he asked.

"Fraid so," Reno said.

Zack stood there for a few moments longer, then shook his head.

"Mount up."

They quickly slipped into the saddles, then spurred the Chocobo's down the rocky slope that led out of the canyon. In a few minutes the canyon wall faded away on their left and they could see the green grassland and rolling hills stretching away from them to the south.

Zack brought his chocobo to a stop and stood there looking out across the grassland. Aeris rode up next to him.

"Something wrong?" she asked. He had a strange look on his face.

He didn't answer for a moment, just sat there unmoving, as if listening to a voice only he could hear. Then he turned toward her.

"Something is calling me," he said slowly.

"What do you mean?" she asked, suddenly concerned.

He shrugged.

"I'm not sure," he replied. "Something is tugging at me, telling me to go to Gongaga. I can feel it."

"You mean, like when Hojo's program was trying to control you?" she asked. The last thing they needed was for something like that to happen again.

"No," he said, shaking his head slowly. "It's not trying to force me to do anything. It's just a feeling that something there wants me to be there. It's not like it's commanding me to do it. It's more like..."

He hesitated for a moment, looking out to the south once again. She remained silent, waiting.

"...an invitation," he finished.

"C'mon, let's go," Cid said. He walked past Vincent and Elena and started down the street, walking rapidly away from the item shop. The other two followed, Elena struggling to keep up.

"Did you get what you needed?" Vincent asked.

"Yeah," Cid replied, but did not elaborate further.

Elena glanced back and saw a man standing in front of the item shop, looking at them suspiciously.

"Hey, can you slow down a little?" she asked. "What happened back there?"

Cid turned to glance back. He slowed down a little until they both caught up with him.

"Well, I went in to get the parts," Cid replied. "So the owner comes up to me and starts talking. Seems he hasn't gotten much business lately. Everybody seems to have everything they want since the Healer came bringing word of Jenova."

"What?" Elena said.

"That's what he said," Cid replied waving his arm at the town around them. "Apparently the Healer is some sort of servant for Jenova. He's the one who cleaned this place up, but he claims all his power comes from Jenova."

"But you killed Jenova," Elena said.

Cid turned toward her.

"Hey, I don't got no explanation. I'm just telling you what he told me. He says Jenova is the best thing that ever happened to this town."

"We killed Jenova," Vincent said, "but we know parts of it still survive. Both Zack and Cloud have Jenova cells inside them. And who knows where else it may have scattered? It is quite possible other parts of it still exist."

"Even if that's true," Elena said. "Why would it be helping the people of Gongaga?"

Vincent shrugged.

Cid looked back behind them once again, but the store owner was no longer in sight.

"Whatever it's up to, I'm sure it doesn't have the best interests of the people of Gongaga in mind. I don't know what's going on here, but I don't like it. I think the sooner we get out of here the better. This whole place is giving me the willies."

"So you think we should go straight back to the Slipstream?" Elena questioned.

"I'd like nothing more," Cid replied. "But I think it might be important for us to take a look at that reactor. I think we need to know what's going on, and I have a feeling we may not get another opportunity. But we better hurry. I'm afraid I wasn't very generous with my praise of Jenova to the store owner. I think he got a little suspicious."

They felt silent and followed Cid as he led them back out of town. There was a wide trail through the forest in this direction, and Cid followed it, looking around warily, but they saw no one.

It didn't take them long to reach the reactor. It towered over their heads as they approached, gleaming in the sunlight.

"It's huge," Elena commented. They could see it was larger than the old one had been. Much larger. A good portion of the forest to the east had been cleared to make room.

"Yeah, it sure is," Cid agreed.

They walked up to the entrance. The doors were open, and there was no guard. They could see many people busily going about their business inside.

Cid looked in for a moment, then shrugged and walked in, the others close behind him. They looked around in awe. The room was cavernous, the ceiling hundreds of feet above them. Huge metal grids supported by wide pillars filled the air above them, all connected by a maze of stairways and catwalks. The hum of machinery was almost deafening, and the place was literally swarming with people.

"They sure do look busy," Vincent observed.

Cid nodded, looking around. The place was huge. Much too huge.

"This doesn't make sense," he said. "With a reactor this size, they have to be producing enough power to run ten Gongagas. They don't need anything this big. What the hell are they doing with all the extra power?"

Vincent and Elena, far from being experts on Mako reactors, had no response.

They walked slowly through the room. There were people all around them now, but no one paid any attention to them. They were all wrapped up in their own work.

Cid turned to the left and noticed a metal stairway leading up to a closed door. There were two guards standing by the door and red lettering on it that said; 'Authorized Personnel Only'.

He brought the door to the attention of his two companions.

"That looks like the only place in the entire reactor that's guarded," he commented. "Do you think there's something back there that might be of interest to us?"

"Why do you keep asking us questions we can't answer?" Elena questioned.

"Maybe," Vincent replied, ignoring her. "But how do we get to take a look?"

Cid shrugged.

"Not sure. Let's look around. Maybe there's another way."

They spent the next half hour walking around in the reactor. Still, no one questioned them, but they discovered nothing else of significance. Eventually they made their way back to the stairway.

As they were approaching it there was a sudden commotion ahead of them. They heard the grinding of metal above their heads. They looked up to see that one of the supports holding up one of the metal grids above them had broken off under the weight of all the people on it.

"Watch out!" Cid cried.

There was a loud snap, and they lunged out of the way just as the metal grid came plunging down. One worker was not as lucky as them, he looked up but did not have time to move before the huge piece of metal slammed down on top of him.

Cid looked at the others. Elena looked frightened but unhurt. Vincent was looking over at the fallen grid impassively. They could hear shouts and cries of horror over the sound of the machinery now as people converged on the spot.

There were perhaps a dozen people who had fallen along with the grid, some of them injured, but none too severely. A couple of people had noticed the man who the grid had fallen on, and were calling people over to help them try to get him out.

The two guards who had stood by the doors rushed over to lend a hand.

Vincent looked at Cid and motioned toward the door.

"Now's our chance," he said.

Cid hesitated, looking over at the man trapped under the grid. He didn't see how the man could possibly have survived.

"C'mon," Vincent said, glancing over at the grid. "There's nothing we can do for him."

Cid nodded and they walked quickly up the steps. He looked around once at the top, but no one seemed to have noticed them. Then he opened the door and the three of them slipped inside.

The door closed behind them, and instantly the shouting voices and sounds of machinery were replaced by a quiet hum. They stood on a metal platform in a circular room, similar to a huge auditorium. A stairway led down from where they were to the center of the room. Surrounding this, and filling up the entire floor of the room around them, were row after row of metal pods.

They stood there looking around.

"Shit," Cid muttered.

"What are they?" Elena questioned, looking at the pods curiously.

Cid walked over to one of them, Elena following. There was a small window in the front of it. Cid looked inside, then stepped back and motioned for Elena to take a look.

She walked over to the front of the pod. The window was above her head, and she had to pull herself up to see inside. She looked for a moment, then stepped back, her face pale.

"What the hell is that?"

"A mako created monster," Cid replied. "Cloud told us about something like this at the Nibelheim reactor. These pods can be used to infuse mako into a human, but if it's taken too far, you end up with monsters."

"So that was a human in there?" Elena said, obviously horrified with the idea.

"Or it could have been some type of animal," Cid replied. "You can create monsters that way too. If someone were doing that and releasing them, it would go a long way in explaining why there's been such an increase of trouble around Cosmo canyon. That would explain what they're doing with all that power, too. Looks like Jenova, or whoever is behind this, is using the reactor as a giant monster incubator."

Elena looked around once more.

"So what does this all mean?" she questioned.

Cid just shook his head.

"It means that we're sitting right in the middle of monster central. And I think that the sooner we get out of here, the better."

They retreated quickly back through the door. Cid was relieved to see that the guards still hadn't returned. There was a large crowd around the fallen grid now. Quickly they walked down the steps and blended in.

They could hear dozens of people shouting orders as they wended their way through the crowd, but then suddenly they all fell silent. Cid looked up and saw all heads turning toward the entrance to the reactor. His own couldn't help but follow.

A man stood there. Cid just stared at him. He was not large, not small, looked neither young nor old. He had long white hair that fell about his shoulders, and his eyes were like black pits.

"Healer," someone cried out. "Thank Jenova! Mendal is trapped."

The man walked slowly over to the crowd. It parted as he approached, and he stepped toward the metal grid and looked down at it.

A man stepped up beside him.

"Can you help him?" he asked.

The Healer turned toward him. Cid could see no expression in the man's eyes.

"Of course," he said simply.

A dozen men had been struggling to lift the grid, but now they all stepped out of the way as the Healer stooped down and took hold of it.

He stood there for just a moment, as if concentrating on something, then he stood up, lifting the grid off the ground as if it were no heavier than a child's toy.

Two men scrambled underneath and pulled Menda's body out. When they were clear the Healer eased the grid back down again. At no time had it seemed to have been an effort for him.

One of the men who had pulled Menda free stood up slowly, wiping sweat from his forehead. He looked at the Healer and shook his head.

"He's dead."

The Healer walked over and looked down at the man. Slowly he stooped down again and laid a hand on the man's forehead. Cid saw a kind of shimmering around Menda's body, and then there was a gasp from the crowd as Menda opened his eyes. He sat up and looked around for a moment, a puzzled expression on his face.

"What happened?" he said.

A cheer ran through the crowd, and the gathered round Menda, hiding him from view. Cid had been slowly leading the others back toward the main entrance while all this was happening. As they walked up the steps that led out the door he looked back once more. He could see the Healer still, standing amid the crowd. He was looking around slowly, and suddenly Cid saw another man he recognized standing beside him. The man from the item store. His eyes were roving around the room, looking over everyone in the crowd. Before Cid could turn away the man looked up the stairs and spotted them. He said something to the Healer, who turned to look at them as well.

"Oh uh," Cid muttered.

Elena looked at him with a puzzled expression, but before she could say anything the Healer suddenly pointed at them.

The crowd went silent once again as all eyes turned to look at them.

"Bring those people to me," the Healer commanded.

"Shit!" Cid exclaimed. "Looks like we've worn out our welcome."

Beside him Vincent suddenly pulled out his weapon.

"No time for that," Cid exclaimed. "You can't kill all of them. Let's get out of here."

He turned and raced through the entrance, the others right behind him. They heard a shout from inside the reactor, but they didn't pay any attention.

They ran down the pathway, back toward Gongaga, but when they came around a bend Cid turned sharply and led them off the trail, plunging into the woods. He tried to glance back a few times but he could not tell whether they were still being followed. A blast from Vincent's gun, however, convinced him that they were.

They broke out into the open. Cid could see the Slipstream ahead, apparently untouched just where they had left it. Cid looked back at the line of trees behind them, but saw no one.

Vincent came up beside him.

"How long will it take you to fix the Slipstream?" he asked.

"Too long," Cid replied. "With a little luck we could be out of here in about an hour. I don't think that Healer fella is gonna wait that long."

Vincent glanced back as well, nodding slowly in agreement.

"Suggestions?" he said.

They reached the Slipstream and stopped. Elena bent down and put her hands on her knees, panting.

Cid looked around. The Slipstream had landed on an open plain surrounded by low rolling hills. There was no place to hide.

"I don't have any," he said grimly. He dropped down and pulled himself under the plane.

"I'll see what I can do about getting this fixed. Maybe by some miracle they won't look for us here."

"Don't count on it," Elena blurted out, looking back at the forest.

Cid pulled himself out from under the plane and looked as well. He could see figures coming out from under the trees, dozens of them. No, more, much more. They slowly walked out onto the plain. Not only the people from Gongaga, but also dozens of other things as well, all sorts of strange twisted creatures. All together, monster and man, slowly forming a long line, slowly spreading out across the plain. And in the center of them, they could see the Healer.

"Shit!" Cid yelled. He looked around again, but there was no where to go. He couldn't possibly fix the plane in time. He stood up beside the others and readied the venus gospel.

Vincent already had the death penalty in his head. Elena pulled out her gun as well. Cid looked at them.

"If anybody has any brilliant ideas, now would be a good time."

Neither of the others responded. The horde was closer now. Suddenly Vincent lifted his gun and fired. One of the creatures near the head of the line coming toward them fell to the ground. With a cry the others surged forward, rushing toward Cid and his friends as inexorably as an incoming tide, and just as likely to sweep them away.

Cid looked around more, feeling more than a little desperate. They could not escape. There was open terrain all around them. They could run, but he knew they wouldn't get very far.

He was about to turn back to face the horde when something caught his eye. Over a ridge off to the east he saw movement, and suddenly figures came into view, four people, mounted on chocobos.

"C'mon," he yelled. "This way!"

The others looked at him in surprise, but followed him as he ran off toward the newcomers. For all he knew, these could be more men from Gongaga, coming back to town from some trip, and they were just running right into more trouble, but maybe not, and there didn't seem to be much else in the way of alternatives.

The figures on the chocobos had seen them, and obviously the mass of creatures behind them, for suddenly they spurred the chocobos to a gallop. As they came closer Cid felt a rush of relief as he recognized the figures.

"It's Zack and Aeris!" he exclaimed.

He looked back. Their opponents had also seen the chocobos, and, suddenly realizing that their prey might get away, was now charging at them as fast as it could go. Cid looked forward again. Zack and the others were much closer now, but he didn't know whether they could reach them in time.

Suddenly a shadow blocked out the sun. Cid turned and swung his spear just as something dived out of the sky. He felt the spear bite into the huge bird, whose claws, diverted by the blow, merely scrapped harmlessly across his back before it turned away with a sharp cry.

"Damn, I'm too old for this!" he exclaimed. The chocobos were not far away now. He put on a burst of speed, and then they came together. Zack reached down and pulled him up, while Vincent jumped up behind Aeris and Elena behind Reno. Half a dozen of the creatures that were following them, the fastest of the bunch, were almost upon them, but a blast of gunfire from Vincent, Elena, Reno and Rude, dropped most of them to the ground, or sent them scurrying desperately out of the way. The chocobos turned around and galloped away. In moments the horde fell quickly behind.

They reached the ridge Cid had first spotted them from and Zack suddenly pulled up short and looked back. He stood there, just staring back toward Gongaga, while Cid sat behind him wearing a puzzled expression.

Aeris rode up beside him.

"Zack, are you all right?" she asked.

He did not answer for a moment, then nodded slowly, still looking back toward Gongaga. The horde had stopped chasing them, realizing it was hopeless, but far away, on a small hill not far from the forest, they could make out the small figure of the Healer.

"He's the one. He's calling me," Zack said softly.

"What?" Aeris said, looking at him with concern.

"He's the one," Zack repeated. "He wants me to come to him. He doesn't understand."

Aeris leaned forward and looked at Zack closely.

"What doesn't he understand?" she said.

Zack just shook his head and did not reply.

"You're not gonna like flip out on us or anything, are you?" Cid said slowly.

Zack shook his head.

"No," he replied. "It's not trying to control me. I don't know whether it can. It's just calling. It's not a command."

Cid nodded slowly.

"So if you can resist it, then why are we still standing here?"

Zack hesitated a moment more, then shrugged.

"I guess there is no reason," he said. He turned the chocobo away.

"C'mon," he said. "I guess we better get back to Cosmo Canyon. I don't think we're going to be welcome in Gongaga."

The Jenova entity that was the Healer stood looking at the chocobos as they disappeared over the ridge. He had recognized the men that had been in the reactor. He had learned about them. The weak creatures on this planet were amazingly willing to share just about any information they had, even without being asked. They were the one's who had killed the main body of the predecessor. The one's he considered a threat and had tried himself to kill. But somehow his attempt had failed. It appeared he had severely underestimated these creatures. They were obviously not as weak as he had thought.

But it was the two that had come on the chocobos who really interested him. The one had obviously been part of the predecessor. He could feel it. It was very weak, yes, but it had been there. Yet when he had called to it he had felt nothing. It was as if the cells were dormant. He felt a spark of life there, but nothing else. There had been no response.

And the other one. The other one he had recognized at once. One of them. One of the destroyers. He had not realized that any of their ancient foes were left here. That one was dangerous. If he was to succeed here that one would have to be stopped at all costs.

The predecessor, or some portion of it, and the destroyer, together. How could that be? They were mortal enemies, sworn to seek each other out and destroy one another across all space and time. The thought of standing beside a destroyer filled him with revulsion. It was vile, an abomination. What could have caused such a thing to occur?

The Healer pondered this for some time, but could not find an answer, which troubled him greatly. But eventually he decided it was unimportant at the moment. The destroyer had fled, and he felt he could handle it when the time came. The important thing now was to send his forces north to find the key.

He slowly lifted his head and looked out over the hills to the northwest.

Yes, finding the key was his first priority. They had thought it lost for all these thousands of years. They had thought it destroyed, gone forever. What a shock it had been to feel the reverberations of its use through the lifestream. He had been sent out immediately, for the existence of the key was a threat that could not be ignored. He must find the key, and he must destroy it, for it threatened the very existence of his species.