

CHAPTER V: THE FALL OF COSMO CANYON

The monsters continued to gather outside of Cosmo Canyon, but they did not attack. By nightfall there were hundreds of them before the gates, and many more could be seen in the light of the fires that still burned in the fields beyond.

Cloud sat at the top of the cliff looking down at the flickering fires. He heard footsteps nearby and looked up to see Aeris come over and sit down beside him.

"So tell me what happened to Tifa," she said.

He told her what had occurred earlier that day. When he got to the part where he told her about the proposal she stopped him suddenly.

"You are so bad!" she exclaimed. "You know I wanted to be there for that!"

Cloud nodded.

"Yeah, I know, but it just kind of came out. She sort of fed me that line about not leaving me ever again and I just couldn't hold it in any longer."

Aeris looked at him thoughtfully, then nodded.

"Okay, I guess I can forgive you," she said. "So then what happened?"

"Well, then I told her I had gotten her a ring, but that I had lost it. And it turned out Barret had picked it up. So he handed it to me and I gave it to her."

"And that's another thing," Aeris interrupted again. "I thought you were going to wait for me to help you pick it out! You've made me miss out on everything! Are you going to forget to invite me to the wedding too?"

Cloud looked at her and smiled.

"No, Aeris. I don't think I could keep you away from that even if I wanted to, which of course I don't."

"So are you at least going to tell me what the ring looks like?" she asked.

Cloud shrugged.

"I don't know," he replied. "It's a diamond. It's round."

"Oh you are so pathetic," she exclaimed. "It's a round diamond? That's the best you can do? You did look at it before you bought it, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Cloud said defensively.

"So, don't you remember anything else?"

"Yeah, it was...well, it had the diamond in it, and then two small rectangular emeralds on either side of it."

"And what was the band made of?" she asked.

"Silver something...platinum, I guess. I'm kinda not sure. Barret just told me to get that kind."

"Maybe I should be talking to him," Aeris said.

Cloud shrugged.

"Well, that was a little helpful anyway," she continued. "So did you set a date yet?"

Cloud shook his head.

"Too much has been happening lately to even think about it," he replied. "Tifa is going to have to recover first. And we still don't even know who was responsible for the attacks. Not to mention that we're sitting in Cosmo Canyon surrounded by monsters."

They both looked down at the fields below them.

"Yeah," Aeris said slowly. She looked back at Cloud, the fires below casting a flickering light upon him.

"Well, I'm just glad she's okay," she said slowly. "For both of you."

Cloud looked at her and smiled.

"Thanks," he replied. He looked at her carefully. "And how are you doing, Aeris? How are things..."

Just then another form loomed out of the darkness beside them. They looked up to see Barret standing over them.

"Come on," he said. "Red has called a little meeting in the great hall. He wants us all to be there."

Cloud nodded.

"Of course."

He and Aeris got up and followed Barret back down the path and along the streets until they reached the Great Hall of Cosmo Canyon. Once inside they found Red along with Illyanova and half a dozen other of the senior elders, as well as the Captain of the Canyon guards. Also there were the other members of Avalanche and the Turks.

"The situation is not good," Red said, not wasting any time. "We were not able to get a message out before we were cut off, so we can't expect anyone to come to our aid."

"We don't know how many monsters are out there," he continued. "Difficult to get an accurate count of them in the dark, and the fact that they move around so much. But it is pretty obvious that we are significantly outnumbered."

"I have never heard of anything like this ever happening before. There are all kinds of creatures out there, some of whom are known to hunt in packs but never on a scale like this. And there are some that we know to be strictly loners that are also here. These creatures are not known to have the intelligence to organize into a fighting force like this. For some reason these creatures have gathered here to attack Cosmo Canyon. It's obvious that this is a planned attack and not just some random gathering. I think it very important that we understand why this is happening and who might be behind it. Does anybody have any ideas?"

He looked around at the others in the room

"I think it's being directed from Gongaga," Cid spoke up.

Red turned toward him.

"What makes you say that?"

Cid told him what had happened to them from the time the Slipstream went down until they were picked up by Zack.

Cloud's face went pale when he mentioned what the people in Gongaga had said about Jenova, but he did not speak. Aeris also looked at Cid in surprise.

When he was finished Red paced back and forth in front of them a few times without speaking.

"Well, that would explain where all these monsters were coming from," he stated. "If Jenova has somehow returned the whole planet is in danger."

"So you think Jenova is creating all these monsters to destroy humanity and take over the planet?" Reeve asked.

"Another one of those world domination things?" Reno muttered. "I'm really getting tired of this."

Red looked at Aeris.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "Jenova was not known for using such blunt tactics. From what I know of her, she used more subtle, more indirect means. But who knows how she could have changed in the time since we defeated her. And I don't know whether she's out to dominate the world. This attack seems to be directed at Cosmo Canyon."

"Well, someplace had to be first," Vincent said.

"So why not the Gold Saucer?" she asked. "It's closer to Gongaga."

"Okay, if this isn't a world domination thing," Cloud said, "Then why would Jenova be attacking Cosmo Canyon?"

Aeris shrugged.

"What in the canyon could threaten it?" Yuffie asked.

"Well, Cosmo Canyon doesn't have an army, so she wouldn't be worried about that," Zack said.

"It's a storehouse of knowledge," Reeve stated. "Perhaps there is something here that's it's afraid we'll find out. Some knowledge somewhere on how to destroy it, perhaps?"

"That's a possibility," Red agreed. He turned to Illyanova, but she shook her head.

"I know of no such knowledge," she stated. "But it is a reasonable conclusion. I will have the elders look into it."

"Very good," Red replied. "But I don't know how much time we'll have to do that."

"How safe are we?" Elena asked.

Red looked at her for a moment before replying.

"I think we are fairly safe at the moment. The canyon walls provide an excellent defensive position, and we can hold off a force much greater than our own while we are within them. The fact that the monsters have not attacked yet leads me to believe they have reached the same conclusion."

"So you think they won't attack?" Cid asked. "You think they will just try to lay siege to the canyon and attempt to starve us out?"

"I hope that is what they have in mind," Red replied. "For we know that could not possibly succeed. We still have access to the outside world through the Gi cave, which they seem to be unaware of. We could bring in supplies that way and hold out against a siege indefinitely. But somehow I don't think that is what they have in mind. It will be too easy for help to arrive from other cities if they start a siege. If only one person got out he could get us aid. Whatever they are going to do, they are going to have to do it soon. I think they will attack."

"So why haven't they attacked already?" Barret asked.

"I don't know," Red replied. "I think they are waiting for something, but I don't know what."

They were all silent for a moment.

"Going back for a moment to why Jenova might be attacking Cosmo Canyon," Vincent said suddenly. "As you said, the canyon has no army, and it may be true that Jenova is trying to prevent us from finding some knowledge that may be hidden here, but there is something else here that Jenova might be interested in."

The others looked at him.

"What's that?" Barret asked.

"Us," he replied.

Reeve looked at him in surprise.

"You think Jenova might be after us because we defeated it the first time?" he asked.

Vincent nodded.

"It is a possibility," he replied. "It knows we can destroy it. It knows we are a threat. Perhaps that entire army out there is here for the express purpose of destroying Avalanche."

Red stood there pondering this for a moment.

"If that's true..." he mused, "then perhaps it was Jenova who was responsible for the original attacks on us."

Cloud's head turned toward him.

"You mean Jenova was responsible for the bomb?" he said.

"It's possible," Red said slowly. "Although we have no proof."

"It would also mean that us being here is a danger to Cosmo Canyon," Aeris pointed out.

"You're right," Zack said. He looked at Red. "So, if we left, would those monsters out there just leave too?"

Red shook his head.

"There's no way to tell for sure," he replied. "Besides, if we walk out the front door we'll be walking right into their hands, and if we snuck out the Gi cave how would they know we were gone? Besides, the possibility exists that we are wrong about this. If that were true, and we left, all we would be doing is weakening, perhaps fatally, the defenses of the canyon."

"All this talk is fine," Barret interrupted. "But we can do this all day long and not solve a damn thing. My question is, the monsters are out there, now what the hell are we going to do about it?"

"That is the key question," Red agreed.

"Well, they're not attacking," Cloud stated. "We're in a good defensive position. We could just hunker down here and wait them out."

"But more monsters seem to be showing up all the time," Zack said. "We don't know how many of them there are. Perhaps they haven't attacked yet because they're just waiting to build up their strength until they have enough to overwhelm even this position."

Red nodded.

"We can't ignore that possibility," he said.

"So what do we do then?" Reeve said. "Surely you're not suggesting we attack?"

"No," Red replied. "Our defense position is the only thing that has saved us so far. To attack would be suicide. Communications are cut off. But we still have access to the outside world through the Gi cave. As long as they are bringing up reinforcements I think we should do the same. I think we should send out messengers to the other cities asking for aid."

"What other cities?" Cid questioned. "Nibelheim and Rocket Town are the closest towns to the north, and I assume you wouldn't want to go south, but neither of them have even a security force, much less an army, and make no mistake about it, that's what you're going to need here."

"I realize that," Red answered. "The nearest cities with standing armies are Wutai and Junon. The messengers would have to go to those cities."

Cid looked skeptical.

"That might take quite some time," he said doubtfully.

"Well, we still do have the chocobos available," Red replied. "Even so it will take a couple of days, at least."

"By then it might be too late," Barret stated.

"I know," Red replied. "But it couldn't hurt to try."

"Even if you do get messages to Wutai and Junon," Reno said. "What makes you think either of them would send you any aid?"

"Wutai would help!" Yuffie said immediately.

"We don't know for sure," Red said. "But again, there's no harm in trying. Besides, I think all of the cities can see what a threat an organized army of monsters could be to them all. I think it would be in their best interest to destroy this threat as soon as possible."

"I don't know," Reno stated. "We're a long way from both Wutai and Junon. They're not even on this continent. These days all the cities only seem to be interested in their own problems."

Yuffie looked at him angrily.

"Wutai would help!" she repeated. She looked at Red.

"If you want, I'll go there myself. I know my father will aid you any way he can."

Red smiled. It was rare to see Yuffie get upset about anything that didn't involve materia.

"I think that would be a very good idea," he said.

Yuffie looked at him in surprise.

"Really?" she said.

"Yes," he replied. "Yuffie, I would like you to go to Wutai immediately and ask your father to send whatever aid he can. You can take the fastest Chocobo we have. Remember, speed is of the essence. We don't know how long we can hold out. The help from your father may be our only chance of survival. We are depending on you."

Yuffie just stood there for a moment without saying anything. She hadn't expected him to accept. The offer had just been a spontaneous thing, an automatic response to an alleged affront to the integrity of her hometown. She hadn't really thought about the consequences, or the responsibility. She hadn't really thought about the burden she was putting on herself, but Red was right, getting a message to Wutai might be Cosmo Canyon's only chance of survival. For a moment she hesitated, the sudden fear growing inside her that she might fail, that she was not up to this task. But she quickly pushed it out of her mind. They were depending on her. Red had told her so. No one had ever depended on her before.

She looked at Red, resolve deepening in her eyes.

"I won't fail you," she said. Then she turned and started for the door, but Cloud called out to her before she reached it. She turned toward him.

"Yuffie, be careful," he said.

She just stood there for a moment. They were all looking at her.

"I will," she said. "I'll come back with an army so big it'll scare those monsters away just to look at it."

She turned away, but then reversed herself again.

"And you all be careful too," she said. "You've got my materia, so I expect you to take good care of it until I get back. Understand?"

Cloud nodded.

Yuffie turned once more and disappeared out the door.

Reno stood there shaking his head.

"What a bunch of pathetic fools," he muttered.

Cloud looked at him angrily.

"You got something to say, Reno?"

Reno stood there looking at them for a moment, shaking his head slowly. Then he stepped forward and glanced at each of them in turn.

"Have any of you looked over that wall lately?" he asked. "Have you seen how many monsters are out there? That plain is literally crawling with them. I thought you people had some semblance of intelligence, but I can see I was wrong. This is the best plan you can come up with? Sit here like lambs waiting for slaughter and sending Yuffie, YUFFIE, out to get help?"

"Reno, why don't you just shut up," Barret blurted. "Unless you've got some brilliant plan of your own you'd like to share with us."

Reno just looked at him smugly.

"As a matter of fact, I do," he replied. "You're hopelessly outnumbered. Even if Yuffie doesn't just run off to save her own skin, help from Wutai is never going to get here in time. You've just got one thing in your favor, and that's that you still have a way out through the Gi cave."

"So what are you suggesting?" Cloud said. "That we run?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Reno replied. "You don't stand a chance here. It's either stay here and get wiped out or pull out."

"You want us to abandon Cosmo Canyon?" Nipala said incredulously.

Reno nodded.

"It's either that or die here."

"That's just the kind of wimp ass plan I'd expect from someone like you," Barret cut in.

"Don't be ridiculous," Cloud said. "We're not going to abandon Cosmo Canyon."

Reno shook his head.

"I know you people too well to expect you to have listened to reason. Well, if you all want to stay here and throw your lives away, that's fine. But that's not the way the Turks do things. We've taken on hopeless causes before, if the price was right, but I'm afraid there isn't enough money in Cosmo Canyon to make us hang around here for this one."

"So what are you saying, you're just going to leave?" Reeve said.

"Why not?" Reno said. "It would be stupid to stay here, and the Turks are not stupid."

"I can't believe you're just going to walk out on your friends," Aeris exclaimed.

"My friends?" Reno said, looking at her. "I know we've been hanging around together a lot lately, but that doesn't make us friends. We're Turks, remember? A Turk can't afford the luxury of having friends."

"Oh don't give me that," Aeris replied. "I know you too well to believe that any more."

"Just let them go," Barret said in disgust. "Shoulda known better than to expect Reno to stick around when the heat is on. He's only interested in money and his own precious hide."

"Call it what you will," Reno stated. "To tell you the truth I'm not really interested in your opinion."

He turned to Rude and Elena.

"Let's go."

Reno looked at them expectantly but neither one moved. Elena glanced over at Vincent.

"I'm staying," she said.

Reno rolled his eyes skyward.

"Elena, don't be a fool," he said. "You know very well that what I'm saying is true. Do you really mean to tell me that you're going to throw away your life with this bunch of losers?"

He stepped toward her, staring at her.

"Think about it, Elena. Is that really something a Turk would do?"

He stood right in front of her now, looking at her expectantly, but she did not reply.

"Well, is it?"

Elena looked at Reno, then at the others. Finally she shook her head.

"No," she said softly. "But I don't care. I'm staying anyway."

Reno stared at her for a moment longer, then turned away and sighed.

"I'm disappointed in you," he said. "I know you have had problems separating your personal feelings from your job, but I thought you could overcome that. Tseng thought you could too, and that's why he chose you to join the Turks in the first place. But now it looks like we were both wrong."

Elena did not reply but looked down at the ground.

"Leave her alone," Vincent spoke up.

Reno turned toward him.

"I don't understand you at all, Vincent," he said. "You should be agreeing with me. You of all people know what can happen when you let your emotions color your judgment."

Reno turned to Rude.

"Let's go," he said again. "Unless you're going to turn on me too?"

Rude said nothing. Nor did he get up. Reno folded his arms across his chest and stared at him. They stood there in silence for a long time.

Slowly Reno's arms dropped to his sides. Rude looked up at him.

"Things have changed," he said.

Reno stared at Rude for a moment longer, and he looked genuinely disappointed. He started to speak, then shut his mouth.

"I don't believe this," he muttered. He looked at the others.

"I guess things *have* changed," he continued. "It seems you both have forgotten what it means to be a Turk. Maybe it was a bad idea to hang around with these people for as long as we have. It appears they've been a bad influence. And I suppose that's my fault. I can't make you come with me. I can't make you listen to reason. I guess I'll just have to start over from scratch. I don't suppose I'll be seeing any of you again."

"Don't be too sure about that," Cloud stated.

Reno did not reply, just looked at Elena and Rude one more time. Then he walked slowly toward the door.

"Reno," Elena said.

He turned around to look at her. She opened her mouth, seeming to be groping for the right words, but then just shut it when Rude reached over and put his hand on her shoulder.

Reno shook his head again, then turned away and walked out of the room.

They others stood there for a few moments in silence.

"I didn't think he'd really go," Aeris said.

"Goodbye and good riddance," Barret exclaimed.

Red looked at Elena and Rude.

"Thank you for staying," he said. "I know how difficult this must be for you."

The two Turks did not reply. Elena just looked at Rude. She had really been surprised by him. Never for a moment would she have expected him to remain. She knew it must be twice as hard for him as it had been for her. She still had Vincent, and Rude had known Reno for...well, it seemed like forever. She had never thought anything would ever come between them.

Suddenly their musing was interrupted as a guard walked into the room. He looked at Red.

"Sorry to interrupt, but there's something going on outside."

A few minutes later Red and his friends stood on the ridge above the gates of Cosmo Canyon, looking down once more on the open plains to the south. If anything, there were even more monsters down there than ever.

Cloud suddenly looked up. Staring off over the fires, into the darkness beyond. Zack came up beside him and looked at him.

"You feel it too, don't you," he said softly.

Cloud nodded without turning toward him.

"Yes," he replied. "What is it?"

"I'm not exactly sure myself," Zack answered. "The man in Gongaga called himself the Healer, but I think it's Jenova."

Cloud shook his head slowly, but said nothing more.

Their enemy was crowded most closely together near the gates below them. There hadn't been much activity among them when Cloud had been looking at them earlier. But now he could see some kind of commotion down below. The monsters nearest the gate were moving apart, leaving a clear space for something, or someone, that was approaching.

Cloud stared out into the darkness. The fires still burned, but they did not illuminate the front of the gate very well. But slowly in the clearing below them four dim forms came into view.

They were human. Or at least had humanoid shape. They were mounted on Chocobos. Black ones. Blacker than any Cloud had ever seen before in his life. He could see the eyes of the great birds giving off an eerie red glow. He had never seen Chocobo's quite like them.

Nor had he ever seen riders quite like the men that now approached the gate. They were all dressed the same, wearing black clothing, with capes swirling around them. They all had long swords at their sides, and their eyes glowed with Mako fire.

Zack looked down at the men.

"Rios, Garn, Darron, and Fielder," he said.

"You know them?" Cloud asked.

Zack nodded.

"They are all from Gongaga," he replied. "Thought I do not know how I remember them."

The men rode up until they were almost directly in front of the gate. Then they halted and looked up at those above them.

"We are Jenova's Disciples," Rios said loudly. "We have come with word of Jenova. Open your gates and you will be taken into Jenova's hands. Resist us and feel Jenova's wraith."

Red looked down at them expressionlessly.

"We have no desire to be taken into Jenova's hands," he replied. "And we do not fear Jenova's wraith. Leave here or you will be utterly destroyed."

Rios stared directly at Red. His Chocobo stirred restlessly and scratched at the ground.

"You are brave but misguided," he said. "No one can stand against Jenova's will. But Jenova does not wish to take life needlessly. So I will ask you once again. Open your gates and surrender the canyon."

Red returned Rios' gaze unflinchingly.

"And again I'm afraid I must decline," he responded. "This is our home, and it has never fallen to an invader. We will not surrender."

Rios sat there for a moment in silence, never taking his eyes off Red. Suddenly Rios sat up in his saddle, seeming to grow tall, the shadows deepening around him.

"Very well," he said. "You have chosen your own fate. You think you are strong, you think your stone walls will protect you. But they are nothing. You do not comprehend the power that you are facing. Look now, and see the folly of your choice."

The four riders drew together and looked at the gates in front of them. Then they simultaneously raised their voices and said in a commanding tone.

"Black Hole!"

The shadows around Rios grew, surrounding all four of them, swirling around them as if it were a living thing. A blackness grew above their heads. A blackness darker than the darkest night. Cloud could still see the fires burning in the fields beyond, but their light was dimmed, as if being sucked away by the darkness in front of them now. Cloud almost had to turn away, for to look at the blackness was almost too much to bear. To look at it was to see the end of all things, to forget even the fact that light had ever existed. To look at it was to see despair.

Cloud felt a trembling in the ground around him. And suddenly a huge beam of something, something that could only be described as anti-light, burst forth from the center of the darkness directly into the canyon gates.

There was a clap of thunder. The canyon rocked around them, and Cloud felt himself thrown to the ground. For a moment it seemed that the very mountainside around them would come crashing down, but then it subsided. Cloud looked up to see that everyone else on the ridge was down as well. He sprang to his feet, looking down at the gates below. But there were no more gates. They had been utterly destroyed. Cloud could not even see any sign of rubble. They had vanished as if they had never been, and the road into Cosmo Canyon lay open below him.

Beside him the others got to their feet. Below the people of the canyon were in a panic, fleeing from the suddenly defenseless position on the canyon floor. The riders spurred their Chocobos forward.

Cloud was about to rush down the path to the canyon below when he noticed that one man below them was not fleeing. He stood just behind where the gates had been, in the center of the canyon floor, unmoving.

Cloud hesitated for a moment and stared at the man. He had never seen him before. He did not appear to have any weapon.

Beside him Reeve noticed the man as well. He stared at him for a moment, a look of shock growing on his face. Then he looked at Aeris.

"Hey, that's the guy I saw looking at you on the train to Mysteele."

Aeris said nothing, but just stood there, staring at the man below as well, her eyes slowly widening in surprise.

"What?" Vincent said, looking at Reeve.

"That's the guy who was on the train in Mysteele," he repeated. "The one I followed and who just seemed to vanish into thin air."

"Are you sure?" Vincent questioned.

"Yeah," Reeve said. "For some reason his face stuck in my head."

Zack stepped over to Aeris. She was still staring at the man, a strange expression on her face.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She did not reply. She did not even look at him. It was as if she hadn't even heard him. She did not take her eyes off the man below.

"It can't be," she whispered.

"What is it?" Zack questioned, but she did not answer. And suddenly she was running, racing down the path as fast as she could, leaving Zack just standing there in shock.

"What's up with her?" he heard Barret say, but he did not answer. They both turned to see Reeve running after her. Zack pulled out his sword and followed.

The riders below reached the place where the gate had once stood, and now saw the single man standing in front of them. They halted their Chocobos.

The man slowly glanced at each one of them.

"You cannot pass," he said calmly.

The four riders looked at him for a moment. Then Rios spoke.

"It is Jenova's will," he said simply.

"There are powers greater than Jenova," the man replied. "You cannot pass."

The four riders drew their swords.

"There is no power greater than Jenova," Rios said. "You cannot stop us."

With that the four riders started forward once again.

The man stood his ground and slowly bowed his head. Cloud drew his sword, prepared to rush down to the canyon floor himself, even though he knew he could never get there in time to aid the man below. But suddenly he stopped. Light seemed to be shimmering all around the man. A strange white light flashed all around him, then suddenly grew brighter, illuminating the canyon in stark contrast to the blackness that had engulfed it when the riders had used their summon spell. This light was almost the opposite of that. This light banished darkness from the mind and uplifted the spirit. This was the light of hope.

The riders in front of the man hesitated. The light was all around them now, and their chocobos warked nervously, sensing the unease of the riders mounted on them. Suddenly the man raised his arms, and the light grew with such intensity that all who watched had to shade their eyes and turn away. There was a flash of blinding power, and yet another clap of thunder rolled through the canyon.

Then the light vanished. When Cloud looked up again, the riders were no where to be seen.

The man still stood silently by the ruined gates when Aeris ran up to him. He turned toward her and she stopped in front of him, breathless from the run. She stood there for a moment staring at him, staring into his dark green eyes.

"You..." she said. She stopped for a moment, barely able to speak from the run down the path and the shock, the shock of seeing this man when she thought all this time that there was no one else, that she was alone.

"You're a Cetra!" she blurted out.

The man looked at her for a moment, then smiled.

"Yes, daughter of my people. It is nice to finally meet you face to face."

And then the man stumbled from weariness, and would have fallen had Aeris not reached out to steady him.

"I'm afraid that the effort..."

He didn't finish, but sank slowly into her arms. Reeve came up beside her and took hold of him as well. Together they supported the man as they led him back up the canyon steps.

Zack watched them walk away, then slowly turned and looked back out of the canyon. The creatures there had fallen back, dismayed at first by the loss of the four riders. But now they started forward once again, first a few, then more and more, until the entire horde was surging toward Cosmo Canyon. The entrance lay before them, no longer protected by its stone wall.

Zack readied his sword as Cloud came up beside him. The canyon guards gathered around them, forming a line across the canyon floor, ready to fight to save their town. Beside them citizens were hastily dragging forward carts and wagons to try to form an impromptu defensive position.

Then the beasts were upon them. Cloud and Zack did not wait, but lunged forward as soon as the creatures came within striking distance. Their swords slashed and cut faster than the eye could follow. They fought without thinking, letting their instincts and their training take over. In seconds a dozen beasts had fallen around them.

But for every one that fell there were two or three coming forward to take their place. The monsters swirled all around them now, and even their formidable fighting skills could not stand against such numbers. Zack felt something tear into the back of his leg. He turned and slashed out, and the monster fell to the ground, but then another was upon him, tossing him roughly to the ground.

Suddenly the air above them flashed with light. Cloud looked up at the ridge above as materia orbs flared brightly in the night sky. All around him the air was rent with lightening. Fire burned through the creatures nearby. He could see the huge forms of Hades and Neo Bahamut materializing in the darkness around him. Dozens of the creatures fell, but still they came on, surging around them once more as soon as the spells had subsided. Cloud turned and slashed out once again, as Zack got to his feet once more beside him. Cloud looked out into the valley below, but there seemed to be no end to their enemy. He could see the guards falling back beside them. Slowly he retreated back up into the canyon.

Red turned to Illyanova.

"Gather all the citizens you can and take them up into the caves. They'll be safe there, or as safe as anyone can be. Hurry!"

He didn't wait for an answer, but ran down the trail, followed quickly by Nipala and Barret. Cid and the others were about to follow when suddenly dark figures flew out of the air around them. He heard Illyanova cry out and fall to the ground in front of him.

"Damn," he muttered, wading forward swinging his spear. Behind him green light flared as Elena cast ice. He heard half a dozen shots from Vincent's gun, and then the birds were gone.

He stooped down by Illyanova. She groaned. There was a large red gash on her forehead. Cid pulled out a restore materia and quickly cast cure. Illyanova shook her head and slowly got back up again.

"Thanks," she said.

"Forget it," Cid replied. "But perhaps we should escort you. Looks like no one is safe."

Illyanova nodded and led them along the ridge top, heading back into the canyon proper. They looked down at the battle below. The monsters continued to flood into the canyon, and the defenders now seemed to be in full flight. Cid heard Illyanova gasp and looked down to see that the creatures had reached the stairway and were now scrambling into the canyon proper.

She looked back at Cid.

"Hurry, or we'll be cut off!"

They hurried ahead, running as fast as they could. They reached a narrow trail and ran down it at a reckless pace. They came out into the streets of Cosmo Canyon.

Cid looked around. He could see Cloud and Zack near the head of the stairs, retreating slowly toward the rear of the canyon. He saw no sign of Red or Barret.

Illyanova looked back and forth down the road.

"Oh my God," she said. "The flame."

Cid looked behind them. The eternal flame still blazed brightly in the center of town, but the guards were all scattered, pushed back by the wall of approaching enemies. There was no one protecting it from the approaching horde.

Cid turned toward Illyanova.

"Get your people up into the caves," he cried out. "Take care of them. I'll worry about the damn flame!"

And with that he ran toward the center of town, Vincent, Elena and Rude right behind him. Illyanova hesitated for a moment, then ran down the street, yelling at the top of her voice to the citizens to flee into the caves above. To save themselves anyway they could.

Cosmo Canyon had been overrun.