

CHAPTER IX: UNEXPECTED ALLIES (RELATIVELY SPEAKING)

"Isn't there any place we can go to get out of this rain?" Reno complained.

Yuffie looked at him and shook her head, a shower of drops scattering from her hair. They had been walking through a steady rain for over an hour now, and they were both very wet.

"This region is nearly uninhabited," she replied. "I'm afraid we won't find any shelter until we get further north."

Reno looked around at the barren landscape surrounding them. They were walking along a ridge of dull grey rock. Sparse tufts of thick bladed grass occasionally could be seen amid the stone outcroppings, but for the most part there was no vegetation. The entire area was a maze of sloping hills and deep chasms, and if he hadn't had Yuffie with him he would soon have been completely lost. He could understand how no one would live here.

"Well, isn't there a cave of something that we could hole up in for a while?" he tried. "At least until this rain lets up?"

"No there isn't," she replied. "Look, I'm not any happier about this than you are, but there's nothing we can do but go on. We're already soaked. We can't get any wetter. I certainly don't want to spend the night cold and wet in some dark cave."

Reno grumbled under his breath, but said nothing more, following her along the sloping trail. They were approaching the crest of a hill, and he could see another one of those narrow wooden bridges spanning a gap ahead. It was the third one he had seen so far.

He looked around, but there was nothing to see but the dark treeless hills jutting up all around them. The landscape here was so unusual, he could almost believe he was on another planet. Not for the first time he wondered why he had decided to tag along with Yuffie at all. Godo had hired him once, to find Yuffie, but this time he thought the chances of a payoff were slim. Still, it was better than being back at Cosmo Canyon. At least they hadn't run into any more monsters.

They reached the top of the hill and stood before the bridge. Reno looked at it dubiously. Like the others, it looked old and rickety. He could see some of the planks were rotted and cracked, and the rope holding it together looked moldy and ready to snap.

"Are you sure there's no other way?" he asked.

"Nope," Yuffie replied. She didn't seem in the least bit worried about the bridge. "It's the only way."

"Great," he muttered.

He paused for a moment, looking down. The bridge ran over a narrow gully, not all that far below them. It crossed what was usually a dry riverbed, but the rain had partially filled the gully, and was washing the sides of the hills into the bottom, forming a sluggish river of mud below them.

Yuffie stood before the span, looking at him expectantly. With a shrug he suddenly stepped onto the bridge ahead of her. If they had to go across, he might as well get it over with.

He walked slowly, placing his weight carefully on each plank, and holding tightly onto the rain slicked ropes strung along the sides. Yuffie was right behind him, looking at him impatiently, and not taking nearly the same care.

They were almost three quarters of the way across when she finally spoke.

"Do you think you could go any slower?" she questioned sarcastically. "I don't think I'll be able to keep up for much longer."

"Well, couldn't you have made these bridges a little sturdier?" he asked sharply.

"There's nothing wrong with the bridges," she replied immediately. "They're a little old, but they were made by some of the finest craftsmen in Wutai."

"Why don't I find that reassuring?" he muttered.

Yuffie looked at him angrily.

"Hey, say what you want about me, but leave Wutai alone."

"Ohh, that's right," he replied. "I forgot your hometown was such a wonderful place. Tell me, how's the tourist business these days? Has Godo started giving guided tours of the pagoda of the five Gods?"

"Shut up, Reno. When I want your opinion, I'll tell it to you," Yuffie said.

"Hmmm, touched a nerve there, have I?" he replied with a sardonic smile. "So how's it feel to be the daughter of the lord of the tourist trap? Funny thing is, with Costa Del Sol around, Wutai isn't even the best tourist attraction. Looks like it'll always be second rate."

"I said shut up!" Yuffie snarled

"Gee, I had no idea you were so sensitive," he continued. "I guess it's tough to fall so far from grace. But I guess that's what happens when you're stupid enough to start a war you can't possibly win. I really think..."

He didn't get to finish, for at that moment Yuffie came up behind him and shoved him.

Caught off guard, he stumbled forward and would have gone right off the edge if it hadn't been for the handrope. But that was just a momentary respite. Besides being old, that rope was not designed to take to full weight of a person. It snapped almost immediately, managing only to slow him down just long enough to turn and grab the edge of one of the planks as he plunged over the side. The bridge pitched wildly, and Yuffie had to scramble to grab the other hand rope to prevent herself from following Reno over the edge.

Reno looked down to see dark muddy water swirling below him.

"You stupid jerk!" he shouted. "Come here and give me a hand before I fall!"

Yuffie just stood there looking at him with a surprised look on her face. She had hardly expected so drastic a result from her little shove. But when she realized the position Reno was in a malvolent smile appeared on her face. She made no move to approach him.

"That's hardly a nice way to talk to someone who's help you seem to desperately need," she replied casually.

He glared at her.

"Cut the shit, Yuffie," he snapped. "C'mon, my hand is slipping!"

She walked over to him and crouched down, looking at him thoughtfully.

"Say please," she said, her smile broadening.

"You little twerp!"

She just stood there shaking her head slowly.

"All right, please, God damn it!"

"Such language," she muttered.

She reached down and grasped his hand. He lunged upward and grabbed hold of her with his other hand. She hadn't expected the sudden shift of weight, and she lost her balance. She tried to grab hold of the edge of the bridge with her other hand, but it missed. She cried out as they both fell off the side and plunged down into the murky water below.

She hit the water on her side, and for a moment she found herself totally submerged in inky blackness. The bottom was covered with mud, and it clung to her, almost as if trying to suck her down as she struggled to right herself.

After a moment she stood up, breaking the surface, mud dripping from her hair. Even now she felt herself sinking down almost knee deep in it. She looked over to see Reno struggling towards the shore. Her face turned red with rage.

"You moron!" she screamed.

He glanced back at her.

"Me?" he shouted just as angrily. "You were the idiot who started it all. If you hadn't shoved me, neither one of us would be down here."

She struggled over toward him, moving with difficulty through the thick mud.

"We wouldn't have fallen if you hadn't panicked like a frightened little wuss."

He had been walking awkwardly towards shore, but now he turned and stood his ground.

"You mean we wouldn't have fallen if you weren't an eighty pound weakling."

She was almost upon him now.

"I'll show you weakling!" she barked. She charged right at him as best she could in the mud. He grabbed hold of her shoulders and tried to push her aside, but he couldn't keep his footing, and they both went down in a heap, with Yuffie on top. The mud was still almost knee deep, but there was only a few inches of water this close to the base of the cliff.

Yuffie pounded on him with half a dozen blows from her fists. At first he merely tried to fend off her blows, but a few got through, one hitting him hard on the jaw. He grabbed hold of her arm and twisted it around behind her, turning to roll on top of her. She found herself suddenly sinking into the mud, with Reno's weight on top of her.

"Get off me, you fat slob," she cried.

"I will if you just calm down," he shouted, but she didn't seem to be listening, and in fact started to struggle even harder. She slipped out from beneath him, the mud keeping him from getting a decent grip. She tried to kick him, but he rolled out of the way. She lunged and was on top of him again. He tried to pull away, but she got a hold of his shirt. He dragged her along for a moment until he heard a ripping sound.

"God damn it!" he exclaimed. "That's the second time you've ruined one of my shirts!"

He turned and grabbed hold of her. Her hand shot out and hit him on the side of the head. With a sudden burst of anger he grabbed hold of her hair and yanked her down. She slipped into the mud once more, and he deliberately fell on top of her.

"You're pissing me off now!" he exclaimed.

She struggled wildly underneath him. They were both almost completely covered with mud now, and she was as slippery as an eel. One of her arms was pinned beneath him. She twisted round and tried to hit him again with the other, but he grabbed hold of it and forced it back down into the mud. Now he found himself directly over her, looking down into her mud streaked face.

Without hesitation he lowered his head and pressed his lips against hers.

For a second she did not react, her eyes suddenly becoming wide with shock. Then she started to struggle wildly, trying to yank her arm away to get at him, but he still had most of her body pinned under him. One arm was locked on hers, the other underneath her and behind her head, holding her still. She couldn't get free. She tried to twist her head to the side, but he held her still, and just kissed her more forcefully. She fought against him for a little while longer, but gradually her struggling diminished, until eventually she lay still beneath him.

His lips lingered on hers a moment more, then he slowly disengaged and lifted his head. He looked at her carefully. She lay there unmoving in the mud, her eyes closed.

"Have you calmed down now?" he asked.

She did not open her eyes, but just lay there. For a moment he thought she wasn't going to respond, but then she nodded once. He let go of her hand and lifted himself up.

Instantly her eyes shot open. Her hand came up and slapped him across the face so hard it made his head swim. She pulled herself out from underneath him and scrambled away. When she was a few paces away she turned to face him, fire burning in her eyes.

"Don't you EVER do anything like that again!" she shouted.

He stood there for a moment until his head cleared, and for a second he felt anger welling up inside of him again. He opened his mouth to shout back at her but then he shut it. They just stood there looking at one another for a long time. Then he suddenly grinned and started walking again, past her toward solid ground.

She watched him walk past. She stood there for a moment in silence, then started after him.

"What the hell is so funny?" she questioned.

He didn't reply, but he started laughing even harder. He finally reached solid ground, then sat down, the laughter almost uncontrollable now.

Yuffie came up beside him and looked at him.

"I said, what's so funny?" she said again, but this time she couldn't keep from grinning herself.

He couldn't answer even if he had wanted to, he was too busy rolling on the ground in laughter.

She sat down beside him. A moment later she was laughing as hard as he was. They both sat there, oblivious to the rain and mud, and laughed until tears came to their eyes.

Yuffie wiped the tears from her eyes as their laughter died down. She looked over at Reno.

"You are such a jerk," she muttered, still grinning.

Reno slowly stood up. He didn't reply, but reached down to lend her a hand. She looked at it for a moment, then accepted it and he pulled her to her feet.

"Now which the hell way is out of here?" he questioned.

Yuffie pointed to the right.

"This way," she replied. "Actually, the fall has made the trip shorter. We would have had to circle around if we had stayed on the trail. Now we can head straight north."

"Well that makes me feel a lot better," he replied sarcastically.

She didn't reply, but started off, walking along the edge of the water. He followed, walking behind her. They were both still almost completely covered with mud. He didn't even want to think about what it would cost to get his suit cleaned. He glanced down at the tear in his shirt. If it was salvageable at all, that is. He would just have to add it to his expenses when he talked to Godo.

He looked up at Yuffie. She walked nimbly among the rocks, her lithe figure seemingly at ease in the rough terrain around them. He found his eyes lingering on her as she walked in front of him. He wasn't really sure why he had kissed her. Just the principle of the thing, he thought. It's what he would have done to any woman in that position. Still, it had more of an affect on him than he was willing to admit. He had always thought of her as nothing but a pest, but he had to admit she had grown up quite a bit since they had first met her.

He found himself stifling a laugh again, and Yuffie looked back at him for a moment with a puzzled expression. She started forward once more, and he followed, slowly shaking his head, and wondering seriously if he were completely losing his mind.

Elena wondered when Ellengio was going to call a halt. They had walked all day with almost no rest on steep and twisted trails through the mountains. The whole time it seemed they had spent going either straight up or straight down. They must have gone twenty miles and yet she doubted they covered more than five in a straight line.

But as dusk had fallen they had finally left the mountains behind. Now they were walking through a tall pine forest. She had expected them to stop at dusk, but they had come upon a narrow trail in the forest that led in the direction they desired. After much discussion they had decided to follow it, hoping that they had gotten past all the monsters and the trail would be unguarded. Ellengio wanted to make as much time as possible, seeing as how they had made so little real progress in the mountains, so they had continued on, even after darkness had fallen. Now they were walking slowly down the trail, their only light the glow of a half moon suspended in the western sky. They had been traveling for almost an hour now since night had fallen.

Ellengio was in the lead, walking easily yet alertly along the trail, with Cid right behind him. Rude followed and Elena walked behind him. She glanced back and saw the dark shape of Vincent in the rear. Even though he was the closest to her, he blended in so well she could barely make him out in the moonlight. If she listened carefully she could occasionally hear the snapping of a twig or the rustle of clothing in front of her, but not behind. Behind her Vincent followed, completely silent and nearly invisible, like a creature of the night himself.

It felt better to be out of the heat that had beat down on them all day. There had been little relief from it in the mountains, and Elena had been happy to finally reach the shade of the tall forest. But the temperature had fallen rapidly now that the sun had gone down, and she was starting to get uncomfortably cold. Plus she was tired and sweaty from the exertion of walking the steep paths all day. She wanted nothing more than to get some rest. They still had to set up camp after they stopped before they could relax. She wondered how much further Ellengio planned to go. She knew he was in a hurry, but they couldn't go on much longer, in the dark and tired as they were.

She sped up until she caught up with Rude.

"How much longer do you think we are going to go on?" she asked.

Rude shrugged. She couldn't see him very well in the dark, but he didn't look tired.

"I don't know," he replied. "I'm sure Ellengio wants to get to Gongaga as fast as possible. Still, I don't think we'll be going to much further tonight."

Elena nodded and looked at Rude again. He hadn't said much during the day, but that was hardly surprising. Rude was not much of a talker to begin with, but now he seemed even quieter than usual. She didn't think it would take a genius to figure out what was on his mind. It had been on her mind all day as well. Reno could be a big pain in the ass at times, but he was still a Turk and he was still their leader. Or had been until now.

"I wonder where Reno is," she said.

Rude did not reply, which was pretty much what she expected.

"Rude, I have to ask you something," she said slowly. "I know you've known Reno a lot longer than I have. I always thought of you two as inseparable. Why didn't you go with him?"

"Not that I don't think you did the right thing," she continued quickly. "It just surprised me. I think it surprised everyone. I never thought anything could come between you two."

Rude glanced over at her. She couldn't really make out his face in the dark, but she had a feeling it would be unreadable even if she could see it.

"To tell you the truth," he replied. "I thought if I stayed, he would too."

Elena pondered this for a while. She couldn't help but wonder what was going to happen when they met Reno again. If they met him again. She wondered if everything could be the same as it was. She didn't want to give up being a Turk. It was important to her and she was proud to be a part of it. But would Reno ever accept them back after what they had done? She wondered if he felt betrayed by them and couldn't help but think that he had.

"What do you think is going to happen?" she asked.

Rude shrugged. She looked at him, but he did not return her gaze. She wondered if they put Vincent and Rude in a room together for 24 hours, whether either one of them would say a single word.

"I know it probably shouldn't, but it bothers me a lot," she tried again. "I don't want to stop being a Turk."

Again Rude did not look at her, and she thought once again that he would not respond. But then he lifted his head and looked ahead of them.

"I don't think it'll come to that," he said.

Again, just the simple response, giving away nothing about how he himself felt. She looked at him again, trying to make him return her gaze. She knew he could feel her eyes on him, but he studiously resisted the urge to look at her.

Neither Reno nor Rude had ever talked about any family or home life. As a Turk it had been discouraged. She knew that Reno had been an orphan, but she knew nothing about Rude, just as they knew nothing about her. Suddenly an image of her own parents appeared in her mind. She hadn't seen them much after becoming a Turk. This job came first, before family or friends. She had realized that when she took it. But she never really thought her parents understood. She had gotten a lot of letters from them, especially her father, dropping subtle, (and some not so subtle) hints that her mother missed her a lot and it would make her feel much better if her daughter could drop in every once in a while to say hello. Even though he didn't say so, she had a feeling her father missed her just as much. She had hardly ever taken the hint. They had been in Midgar when meteor struck. She had not heard from them since.

The Turks were the only family both she and Reno had.

"You got any family?" she asked.

This time Rude did look at her, the surprise plain on his face. They were both well aware of the Turks rule never to talk about such things.

For a moment she thought she was going to get the usual response.

"I've got a sister in Junon," he replied eventually. "Haven't seen her in a while, but I get letters every now and then. She's married to a dentist."

Elena was mildly surprised.

"What about your parents?" she asked.

He hesitated for a moment.

"My parents split up when I was a kid," he replied. "I didn't see much of my father after that. Not that he didn't want to see me, but he had a job that made him travel a lot. He just didn't have much time for us."

Elena nodded slowly.

"My mother did have the time, but she wasn't much interested," he continued. "She drank a lot after they broke up, not that they didn't both drink before that, but it got a lot worse. She didn't pay much attention to us after that. My sister and I were pretty much on our own."

Elena did not reply. She was surprised he had even opened up enough to tell her that.

"My life was such a mess when I was younger," Rude continued. "I got into all kinds of trouble. I'm sure I would probably be dead by now if it hadn't been for Tseng."

Again Elena did not speak. She couldn't help but feel a pang of loss at the mention of Tseng. She had admired him so much, and he had done so much for all of them.

She looked back at Vincent, following them silently, and smiled faintly. The pain of the loss of Tseng had lessened with time, especially since she had met Vincent. Still, she would never forget him, and she couldn't help but wonder what he would have done in their situation.

"Rude, what do you think Tseng would have done?"

Rude thought about it for a moment.

"Probably the same thing as Reno," he replied.

"So you think what Reno said was true? Do you think Tseng would have been disappointed with me?"

Rude didn't answer that one for a long time. Was he really unsure, or was he just trying to phrase it in a way that wouldn't hurt her? Vincent had already told her he didn't think she'd make a good Turk, now Reno had said so as well. Is that what they all thought about her?

"It's like you said," Rude replied. "Things have changed. I can't tell you what Tseng would have thought. It was a different world then. We can't go on being what we were under Tseng. The world changes, and we have to change with it. It's the only way we'll survive. Even if Tseng would be disappointed, I think under the circumstances we did the right thing."

Elena tried to see the look in Rude's eye as he said that, but the darkness foiled her. It seemed strange for a Turk to use the words 'we did the right thing'. But she had to agree with him. Things really had changed.

She slowed down and looked back at Vincent. He had been a Turk once. She wondered how he felt about this situation. Rude saw her and slowed down as well.

Vincent seemed to have dropped further behind them, and it took her a moment to spot his dark form coming up the trail.

"Vincent..." she began.

"Be quiet," he said, cutting her off. She could see him outlined clearly in the darkness now. He was looking off the trail to the left, and she could see he had his gun in his hand.

The others stopped as well. They had heard Vincent's admonishment, and could tell from the tone of his voice that something had disturbed him.

For a long time they all just stood there in silence. Cid came up beside Elena, looking at Vincent carefully.

"What is it?" he said softly.

Vincent did not reply, just continued to stare off into the forest. Elena saw Cid slowly lift his spear off his back. She reached into her suit and felt her hand wrap around the cold steel of her gun, and even as she did so the forest erupted around them.

She couldn't really see who, or what for that matter, was attacking them. All she could tell was that there were a lot of them, and they were all around. Apparently they had walked into some kind of ambush, and had only failed to be taken completely by surprise because of Vincent's instincts.

She fired her gun and heard a yell. She spun around, looking for more targets, but it was difficult to tell who was friend and who was foe in the darkness around them. The fact that their opponents seemed to be human, or at least humanoid, made it even more difficult.

Someone lunged toward her. She thought for a moment it might be Rude, but then realized her mistake when she saw the glint of a blade in the moonlight. She dodged out of the way, firing blindly. She felt red hot pain explode in her shoulder. She cried out and dropped her gun. The man brought his blade up again, but then his head snapped forward as Rude hit him from behind. He stumbled forward. Elena felt something hard against her leg. She reached down and picked up her gun in her left hand. She turned to fire.

"Stop it!" shouted a commanding voice.

Elena felt her finger on the trigger, but she did not fire. The man in front of her hesitated as well, his sword balanced in the air.

"We are not your enemies," Ellengio shouted again. "Everyone stay your weapons."

Elena heard a few more moments of scuffling in the vegetation nearby, then all went silent.

"Who is in command here?" Ellengio asked loudly.

"It is we who should be asking the questions," a voice called out. Elena looked around as another man materialized out of the darkness of the trees.

"Who are you and what brings you here?" the man questioned.

She could not make out his features in the darkness, but she could see he was a young man as he walked past her to stand in front of Ellengio. He had an ax balanced in his hands, and the way he held it made it appear he was anxious to put it to some use. Ellengio stood in front of him, apparently unconcerned about the weapon, his own hands empty.

"A fair question," he replied calmly. "I am Ellengio, one of the last remaining Cetra. My companions and I are on our way to Gongaga to confront the evil that dwells there."

"You lie!" the man said, holding his ax up menacingly. "There are no more Cetra."

Elena felt her grip tighten on her gun. She could see that a dozen other dark figures had appeared on the trail around them, and she could hear others that she could not see. If the fight continued, they were sorely outnumbered. But Ellengio seemed to have no concern about the man's weapon at all.

"It is the truth," he said simply.

"I don't believe you," the man said. "I think you're spies. How did you get into this forest in the first place? There are monsters scattered across the plains from the desert surrounding the Gold Saucer to the hills of Cosmo Canyon. You could not have got here without being seen by them. They must have let you through."

"They did not," Ellengio replied. "We came over the hills east of Cosmo Canyon."

"You lie again," he man said angrily. "There are no trails through those hills."

"There are," Ellengio replied firmly. "Though they are not well known. We were in Cosmo Canyon when it was attacked and taken by the monsters. Nanaki himself showed us the trails."

"Cosmo Canyon has been taken?" one of the others said in disbelief. There was a murmur through the men surrounding them

"Shut up!" the leader said sharply. "You all know we cannot believe the word of these spies. They are probably just trying to confuse us."

"Everything he's told you is the truth," Cid interjected. "I'm not too quick in the uptake myself, but it seems pretty obvious to me that we're all on the same side here."

"Just what a spy would say," the man retorted.

"We are wasting time," Ellengio spoke up again. "We are not your enemy. Some of you were wounded just now. We have materia, we can cure them. Would that prove to you that we are not spies?"

The man looked at him doubtfully, but for the first time his weapon dropped to his side.

"Cure them first, then we'll talk," he said.

Ellengio nodded. Rude and Cid pulled out restore materia and cured all the wounds that had been caused in the battle, including the deep cut to Elena's shoulder. When they were done Ellengio looked at the leader again.

"My name is Ellengio," he repeated, "But you haven't told me yours."

The man hesitated, looking at him suspiciously. But eventually he spoke.

"I am called Talon," he said slowly.

"You are from Gongaga?" Ellengio asked, though he was already sure of the answer.

The man hesitated again.

"I have orders to kill anyone, or anything, I meet in these woods," he said. "But even if I don't do so, that doesn't mean I trust you."

"Killing us would be a great disservice to your city," Ellengio replied.

"So you say," he answered. He paused and looked at them all carefully, his eyes lingering on Vincent.

"Who is this one that looks more monster than man?" he questioned.

"His name is Vincent," Ellengio replied. "And I assure you he is no monster. He has been a trusted companion and has proven his worth many times."

Talon continued to look at Vincent suspiciously for a moment, while Vincent tried to look innocent, something he was not very good at.

"This is all very strange," Talon mused. "I did not expect to run into anything like this. My orders are clear, but I don't think anyone anticipated running into you. I don't know what to do with you, but I do not wish to kill you outright. Not when the possibility remains that you are telling the truth."

"So then what are we going to do?" Cid asked.

Talon paused, looking at them all intently in the dark. They could not read his face.

"I will take you back to our camp," he said finally. "And let them decide for themselves what you are, and what to do with you. It is not far, but well hidden. Our enemies far outnumber us, and our lives depend on remaining concealed from them."

Ellengio nodded.

"Very well," he said.

A few minutes later Elena found herself once more walking through the woods, back in line between Rude and Vincent, but the line had grown much longer.

They left the narrow trail Ellengio had been following shortly thereafter and struck out into the deep forest. Talon led them a convoluted journey, twisting and turning, sometimes doubling back on themselves, until Elena was completely lost. About a half hour later they came to a narrow brook. They followed it up a steep slope until it disappeared beneath some thick hanging vegetation. Talon turned to the left and walked a few steps, then pulled the vegetation aside. They all walked through into a small clearing. Elena could see some tents set up in the darkness, and there were more people here, but in the dark she had no idea how many. There was no chance of escape now, and she couldn't help but think what Talon had said about the need for concealment. Now that they knew the location of the camp, they would never be allowed to leave if it was decided they were untrustworthy.

A couple of other men had come over as soon as Talon led them into camp. Now they stood talking quickly with Talon in the darkness. One of the men suddenly ran off ahead of them, and Talon followed at a slower pace, motioning for them to follow him as well.

The moon was concealed behind the hill in front of them, and there was no light in the camp, so Elena could see little as they walked behind Talon. She could see the dark outlines of tents as they passed by, and she heard the murmur of voices. But there was little else to see. Eventually a large tent loomed up directly in front of them. Talon pulled aside the flap and disappeared inside. The others followed.

Elena stepped into the tent and stopped. It was pitch dark. All she could see was a small triangle of light through the open tent flap as the rest of the party came in behind her. She saw what she took to be Vincent step inside, then one other man. Then the tent flap closed and she could see nothing at all.

But that only lasted a moment. For suddenly a hood designed to conceal its light was removed from a lamp nearby. The tent was flooded with light, and Elena found herself blinking, her eyes taking a moment to adjust to the new found brightness. After that she looked around to see that there were a half dozen men and women standing beside Talon, looking at them, and not with a particularly friendly expression.

"Why have you brought these people here?" one of the men said, looking at Talon sternly.

"We met in the woods north of here," he said, sounding a bit nervous. "They claim to be friends on their way to Gongaga to fight the evil there."

"What do you know of the evil in Gongaga?" the man said, turning to look at the others. Elena stood there staring at the man. He looked vaguely familiar. He had a beard and long hair, and she hadn't remembered him looking like that. But the eyes and the facial features were definitely familiar. If the hair was just shorter, and the beard gone. Yes, she did remember.

"Gagnon," she exclaimed.

The man looked at her in surprise.

"Who are you?" he questioned immediately.

"My name is Elena," she replied. "I used to work for Shinra. You might not remember me, but I came to your house a couple of times to talk to your son after he became a member of SOLDIER."

The man remained still, staring at her intently. But suddenly a woman stepped forward, looking at Elena, her eyes wide.

"Yes, I remember you," she said. "That little blonde girl. The one who asked all the questions. Do you know what happened to our son?"

"He's alive," she said. "He was with us just a short time ago."

She turned and looked at Ellengio.

"These are Zack's parents," she exclaimed.

For a short time everyone seemed to be talking at once. Zack's mother almost ran over to Elena, firing questions off as she came. Gagnon followed more slowly, but his face no longer held its stern look. Ellengio looked over at Talon and saw him give a sigh of relief. Half a dozen of the others were shouting out questions as well. Gagnon turned around suddenly and called in a loud voice for order, and immediately everyone quieted down. He turned toward Elena and asked her to tell them everything, right from the beginning. Elena immediately launched into the story, relishing the chance and filling him in with many more details than Vincent suspected he wanted to know. Still, Gagnon did not interrupt, and waited patiently until Elena was done. When she actually had finished he smiled warmly.

"You have brought us better tidings than we had ever hoped to hear," he said. "I had given up hope. Now what has happened in Gongaga does not weigh quite as heavily on my heart."

"What has happened?" Cid asked. "We were in Gongaga a few days ago. The place looked beautiful, actually. But we could tell something was wrong. You could almost feel it. How did it all get like that?"

Gagnon scratched his beard and looked at Cid sadly.

"It all started about two months ago," he said. "That was when the Healer appeared. At first no one knew him, but he soon was the talk of the town. He seemed to have almost God like power. Everything he touched was revived, made into something beautiful. He healed the sick, he made the crops grow, with a touch of his hand he created beautiful gardens. He seemed to be able to do anything. And all that he asked in return was the worship of Jenova."

"Yes, we had all heard about Jenova. We may be a small town, but we do keep up with the news. We knew Jenova had been evil, but he told us that we were wrong, that Jenova had just been misunderstood. That it had all been just a sad

mistake, and now Jenova wanted to make up for it, wanted to heal the wounds and make right what had been wrong. A lot of people believed it."

"But some of us didn't. To some of us, there just seemed something wrong about the whole situation. It just didn't feel right. But there was nothing concrete, the Healer did nothing to give any indication that what he was saying was anything but the truth. Most people dismissed the warnings as just the rantings of a paranoid few."

"When the Healer asked for volunteers to rebuild the reactor some of us paranoid people really started to get nervous, but again the Healer soothed their concerns, telling them that the reactor was safe as long as it was operated properly. The reactors were only dangerous if mishandled. And again, most people believed. After all the Healer had done for us, they volunteered in droves."

"But for those who were observant, it was becoming obvious that something was wrong. There were a few who openly spoke out against both the Healer and the reactor, and most of them seemed to mysteriously disappear. Also, there seemed to be a sudden increase in the monsters that roamed the plains around Gongaga. They had nearly disappeared since the fall of Shinra and the shut down of the reactors, but now they reappeared in force. Eventually a few of us got inside the off limits areas of the reactor and figured out what was really going on. But by then the Healer was running the entire town. We couldn't fight him. We had no choice but to flee. So that's what we did, into the forest as you now see us. We've staged some raids against the Healer and his forces, but we are too few to do any real damage. And to tell you the truth, I don't see how you four would stand much of a chance against the sort of power the Healer commands."

"There may be more to us than meets the eye," Ellengio stated.

Gagnon looked at him closely.

"Perhaps," he replied.

"But our biggest problem is still getting there," Ellengio continued. "As you already know, there are monsters scattered all across the plain. The forest ends well short of Gongaga, and there is no other way to cover the last few miles except over open plain. The four of us cannot fight Jenova and all of his forces in a pitched battle. Our mission relies on stealth. We must find a way to reach Gongaga unobserved."

Gagnon nodded slowly. He scratched his head and then sat there for a moment in thought.

"True," he replied. "But on that score we may be able to assist you. What would you say if I told you we knew a way to get you right into the city unnoticed?"

Ellengio looked at him and a faint smile appeared on his lips.

"If that were true, then I would say that what we have here is the makings of a beautiful friendship."