

CHAPTER VII: FIRE IN THE NIGHT

Yuffie glanced quickly back over her shoulder, scanning the darkness behind her, but she saw nothing but the dark outline of the trees in the nearby forest. The moon was a sliver in the eastern sky, casting almost no light. She saw no sign of danger.

Her chocobo warked nervously, and she turned forward once more and patted it reassuringly. Unfortunately, there was no one to reassure her. Though she saw no sign of danger, she felt as nervous as the bird below her seemed to feel. She had an uneasy feeling that something was out there. Something was watching her. She had felt it soon after leaving the canyon, and she could not shake it.

She looked ahead. The hills were flattening out in front of her, the land leveling off as it neared the coast. The forest had given way to a wide plain. Even in the dark she could see for some distance all around her, and the land was barren. There was nothing there to threaten them.

Still, the feeling did not leave her, and the chocobo continued to wark, and now it began to run in an erratic pattern, and she had to strain at the reigns to keep it in a straight line. She grumbled and pulled the reigns tighter. Suddenly the chocobo darted to the side, looking up.

Yuffie turned and lifted her eyes upward, just as a dark shadow plummeted down out of the darkness above. She felt something clang against the shield on her arm, then the chocobo screamed and she found herself flung from the saddle. She tumbled along the ground, fortunately falling free of the bird and landing unhurt on the coarse grass that covered the plains around her. Instantly she was on her feet, her shuriken in her hand. The chocobo was lying on the ground not far away. It was not moving.

She looked up and saw the dark figure of a huge dragon swooping down once more, outstretched claws reaching out for her. She threw her shuriken and then flung herself out of the way. The beast flew past, its claws missing her by inches. It soared up into the air and turned toward her once again.

Her hand went to her poach, but all she felt was her hip. She looked down in shock. The poach was gone!

She looked around frantically. It must have fallen when she was tossed from the chocobo. She looked down at the ground around her, but she couldn't see it in the darkness.

"Oh Gawd," she muttered.

She looked up again. The dragon was coming straight for her. She leapt out of the way as the claws raked the ground where she had stood just a moment before. The dragon wheeled in the air, turning and hovering just over her. It reared back its head and let loose with a blast of searing flame. Yuffie scrambled madly out of the way, but even so she felt it singeing the back of her legs.

She ran back toward the body of the chocobo. Her poach had to be somewhere near there. The dragon was behind her now. She kept glancing back, until she saw it diving toward her once more. Again she darted to the side, but this time stumbled over a rock she hadn't seen in the darkness. She tumbled to the ground once again.

She looked up to see the dragon filling the sky above her, swooping down with claws extended. She raised her arm to protect herself with her shield.

There was a blast of light, and the dragon cried out and altered course, arrowing back up into the air. She looked up just as a chocobo materialized out of the darkness and came up beside her. The rider looked down at her.

"Hey pest."

Yuffie leapt to her feet.

"Reno!" she cried out. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Reno shrugged.

"Not a good time to explain," he replied, looking up into the sky. "Why haven't you toasted that thing with your materia?"

"I can't find my poach," she exclaimed. "I lost it when I fell. It's got to be around here somewhere."

"Well, you better find it in a hurry. I'll try to keep its attention."

He looked up. The dragon was headed for them once again. Reno spurred his chocobo toward it and raised his nightstick once more. There was another blast of electricity, and the dragon cried out one more time. It turned in the air and launched a long line of flame in Reno's direction.

"Hurry up!" she heard him call.

She ran forward once more, until she stood beside the body of her chocobo. She looked around, searching the ground frantically. Every once in a while she glanced up to see Reno's chocobo running across the plain, the dragon not far behind.

After what seemed like an agonizingly long time she suddenly spotted her poach lying half buried in the grass. She fell to her knees and grabbed hold of it. She heard Reno cry out in distress. She reached in the bag and pulled out the first materia that she felt. She concentrated on it and green light flared up around her.

Reno pulled his chocobo to the side as the dragon swooped by. As it rose up into the sky again fire suddenly erupted all around it. The dragon immediately absorbed the flames and turned toward him once more.

He looked over at Yuffie.

"You're not helping me here!"

"Oops," Yuffie muttered. What were the odds she would pick the one materia that would heal the dragon? She dropped the orb and groped in her bag again. It was hard to tell which was which in the dark and the heat of battle. She pulled out one that glowed a faint red color. That should do.

Reno triggered his nightstick yet again and there was another flash of light, but he knew that the damage he was causing wasn't nearly enough. The dragon dived down at him one more time and he jerked the chocobo to the side once again, this time a little too roughly, for suddenly he found himself slipping out of the saddle. He reached desperately for a handhold and managed to grab hold of one of the straps as he felt, but the bird surged forward, no longer under his control, running directly away from the dragon. He was dragged along the ground beside it. He tried to pull himself up along the strap but gave up after a moment and let go. The chocobo raced off into the darkness.

He stood up and turned around. He could see the dragon circling around above him. Suddenly a bright light appeared where Yuffie had been standing. He could see the shape of a huge flame red bird materializing in the air there. There was a blast of flame, which was once more absorbed by the beast above them. Then it dived down at him once more.

This time he didn't even look in Yuffie's direction.

"Would you quit playing around!" he shouted frantically.

"Damn!" Yuffie muttered. She reached into her bag one more time.

Reno turned and ran as he saw the dragon coming straight for him. He dodged erratically, but he didn't think it would do much good. Suddenly the night behind him was light up and he heard the crackling roar of flames. He put on a burst of speed, not even bothering to look back, but he knew it wasn't going to help. He could feel the heat increasing on his back, and he could not help but mutter.

"I am so dead."

But then suddenly the light went out behind him. The heat vanished, as did the roar of the wind. For a moment he ran on in the darkness, then he stopped suddenly and looked behind him.

The stars shone brightly in the sky over the plain. He could see no sign of the dragon.

Slowly he started walking back toward Yuffie. As he approached he heard the croak of a frog from not far off.

Yuffie sat on the grass, a materia orb in her hands, as he came up to her.

"What the hell were you doing?" Reno exclaimed.

"Hey, it was hard to tell which orb was which in the dark," she replied defensively.

"Hard to tell?" he shouted. "I thought you were supposed to be the materia expert!"

"I am!" she snapped back. "Reno, what the hell are you doing here?"

"I was following you," he said. "And a good thing I did. I can't believe I had to rescue you again!"

"You didn't res..."

"I know, I know," he interrupted, throwing up his hands. "I didn't rescue you. This was all part of your plan. You attracted the dragons attention because you were bored. You let it kill your chocobo because it made it too easy to escape. You threw away your materia poach because that would have made it too simple. What were you planning on doing, annoying it to death?"

"I wish I could do that to you," she said sarcastically.

"Ohh, I'm hurt," he replied.

"Why were you following me?" she demanded suddenly.

"Why do you think?" he shot back. "Do you actually believe the others would trust you to get them help? Fat chance. They sent me along after you to make sure you weren't just telling them you would get help so you could get out of there with you own ass intact."

"They did not," she replied angrily, stung by his words.

"Yes they did," he replied smugly. "C'mon Yuffie, do you think they actually trusted you for one minute?"

Yuffie did not reply, truly hurt by his words. Red said they were depending on her. For the first time in her life she thought someone trusted her. Could it have all been a lie?

But then she remembered who she was talking to.

"You're a liar," she said. "Even if they didn't trust me, why would they send you after me? Why Reno? If there was anyone they weren't going to trust, it would be you."

"They needed everyone else there to fight," he replied. "I was the only one they could spare."

"I don't believe you," she responded. "I think you ran off on them. I'll bet you even stole that chocobo you had."

Reno looked shocked.

"It pains me to realize how little you think of me," he said.

"I'll bet," she muttered.

They stood there for a moment in silence.

"Regardless," Reno said at length. "Don't you think we better get a move on? The sooner we get to Wutai, the sooner your father can get his army together and get back here to free Cosmo Canyon and save all your friends. Do you think Wutai can handle the job?"

"Of course," Yuffie replied indigently. "We'll kick those monsters butts!"

"Well, let's hope so," Reno replied thoughtfully. "But just in case, perhaps I should offer my services as a mercenary. I'm sure your father would pay well to have such a valuable personage as myself assisting his army."

Yuffie looked at him for a moment.

"So that's what this is all about," she exclaimed. "You're just angling to make so gil out of all this!"

Reno looked at her and shook his head.

"You really do have a low opinion of me, don't you?"

"I think you would have to work hard just to attain the level of pond scum," Yuffie replied.

Reno raised his hand to his breast.

"Another dagger in my heart."

Yuffie just glared at him.

"Well we better get going then," she said. "It's a long way to Wutai on foot. It would have made things a lot simpler if you had managed to stay in your saddle."

"Hey, I wouldn't have had a problem if you hadn't been so anxious to assist that dragon."

"I told you it was dark!" she exclaimed.

"Whatever," he replied dismissively.

Yuffie looked around.

"Wait a minute. There's your chocobo," she said, pointing. Reno turned and saw the dark shape of the chocobo grazing on the grass not far away.

"Good," Reno said as Yuffie jogged toward it. The chocobo looked up as she approached, then trotted away from her.

"Hey you stupid bird," she exclaimed.

She ran toward it again, and again it trotted away from her.

"Yuffie," Reno called out, walking toward her with an amused look on his face.

She changed tactics, walking up to it slowly, trying not to disturb it, but again, as soon as she came near it ran off to a safe distance.

"C'mere!" she exclaimed.

She bolted straight for it. The bird let out a wark and dashed away. Yuffie stopped and stomped her foot. Reno laughed out loud behind her.

"Shut up, Reno," she yelled. She turned toward the bird once more and pulled out her shuriken.

"Yuffie!" Reno exclaimed.

The shuriken flew through the air and caught the bird a glancing blow to its hindquarters.

"Take that, you stupid bird." Yuffie yelled. The chocobo warked loudly and then charged right at her, pecking savagely at her head.

"Yaaggghhh!" Yuffie yelled, running away while trying to protect her head with her arms. "Get it away from me!"

Reno ran over and tried to grab hold of the bird, but it immediately turned and pecked at him as well, then suddenly bolted off into the darkness. In moments, it was lost from sight.

Reno turned toward Yuffie.

"You little idiot!" he yelled. "Now we'll never get it to come back. What the hell did you have to go and do that for?"

"It pissed me off," Yuffie replied angrily. "Just like you!"

"Well, excuse me," Reno responded sarcastically.

Yuffie looked around once more, but the bird was long gone.

"Well, no sense standing around here," she said. "Let's go."

She started off into the darkness. Reno shook his head slowly and then followed. The land sloped gradually down in front of them, and they could see the dark outline of the coast not far ahead. It didn't take them long to reach the water's edge.

Reno looked out across the dark expanse. He could just barely make out a line of low hills in the night.

"How are we going to get across?" he asked.

Yuffie pointed north.

"There are some farms along the coast," she replied. "We can 'borrow' one of their boats."

Reno looked in the direction she pointed uncertainly.

"How do you know they have boats?" he asked.

"Because I've done this before," she replied. "C'mon."

She walked along the beach, headed north, with Reno right behind her. They walked for quite some time, but eventually the dark shadows of farmhouses loomed up just off the beach ahead of them. Soon after they came upon a small rowboat pulled up on the beach and tied to a stake in the ground.

"This should do," Yuffie said, untying the boat without hesitation. She grabbed hold of it and looked at Reno.

"Well, you going to help or what?"

Reno hesitated a moment, then stepped forward and helped her push the boat into the water. She leapt nimbly in and clambered up to the bow. Reno stepped in much more carefully. He sat down quickly.

Yuffie looked at him expectantly.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she asked. "Man the oars."

Reno looked at the two oars sitting on the bottom of the boat. Then he looked up at her.

"Why should I do it?" he asked. "You're the one who's done this before."

"Hey, you're the man," she retorted.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You're much bigger and stronger than me," she replied slyly.

"Oh, give it a rest!" he exclaimed. "You know that's not going to get you anywhere."

"C'mon," she cajoled.

"You're as capable of doing it as I am," he snorted. "In fact, I think I kind of threw out my back fighting that dragon."

"Oh you are so full of it!" she exclaimed.

"It's true," he responded, reaching around behind and rubbing the back of his neck. "I can feel it. It's all tight back there."

"You are such a jerk!" she shouted.

"Moron," he replied.

"Wimp."

"Witch."

"Miscreant."

"Bi...miss-what?"

"Miscreant," Yuffie repeated.

"What the hell is that?"

"Why don't you just look it up in the dictionary Mr. Big Shot Turk," she replied venomously.

Reno glared at her.

"You probably just made it up," he muttered.

"Did not!" she protested.

"Well, where the hell would you learn a word like that?" he questioned.

"I'm the daughter of the Lord of Wutai," she replied haughtily. "I had the finest tutors the city could offer. They taught me a lot, when I bothered to listen."

Reno gave her a dark look.

"Where I come from, we used to break the arms of people who knew the definitions of words like that," he said slowly.

"I'd like to see you try!" she challenged.

Reno shook his head.

"Oh no," he responded. "You'd like that because then you wouldn't have to row."

Yuffie looked out at the ocean around them. They had drifted quite a ways south.

"Would you just take the oars before we drift clear into the southern ocean?" she said.

Reno refused to move.

"No one's stopping you."

"We'll never get to Wutai at this rate," she said. "And the longer it takes the longer before you get any gil."

"And the longer before you get help for your precious friends," he shot back. "Remember, the one's who are depending on you?"

"You told me they sent you to make sure I completed the job," she pointed out. "Doesn't seem like you're doing a very good job yourself."

Reno started to reply but then shut his mouth. They had drifted quite a bit out of the way. He looked down at the oars.

"All right," he said. "I have a compromise. There's two oars. What say we each take one?"

Yuffie looked at him suspiciously. She hesitated for a moment then slowly nodded her head. They each sat down beside one another on the wooden seat in the center of the boat, slipping their oars into the oarlocks. Yuffie looked at Reno again.

"You better not tank it," she said. "Or we'll end up going in circles."

"Don't worry about me," he replied. "I can keep up with a little squirt you even with a bad back."

Yuffie pulled her oar through the water and glanced at him.

"Cretin," she muttered under her breath.

"Oh grow up."

Aeris stepped into her room and closed the door quickly behind her, too quickly. The door had slammed shut, which she had not intended. She looked at it for a moment, wondering if any of the others had been out in the hall and heard it, but then she decided she didn't care.

There was a window nearby. Through it she could see the streets of Nibelheim in the darkness outside, but she barely noticed. She kicked off her shoes and sat down slowly on the bed, staring at the wall in front of her. A lot had happened that she had not intended.

Cosmo Canyon. Everything Red had ever held dear. All of it, gone. How many had died in the battle there? How many innocent citizens of Cosmo Canyon had been killed? And what of Gongaga? What of Zack's home town? What had happened there? How many of those people had been turned into twisted creatures by a mako reactor gone wild? The bomb at Tifa's bar. It had taken Mikko's life and came within a hair's breath of taking Tifa too. How many people had paid with their lives? How many people were paying even now for what had been done to bring one Ancient back from the dead?

Aeris slowly lay down on the bed, unable to stop the tears that welled in her eyes.

She hadn't wanted it to be like this. The last thing on earth that she wanted was for others to suffer because of her. She was a healer. Her greatest satisfaction in life had always come from comforting others. To help those who were suffering. To fight against the very thing which they had unwittingly released.

She felt sobs wracking her body. It was almost too much to bear.

Suddenly there was a knock at her door, so softly that she almost didn't hear it. She lifted her head and looked at the door. For a moment she was tempted to cry out 'go away', but she didn't. She grabbed the edge of the bedspread and wiped her eyes as best she could. She got up quickly and looked in the mirror. It was pretty obvious she had been crying.

"Come in," she said.

The door opened. Reeve stepped in and saw her standing by the dresser, her back toward him.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently.

She bowed her head.

"Yes," she lied.

Reeve stood in the doorway, hesitant. He noticed that she did not turn toward him.

"Aeris, I..." he started. He stopped for a moment, not sure what he was going to say. Not sure how much he could say.

"It wasn't your fault," he chose.

She didn't say anything at first. Just stood there, still facing away from him, her head slowly shaking back and forth. Finally she turned around and sat down on the bed. Her eyes were red.

He took a step toward her and stopped abruptly. But then she motioned for him to come closer, and he walked over and slowly sat down beside her.

"Aeris please," he began. "Don't do this to yourself."

She reached over and grabbed hold of his hand. He looked at her in surprise, but she was looking at the ground.

"Oh Reeve, what am I going to do? I never wanted it to end up this way. I wish...I wish I had never been resurrected."

Reeve brought his other hand around and grabbed hers, squeezing it tightly with both of his. Her words cut through him like a knife.

"Please, Aeris, don't say such things," he said urgently. "This is not your fault."

"But that's just it," she replied. "It is my fault. It's all happened because of me."

"No," Reeve protested. "It's not you, it's Jenova. Those people who were killed in Cosmo Canyon, that was Jenova who killed them, not you. Of all of us, you are the least to blame. You didn't force us to bring you back. We chose to do so. You didn't have any say in that. The truth is that none of this is your fault."

She shook her head.

"I could have stopped you. I could have made Cloud turn back. I'm sure of it, if I had chose to. But deep down inside, I wanted to return. I let my own selfishness cloud my judgment, and this is what has come of it."

"Aeris, you're being ridiculous," Reeve countered. "You're tearing yourself apart for no reason. You didn't force Jenova to come here. You didn't make Jenova create those monsters, or do what it did at Gongaga and Cosmo Canyon."

"But it was my return that brought it here," she replied. "All my life I strove to make the world a little better place, but what have I done since I've been back except to cause the return of the crisis from the sky, the creature that nearly wiped out my people?"

He could see tears in her eyes once more.

"Aeris..." he said, his voice choking. He couldn't bear to see her like this!

He took a deep breath and calmed himself.

"How can you say that? Don't you see how just having you near lifts the spirits of all your companions? How could you not see what you do for us all. Do you remember when I first decided to put Cait aside and join you? I was a bumbling fool who didn't have a clue what he was doing or what he was getting himself into. I was a major pain in the ass, always slowing you down. But not once did you complain or become irritated by my annoying behavior. The whole time we were searching for Nipala you supported me, helped me get over every hurdle. I admit I'm not Mr. Action Hero even now, but I've come a long way from that stumbling idiot who could only sit on the floor paralyzed in fear when danger reared it's ugly head. And it's all because of you, Aeris. You did that for me, and it's a gift I can never repay. So don't tell me you've done nothing since you've been resurrected. I know better."

Aeris sat there in silence for a long time. Finally she looked up at him, and the hint of a smile appeared on her face, but then disappeared a moment later.

"That's very sweet of you Reeve," she said. "I really appreciate that you would say such things to try to cheer me up. Especially after what I did to you."

"You didn't do anything to me," he answered quickly.

"But I did," she responded. "You took a bullet for me. You would have died if it hadn't been for Ellengio. Another life that was almost lost...because of me."

"Stop it!" he exclaimed, a little too vehemently. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"I didn't die," he continued, a little more calmly. "But the fact that I was willing to, doesn't that tell you how important you are to us? Aeris, I don't care if what we did brought back Jenova. I don't care if what we did endangers the entire world. We didn't know, but even if we had, it wouldn't have made any difference. We'd have done it anyway. Because you're worth it, Aeris. You're worth it to us. You give us hope. Don't you see that?"

She sat there for a long time staring at him in silence, her green eyes, still moist with tears, looking at him contemplatively. Finally she smiled again, and this time it lingered on her face.

She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you, Reeve," she said. "For caring."

He sat there, immobile, just looking at her face. The deep green emerald eyes. He'd never seen any quite like them, and he knew he never would. The delicate curve of her nose and her soft lips. There was not one feature about her that was not perfect. And quite suddenly he found himself leaning forward, until their lips met.

For a moment Aeris did not react, then she suddenly pulled back in surprise.

Reeve stood up, letting go of her hand, his face flushing crimson.

"I...I'm sorry," he stammered. "I don't know what...I. Please forgive me!"

He turned and almost ran for the door. He heard her call out his name as he opened it, but he did not turn back. A moment later he was gone.

Aeris sat on the bed just staring at the open door for a long time. Then she got up and walked over to it. She looked out but the hall was deserted. She walked back inside, closed the door, and slowly eased herself down on the bed once more, staring up at the ceiling. It was going to be a long night, and somehow she did not think she was going to get much sleep.

The next morning the entire party gathered in the lobby of the Nibelheim Inn. Reeve was one of the last to arrive. Aeris looked at him when he got there, but he pointedly avoided meeting her gaze.

"So," Cloud said, looking at Ellengio. "Do you have any suggestions as to a plan of attack?"

"I have given it some thought," Ellengio replied. "The problem is two fold. The first is what to do about Jenova. I'm afraid the only way we are going to solve that problem is to confront and defeat it."

"Which means we have to go back to Gongaga," Cid said with little enthusiasm.

"I'm afraid so," Ellengio replied. "Which brings us to our second problem. What are we going to do with the crystal materia? That's what Jenova is after. It would be the height of folly to go to Gongaga with it in our possession."

"So are you suggesting we split up?" Cloud asked.

"That would seem like the logical thing to do," Ellengio agreed.

Vincent looked thoughtful

"Divide and...be conquered," he mused.

Ellengio glanced at him.

"Let's hope not," he replied.

"So who's going to Gongaga?" Zack asked. "And whoever takes the crystal materia, where do they go?"

"I at least will be going to Gongaga," Ellengio replied. He took out the crystal materia and held it in his hand.

"Which means that someone else must be burdened with this."

He looked straight at Aeris.

"I want to go with you," she protested. "Jenova is here because of me. If anyone should share the danger with you, it should be me."

Ellengio smiled.

"You are very brave," he said. "But this is not a burden I give to you lightly. There is just as much danger in holding on to this materia as there will be for us going to face Jenova. If not more. Tracking down the person who has this in their possession will be the focus of all of Jenova's efforts. Those riders will return, stronger than ever. I don't know if any of us would be able to defeat them the next time we meet. Believe me, I am not doing this to keep you out of danger. If I fail to destroy Jenova, someone else can always try again. If you fail, all is lost."

"Why is that?" Vincent questioned. "Why is the crystal materia so important to Jenova?"

Ellengio turned toward him once again.

"Isn't the fact that it can be used to bring back the Cetra reason enough for Jenova to want to destroy it?" he asked.

Vincent looked at Ellengio thoughtfully for a moment, then nodded.

"I suppose," he said slowly.

"If you're right about Jenova," Cloud said with a cold look in his eye. "If it's responsible for the attempts on our lives, for the attack on Tifa, then I've got a score to settle with it. I'm with you."

"I understand how you feel," Ellengio responded. "But I think that would be a very bad idea. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of Jenova's creatures between us and Gongaga. Somehow we're going to have to get past them, and we certainly won't be able to fight our way through against such numbers. Success will depend on stealth. We will have to sneak into the very heart of Jenova's lair undiscovered. But you have Jenova cells within you. Jenova can sense your presence." He glanced over at Zack. "And this goes for you too. Bringing either one of you along would be like sending up a flare."

Cloud looked like he wanted to protest, but shut his mouth, looking at Ellengio unhappily. There was no denying the truth of Ellengio's statements.

"But if we go with Aeris, won't we be endangering her?" Zack questioned.

"Yes, to some extent," Ellengio replied. "We certainly don't want you to draw Jenova's attention to Aeris. That would be worse than your coming with us. But there are other factors involved. Jenova's ability to sense you decreases with distance. If you get far enough away it will not be able to sense you at all. And if by chance Jenova's disciples do find Aeris, you two may be the only one's strong enough to defeat them."

They fell silent, Cloud and Zack mulling things over.

"I'm not anxious to return to Gongaga," Cid spoke up. "Especially seeing as how we barely go out of there by the skin of our teeth the first time. But if it means putting an end to all this crap, then I guess I'm with ya. Besides, the Slipstream is still back there, and if they've done anything to it, they're really going to regret it."

"I'll go too," Vincent said simply.

"Well, you're not going to leave me behind," Elena said, looking defiant.

Rude said nothing, but stepped over to stand beside Elena and Vincent.

They all turned to look at Reeve.

He looked around hesitantly. For a second his eyes fell on Aeris, but he turned away immediately and locked his gaze on Ellengio.

"I'll go with Aeris," he said slowly. "Unless anyone objects."

No one spoke. Ellengio nodded slowly.

"Very well then."

"But where do we go?" Cloud asked.

"As far away as we can get," Zack suggested.

"That pretty much sums it up," Ellengio agreed. "All you have to do is protect the crystal materia and avoid Jenova's forces until we can finish it off."

"That's all? Piece of cake," Zack muttered.

"None of this will be easy," Ellengio said seriously. "I know Jenova can sense you two, and it may be that it can sense the crystal materia as well if it gets close to it. But I'm not certain of that. Either way, the farther away you get the better off you will be."

Cloud nodded. Ellengio extended his hand once more to Aeris. She paused for a moment, then reached out and accepted the materia.

"Be careful," Ellengio said. "I just wish we had met under better circumstances. There is much I would like to discuss with you."

Aeris smiled.

"And I with you," she replied. "But we may yet get to do that when this is all over."

"I hope so," he said.

"All right," Cloud said. "I guess we better get going then."

They left the Inn and collected their chocobo's. They passed quickly through town, until they reached the plain beyond at the base of the Nibel mountains. Then with a final wave Cloud, Zack, Aeris and Reeve peeled off and rode away to the west, while Ellengio and the others turned south. Ellengio spurred his chocobo to a gallop.

"We might as well make time while we can," he called back to the others. "South of Cosmo Canyon the plains will be watched by Jenova's creatures. We'll have to make our way through the mountains and forests. We may even have to leave the chocobo's behind."

The others spurred their chocobo's forward. Cid and Rude close behind Ellengio, with Vincent and Elena bringing up the rear. Elena noticed an odd expression on Vincent's face.

"Something on your mind?" she asked.

Vincent shrugged and for a moment she thought he would say nothing, but then he spoke.

"When I asked Ellengio about why Jenova was after the crystal materia, his answer was...how shall I put it? Less than satisfying."

Elena looked at him in surprise.

"You think he's lying?"

Vincent shook his head.

"No, but I get the distinct impression he's holding something back on us. Think about it, Elena. Why would the crystal materia be such a threat to Jenova?"

"Ellengio already told us that. It can be used to bring back the Cetra."

"But only at the cost of another Cetra, remember?" Vincent said.

"Or someone infused with Jenova cells," Elena reminded him. "Or maybe even Jenova itself. Perhaps Jenova is afraid we'll use it on him/her, or whatever the hell it is."

"Perhaps," Vincent replied, though he did not sound convinced.

"Well, why don't you just ask him?" she suggested.

Vincent just rode on without replying. Elena rode beside him, thinking over what he had told her. She wasn't sure she shared his suspicions. She felt a strong desire to trust Ellengio, even though they hadn't known him all that long. After all, he had saved Reeve's life and stopped the riders at the gates. But even if he had as great a desire to stop Jenova as they all did, and she thought it quite likely he did, that still didn't mean he wasn't working toward some other purpose, some purpose none of them were aware of.

Even if that were true, that didn't mean it would pose any danger to them. But if that were true, why hadn't he just told them?

They would just have to wait and see, she supposed. They would just have to follow Ellengio's lead, at least for now, while they were all united with the same purpose. If Ellengio had something in mind after they defeated Jenova, then they would

just have to deal with that when and if it came up. She decided there wasn't anything she could do about it now except keep her ears and eyes wide open.