

## CHAPTER X: THE Northern Crater

"How was the trip?" Aeris asked.

"A little chilly," Barret replied, wrapping his arms around both her and Tifa. "That ferry from the Canyon needs a better heating system. How are my two favorite ladies?"

"Fine," Tifa replied. Barret's squeeze wasn't quite as lung crushing as usual. "Hey Barret, you tired or something? I can still breathe."

Barret chuckled as he released them.

"Maybe I'm gettin' old," he suggested.

Behind them Yuffie scowled.

"Hey, aren't I one of your favorite ladies?" she questioned.

Barret looked back at her.

"Yeah, right, he replied. "But if it makes you feel better, you are my favorite pain in the ass."

"Gee Barret, you say the sweetest things," she responded, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Aeris' eyes turned toward the silver haired girl standing beside Yuffie.

"And who do have we here?" she asked.

"This is Amanda," Barret replied. "We ran into her, or she ran into me, a couple of days ago. She was running..."

"It's too cold to stand here and tell them the whole story," Yuffie interrupted, rubbing her arms and stomping her feet to stay warm. "Let's go up to the house. We can talk all we want about it there in comfort."

Barret grumbled for a moment at being interrupted, but he couldn't argue with her logic. Though the sky was clear today a cold wind was blowing in from the ocean.

"I suppose," he said gruffly. "We'd just have to end up repeating it for everyone else anyway."

They walked up the the road toward Lord Godo's house, Yuffie in the lead, obviously anxious to get out of the cold.

"You seem in an awful hurry," Barret observed. "I thought your father was mad at you."

Yuffie hesitated for a moment before answering.

"Um, well, I'm sure he's gotten over it by now," she replied. "He's not getting any younger, and his memory isn't what it used to be. There's a good chance he's forgotten all about it."

She glanced at Tifa and Aeris, who were looking at her with puzzled expressions.

"And it might be better if no one brought it up in front of him," Yuffie finished.

Tifa looked at Barret, but he just shrugged and gave her a 'don't ask' look.

They reached Godo's house soon after. The others members of Avalanche were gathered around a roaring fire in the main room.

"Bout time you showed up," Cloud commented as they entered. "Even Vincent got here before you."

"Hello to you too," Barret replied.

"Cloud," Tifa admonished. "You know Cid went and picked up Vincent and Elena in the Slipstream."

"The Slipstream?" Yuffie exclaimed. "Why couldn't he come get us?"

"I ain't your goddamn personal transportation service," Cid snapped.

"Vincent was farther away," Aeris replied. "If he would have had to come get you too it would have taken even longer."

Everyone fell silent as they noticed Amanda, who was standing behind Barret.

"This is Amanda," Barret introduced her. He went around the room identifying everyone. He stopped at the young woman seated in front of a computer at a desk nearby.

"Lai Li," Red volunteered. "She's a linguistics expert."

Barret nodded in acknowledgment, then he told them how he and Yuffie had met Amanda, and what she had told them about her captivity.

"They were doing some kind of experiments on you?" Red said after Barret had finished the story.

"Yes," Amanda replied. "I don't know what their purpose was, though."

"I don't like the sound of this one bit," Cloud said grimly. "Seems too much like what Hojo was doing. Do you think someone could be continuing his experiments?"

No one answered for a moment. Tifa looked at Cloud sharply. Just mentioning the name Hojo brought chills to her spine. They had gone through so much, Cloud especially. Hojo had been back to haunt them once already, she couldn't even imagine how she would feel to have to face him again, or anyone twisted enough to follow in his footsteps. She had thought they were finished with Jenova as well, and look how wrong that had been! If they had to deal with Hojo once more, or someone like him, she didn't know whether she'd be able to stand it.

"I don't know," Red said finally. "They would have to find some living Jenova cells, and as far as I can tell, all that are left are accounted for. But you can't rule out the possibility altogether."

"Well, even if this had nothing to do with Hojo, it's obvious that these people are up to no good," Reeve said.

"Got that right," Barret agreed. "And to think it's happening in Corel is really what's gettin' to me. I'd really like to get to the bottom of this."

"Well, we'll be glad to help you," Aeris said.

"Indeed," Ellengio spoke up. "But not right now. We have other things to take care of, things that have a greater urgency, and are of concern to not only Corel, but the entire planet."

"Yeah," Barret replied, turning toward him. "What is this all about. Why did you call us all here?"

"Better sit down," Cloud commented. "This might take some time."

They made themselves comfortable, then Ellengio explained to the newcomers what he had already gone over with everyone else. When he had finished, Barret whistled.

"Damn, you weren't kidding when you said it was trouble for the whole planet. So you want us to all go there in Cid's rocket? Sounds hard to believe."

"That's what we all said," Tifa replied.

"That is the plan," Ellengio said. "But first we have to find Sephiroth's black materia. Without that, we cannot reach the Jenova system."

Barret shook his head slowly.

"This is all too weird for me," he said. "Here I thought we were finally done with this Jenova shit, and here we go again, not just fighting one, but going to a whole planet full of 'em! Who'da thought it? But if that's what it's going to take to finish this thing once and for all, then I guess I'm all for it."

"Good," Ellengio said approvingly. "Now we just have to get to the Northern Crater."

He looked at Cid.

"How soon will we be ready to go?"

"We're ready now," Cid replied. "We packed all the supplies we'll need in the Slipstream as soon as I got back with Vincent and Elena. We can't land in the crater, the lands too broken up from the battle and the eruption of Holy. The closest we can come is Holzoff's cabin. We'll have to start from there and go over the Gaea cliffs on foot. A days march over those cliffs this time of year ain't gonna be no picnic. But even if we leave now it'll be too late to start today, we'll have to spend the night at Holzoff's cabin and get an early start tomorrow."

Ellengio nodded.

"Excellent."

Barret looked at Amanda.

"You can stay here until we get back," he said. "Lord Godo will take good care of you."

"I want to go with you!" Amanda protested immediately.

"Where we're going ain't no place for a young girl like you," Barret stated. "It's going to be very dangerous. Don't worry, you'll be safe here."

"No," Amanda stated, extremely upset. "I don't want to stay here. I want to go with you. If I stay here I'll be afraid. They'll find me, I know they will."

Barret looked at her sympathetically.

"No one is going to hurt you," he said. "No one from Corel knows where you are. I'll tell Godo to see that his personal guard watches over you. You'll be safer with them than you were with me in Corel."

"I don't want to stay!" Amanda repeated, appearing on the edge of tears. "You're letting Yuffie go!"

"Much as I hate to admit it, but Yuffie is a trained ninja," Barret said, eyeing Yuffie for a moment. "And she's proven that she can take care of herself and even be a little bit useful in a fight."

"A little bit?" Yuffie exclaimed.

"They're after me, I know they are," Amanda pleaded. "Don't leave me behind, please!"

Barret stood there for a moment, just looking at her.

"Oh let her go," Yuffie suddenly chimed in suddenly. "She's been with us this long. I'll make sure she doesn't get into any trouble."

Barret hesitated, looking from one to the other. Suddenly Yuffie stepped forward and looked up at Barret.

"Puleeeeeez?" she said.

"Oh shut up!" Barret cut her off. He stood there in silence for a moment, then slowly turned to look at the others, obviously hoping for guidance.

"I suppose it would be alright," Ellengio said slowly. "At least to Holzoff's cabin. I'm sure anyone from Corel will not be able to find you there."

Barret looked back at Amanda again, then nodded curtly.

"Thank you," Amanda said.

Ellengio turned to Lai Li.

"And I suppose you'll want to come to?"

"Huh?" Lai Li said, obviously surprised by the question. Then she broke out into a grin.

"Sure!"

"Do you really think this is a good idea?" Red questioned.

This time Ellengio hesitated.

"Not really," he said, his eyes still on Lai Li. "But maybe if she gets a hint of the kind of trouble we're going to be facing, she'll be a little less adamant about shooting off to another planet with us."

Lai Li frowned at him.

"Don't count on it," she said defiantly.

"All right already," Cloud stated. He looked around at all of them for a moment.

"What a crew," he muttered, but he had to admit it was good to see everyone together again. "Let's get going."

It took just over an hour to reach Mr. Holzoff's cabin. Just enough time for the sun to fade from the sky. They thought they had been cold in Wutai, but none of them were prepared for the fierce blast of freezing wind that struck them as soon as the door on the Slipstream slid open. Tifa paused for a moment to glance to the north. She could see the jagged peaks of the Gaea cliffs towering above them in the night. The wind blew straight down from them, whipping her hair and numbing any exposed skin in a matter of seconds. They had faced those cliffs one other time, and had survived, though Tifa was not fond of the memories. Summer never really came to these northern latitudes, and the lower regions were only clear of snow for about two months a year, while up on the peaks, of course, the snow was eternal. When they had last been here it had been late spring, a time of renewal and rejuvenation further south, though here it only meant that on most days the temperature would rise above freezing, and still they had just barely survived. But now they were here in early winter, when minus thirty to fifty degree temperatures were the norm, and an icy wind howled down the mountains almost constantly. Even now she could hear it, whistling through the cracked face of the cliffs above, like the mournful sound of a lost soul.

She shuddered and hurriedly followed the others into the cabin.

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Later that night Cloud lay awake staring at the ceiling. He felt restless, though he wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was this whole Jenova thing. This whole idea of flying off to another planet sounded like science fiction. To think that they might actually do it just boggled the mind. But Jenova had come here twice already, and if this was what it took to end this once and for all, he wasn't going to pass up the opportunity.

Or was it perhaps the fact that they were returning to the Northern Crater that was troubling him? Could it really be almost two years now since they had faced Sephiroth? He remembered it so vividly, as if it had been only yesterday. He remembered his steely determination as they had descended into that darkness, his utter conviction that they would make Sephiroth pay for all he had done, and that his payment would somehow make everything right, would make up for all the loss and suffering he had caused them.

But of course that hadn't been the case. Sephiroth had paid, but it didn't make up for all the suffering he had caused, it didn't make up for what he had done. Though Aeris had been returned to them, there were still many others who would never have that opportunity. Both he and Tifa had lost a parent to Sephiroth, and there was no bringing them back, nor any of the other people Sephiroth had killed on his mad rampage. They had all grown up during that mad pursuit of Sephiroth, he especially, but they had lost something as well. Somehow the closer they came to the place where the final battle had occurred, the more acute he felt that loss.

He tilted his head and saw the familiar form of Tifa sleeping beside him. The light of the moon filtered through the window, illuminating the room with a pale glow. Her brow was furrowed slightly, as if puzzled or perhaps disturbed by something. But her eyes were closed, and the slow rhythmic movement of the blanket made it obvious she was sleeping peacefully. Her hair, unbound, lay scattered about her, like soft strands of silk glistening in the moonlight.

He lay there for a while just looking at her. Yes, he had lost a lot, they all had, but they had gained much too. If it hadn't been for Shinra there would have been no Avalanche, there would have been no cause to unite him with all the friends he had made, no reason for he and Tifa to have stayed together after they met at the train station in Midgar...

He shook his head. After all the trouble Sephiroth and Shinra had caused, it seemed odd to think that without them, he might never have realized how much he loved the woman beside him. No matter how much evil they had caused, some good had come out of it after all.

He slipped out of the bed, being careful not to wake her. Sleep seemed far away at this point, and there didn't seem to be much sense in laying there in bed.

The flickering of a fire met him when he entered the short hallway outside the room. He could hear the crackling of the flames plainly in the quiet around him. He walked into the main room and saw Zack sitting on a couch staring at the fire.

"You're up late," Cloud commented, coming up behind him. Though Zack had given no indication that he had seen Cloud, he showed no surprise when Cloud spoke.

"Just not tired I guess," Zack replied. He turned and glanced at Cloud.

"I could say the same for you."

Cloud sat down on the couch beside him.

"I couldn't sleep," he stated. "And I'm sure Ellengio is going to drag us out of bed at the crack of dawn. I'll be falling asleep climbing up those cliffs."

"I think the cold might keep you awake," Zack replied.

They fell silent. Zack's gaze remained focused on the fire. Cloud looked at him closely. He hadn't really had a chance to talk to his old friend since they had found out he was alive. Even now it seemed so strange seeing him again. For a time they had been almost inseparable, while they were training for SOLDIER. He had seen so much death that he had almost gotten used to it, and now to see his friend again seemed almost unreal.

"I never got to say thank you," Cloud said.

Zack did not turn toward him.

"You don't have to thank me for anything. It was you who bested Sephiroth at the reactor. You're the one who saved us."

"But you got us away from Hojo," Cloud answered. "I was completely out of it by that time. If it hadn't been for you, I'd never have escaped. You could have left me behind, in fact, your chances of getting away yourself would have been better if you had. But you didn't. You dragged me along, all the way to Midgar, and in the end it nearly got you killed."

Zack just shook his head.

"It was nothing," he said softly.

"No it wasn't," Cloud replied. "And then after Shinra found us, I still was so weak I couldn't lift a finger to help you. I was so out of it, I thought you were dead, Zack. I never would have left you if I had known..."

"Forget about it," Zack said sharply. "I don't blame you. There was nothing you could have done anyway. You would have just ended up getting killed yourself."

They fell silent again. The fire gave off a loud 'pop' and a burst of sparks shot up the chimney. Northern Crater

"You left your sword in Ifalna," Cloud spoke after some time. "I brought it along."

"I don't want it," Zack said quickly.

Cloud's brow furrowed.

"Zack, the Northern Crater is bound to be dangerous. Who knows what kind of mutations the radiation from holy formed when it burst through. We're going to need your help, and you can't help us without your sword."

"I told you I don't want it!" Zack exclaimed. "It's part of the legacy of the Swordsman. After what happened with Reeve, I don't think I can trust myself with it."

"Zack, nothing happened with Reeve," Cloud pointed out.

"But it could have!" Zack replied. "And maybe next time it will. Until I learn to control myself, I don't want to have it around. I'm afraid I've totally botched things up here, with Aeris, with everyone. But no more. I've been doing a lot of thinking. All this time I thought I loved Aeris, but I've just been thinking about myself. Whether intentionally or not, I've been trying to force her to chose between us, even though I know full well how that is tearing her apart. The truth is I've been playing with her sympathetic nature to try to gain an advantage. And stepping back and looking at it, the truth, the real truth, is that I just don't deserve her."

Cloud looked at him in surprise.

"So what are you saying," he resounded slowly. "That you think she should be with Reeve?"

Zack shook his head.

"I'm saying that it should be her choice, and I've been trying to force the issue. But not anymore. What I'm saying is I'm going to stay away from her. Let her make up her own mind. If what she said on the hill outside Gongaga was really true, that she really does love me, then I have nothing to fear. And if it wasn't, if it was just her way of trying to save me, then there's nothing at all that I can do about that, now is there?"

Cloud hesitated a moment, and saw that Zack was now looking directly at him. Cloud had to admit that everything that Zack was telling him rang true.

"No there isn't," Cloud agreed. He had been concerned that Zack might attempt to repeat the stunt up on the hill that day, but what Zack was saying reassured him. He had been worried about his old friend, almost as much as Aeris, and it made him feel just a little better that Zack finally seemed to be putting things together.

Suddenly Cloud yawned.

"Looks like I might be getting tired after all," he said, as they both got up. "I guess I'll head back to bed. We've got a big day ahead of us, and dawn is going to come awfully early."

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"Rise and shine!" Barret's voice boomed though the house.

"Uggggh," Cloud moaned.

He felt someone shaking him.

"Leave me alone," he pleaded, wrapping the pillow over his head.

"C'mon, get up sleepyhead," Tifa said.

He peeked out from beneath the pillow. The first rays of the dawn were streaking the sky out the window.

"Damn, it's not even light out yet!" he protested. "What, are you in a rush to go out there and freeze to death?"

"Not me, but Ellengio and Red are," Tifa replied. "I wouldn't mind crawling back under the covers myself, but you know they're just going to bug the hell out of us all until we get up, so we might as well just get it over with."

Cloud stretched and pulled the blanket around himself.

"But I'm soooo comfortable," he stated.

"Just come on," Tifa replied. "I'm not too thrilled about this either, but the sooner we get started the sooner we'll get it over with."

Tifa slipped out of bed. Cloud tossed the pillow off his head and looked at her unhappily.

"I hate it when you're logical," he grumbled.

A short time later they were all gathered around the breakfast table. Cid and Yuffie had proven the hardest to get up, with Vincent and Zack practically having to drag Cid kicking and screaming from his bed. Yuffie proved a bit easier, but only because she was lighter. Barret handled her by himself, and had the bruises to prove it.

They started off about an hour later. Even so the sun was still low on the horizon, and gave off little warmth. The air was icy cold, but the wind seemed to have abated somewhat, with just an occasional gust blowing by to take their breath away.

For the next four hours they made their way arduously up the cliff face. The wind kicked up again after they were no more than a quarter of the way up, and they had to stop often in whatever shelter they could find to warm themselves up for the next exposed slope. The network of caves still honeycombed the mountain face, and they used these whenever possible, but for the most part, they had to follow the trail up. It was broken and though there were pennants left by previous climbers, they often led off into a dead end. None of them remembered the exact route they had taken up the slope almost two years ago, so it was not until late afternoon that they found themselves approaching the top.

"Let's take a break," Cloud suggested as they came upon a narrow split in the rock that marked the entrance to yet another cave.

"At this rate, we won't make it down into the crater until tomorrow," Ellengio commented, obviously not all that keen on the idea. They had been traveling steeply uphill all day long, and though Ellengio was easily the oldest among them, he didn't look particularly tired. Cloud glanced at the others and saw he couldn't say the same for them. Yuffie and Amanda in particular had been falling farther and farther behind.

"What's your rush?" he asked. "It's obvious that some of us need a rest. It won't do much good to continue if people start to collapse."

Ellengio paused, looking at the others as well. Then he nodded.

"Of course."

They dragged themselves far enough into the cave to be out of the wind. Ellengio remained by the entrance, looking out and up as if he could carry them over the top by force of will alone. Most of the others plopped down on the floor, more concerned with getting off their feet than the cold stone beneath them. All except Vincent, who remained standing next to Elena in one of the darker corners.

Red lifted his head and sniffed the air.

"What an odd smell in here," he commented, looking at Nipala.

"I smell it too," she replied. "Some kind of animal, I'm sure, but I've never smelled it before."

"Is something in here?" Lai Li asked, looking around nervously.

"I don't know," Red stated. "The scent is faint, and could be very old. But perhaps we should take a quick look around before we get settled in."

Red, Cloud and Vincent walked further into the cave. They quickly disappeared from view in the darkness. The others sat in silence for perhaps ten minutes, though it seemed much longer, until they faded back into view.

"These caves must run far into the mountain," Cloud stated. "There are dozens of passages, all leading off in different directions. We didn't go too far because we didn't want to get lost, but it looks like whatever might have been in here is long gone."

The others accepted that answer.

"It's freezing," Yuffie complained. "Can we start a fire?"

There were no trees on the face of the mountain, but each of them had a few pieces of wood in their backpacks, brought along for just such an occasion. Cloud looked at Ellengio, who, again, did not seem all that thrilled with the idea, but finally he nodded.

Yuffie and a few of the others pulled the wood from their packs, and soon there was a merry little fire blazing on the floor of the cavern. They all huddled around it, and even Ellengio finally came over.

"As long as we've got a fire going," he said, "We might as well have something hot to eat. But after this, we don't take anymore long breaks."

"Fine," Yuffie said, when she saw the others had nothing to say. Tifa broke out the cooking gear and she, Aeris and Amanda soon had hot soup for everyone.

Yuffie greedily took the bowl Tifa handed her and sat back, inhaling deeply the steam rising off the soup.

"Ummm," she said contently as she cradled the bowl in her lap and picked up a spoon.

"There's something there!" came Vincent's sudden warning.

Yuffie looked up and got a glimpse of a serpent-like creature lunging toward her. With a cry of surprise she threw herself out of the way, her soup flying out of her lap. She felt something cold and slimy across her back, and then searing pain. She cried out and rolled across the floor out of the way.

There was a volley of shots. She felt something wet hit her face. She wiped her hand across it and it came away dripping a greenish goo.

"Oh gross," she muttered, but it was drowned out by the sounds of battle. She looked around to see her friends engaged with four of the creatures. The one that had attacked her lay on the floor nearby, the green goo oozing out of the holes Vincent had put in it with the Death Penalty. She could see Cloud and Zack combining to slice up another one, and not far away Red was clawing madly while Barret stood behind him, trying to get a shot in himself. She reached into her poach. Her back felt like it was on fire with every movement, but she ignored the pain and pulled out a green materia. She concentrated on it for a moment, and then the room was filled with light as fire flashed around them.

A few seconds later the battle was over, as abruptly as it had begun. The creatures hadn't been difficult to wipe out after they had gotten over their initial surprise.

"Everyone all right?" Cloud asked, looking around.

"I've been better," Yuffie replied, easing herself down to a sitting position and gingerly trying to feel the damage that had been done to her back.

"Let me take a look at that," Aeris said, swiftly coming over to her.

Ellengio and Red were looking over one of the bodies.

"Ever see anything like that before?" Red asked.

The beast was large greenish colored insect-like creature, it's segmented body reminding Red of a centipede, but the sharp teeth in it's gaping jaw made it more than just a big bug. It was covered with a thin slim like coating.

"These look like burns," Aeris commented, peering at Yuffie's back, a puzzled expression on her face.

Ellengio bent down and touched one finger to the slimy coating on the dead creature in front of him. Instantly he pulled back and wiped his hand off on his pant leg.

"They're secreting some kind of acid," he said slowly. "Don't anyone touch them."

There was a flash of green light as Aeris used a cure materia on Yuffie.

Lai Li looked around.

"You don't suppose there's any more of them around, do you?" she questioned.

Ellengio stood up and looked back into the darkness.

"No way to tell," he replied after a moment.

"Well, I for one don't want to stand around here waiting to find out," Cloud stated. "We've had our little rest. I think the sooner we get going the better. Yuffie, are you up to continuing?"

Yuffie nodded. The materia had reduced a burning pain to a mere discomfort. She looked down at the dead creatures scattered across the floor.

"Let's get going," she said. "All of a sudden, the freezing wind don't seem all that bad anymore."

"Wait 'til we've been walking in it for an hour, you might change your mind," Barret muttered as they filed their way back outside.

The wind was blowing stronger than it had been all day, and they were greeted at the entrance with an icy blast. On top of that, it had started to snow while they were inside, and now the air was filled with swirling flakes. Still, they made their way up the cliff with renewed vigor. But Barret's words proved prophetic. The trail up near the top was steeper than ever, and the sheer slopes around them provided no relief or respite from the wind that blew down directly in their faces. Soon the steepness of the slope had reduced their forward progress to a crawl. They struggled upward, heads bent as protection from the wind, only glancing up to find the next handhold. For nearly another hour they continued this way, while hands and feet, even beneath layers of protection, slowly became numb from the cold. They moved upward in single file, Ellengio in the lead. Cloud was right behind him, the slope so steep now they were nearly on their hands and knees. Cloud soon lost all track of what the others were doing, focusing just on Ellengio's form in front of him and putting one foot in front of the other. He glanced back a couple of times, but the snow was falling heavily now, and he couldn't see very far below. He looked and saw Tifa struggling up behind him. She glanced up at him and he saw her eyebrows were coated with white. He didn't know how far some of the others might have fallen behind.

"We can't go on like this much longer without a rest!" he shouted up to Ellengio.

Ellengio just kept on walking, the howling wind having blown Cloud's words away. Cloud looked around, but the cliff face on all sides was a sheer drop. There was no place to stop here, even if they wanted to.

Cloud shook the snow off his hood and trudged on behind Ellengio. There was nothing for it now but to reach the summit. Only then would they be able to stop and regroup.

He didn't know how much longer they struggled up the mountain. He only knew that it seemed never ending. But just as he was about to suggest they stop to catch their breath out here in the open, he heard Ellengio call out.

"We're at the top!"



Cloud scrambled up a little ways more, and suddenly the slope flattened out in front of him. The snow was still falling heavily, but he could see far enough ahead to tell that they had indeed reached the pinnacle of the crater.

He stood beside Ellengio as the others pulled themselves up, grumbling and groaning. They had to wait and agonizingly long time until Yuffie and Amanda, the two stragglers, finally hauled themselves up on top.

"Gawd," Yuffie exclaimed. "I thought we were going to be climbing forever. So where's the bar and hotel? I need a rest."

"I'm afraid we've left both of those far behind," Ellengio responded seriously. "And this isn't over yet. We've still got to go down now."

"After all that, down will be a piece of cake," Yuffie stated confidently.

"Yeah, but just remember, all the down now will be up later," Barret pointed out.

"Thanks for reminding me," Yuffie said sourly.

"Well, we can rest here for a few minutes," Ellengio said. "But there's still no shelter, and I'm afraid it's not going to be comfortable standing out here in the middle of a snowstorm. I suggest we get going as soon as everyone feels they are able."

Yuffie stamped her feet and looked at the snow falling around them.

"There's no sense in staying here," she stated. "Standing around here we're just going to freeze. Let's get going."

Ellengio walked over and looked at Amanda.

"Are you alright?"

Amanda nodded, though she was clearly exhausted.

"Yes, I can go on. Yuffie's right. We can't stay here."

Without another word Ellengio started leading them down into the crater.

At first the trail was as steep as before, and even though it was now downhill they still had to go slowly. The snow covered rocks were slippery and each step had to be tested before someone's full weight was placed upon it. Even so a number of times someone lost their footing and started sliding down the slope for a moment, but each time they were quickly steadied by the others around them.

But as they continued down the slope gradually became less steep, and as they became more sure of their footing their progress increased. Also, the swirling wind that had plagued them coming up the mountain seemed to be slackening. Even the snow appeared to be thinning out. It was almost as if the mountain had expended all of its effort to prevent them from reaching the top.

The air around them began to clear, although the sky was still gray over their heads. The inside of the crater was a barren wasteland of jumbled snow covered rocks and boulders, completely trail-less after the upheaval of holy. Almost as soon as they had entered the crater the sun, already hidden behind thick clouds, had been blocked out by the steep hills, leaving them in a kind of gray twilight, even though it was only late afternoon.

"It's going to get dark real early in here," Vincent commented. "We're not going to have a lot of time."

Ellengio nodded but said nothing. For what seemed like hours they traveled deeper and deeper into the apparently lifeless crater, picking their way among the rocks. There were no landmarks, and the jumbled rocks spread out uniformly all around them. There was no trace of the trail that had been there before holy had torn up the land, no sign of where they had battled Sephiroth. Cid sprang up onto a large rock and looked around slowly.

"The land has been completely changed," he stated. "There's no sign of the trail we followed when we were here, or the place of the final battle with Sephiroth. How are we supposed to find a small materia orb in this trackless landscape?"

"The black materia creates a small disturbance in the lifestream," Ellengio replied. "If we get close enough to it, Aeris or I should be able to detect it."

"It seems like we've been walking for hours," Yuffie complained. "Haven't you felt anything yet?"

Ellengio turned toward Aeris, who slowly shook her head.

"No," Ellengio replied. "I feel something is nearby, but I can't seem to get a clear impression. We'll just have to keep going."

Yuffie sighed and looked around. The mountainside to the left had been cut away where a huge boulder had been torn out. The place where it had once stood formed a shallow depression sheltered from the elements.

She pointed it out to the others.

"Well, if only you and Aeris can detect the materia, there ain't much use in us all running around out here, now is there? What say the rest of us take a little break?"

Ellengio turned toward her and for a moment it appeared he was going to snap at her, but then he reconsidered.

"I suppose it is kind of silly for us all to go trekking around in this trackless wilderness."

He looked around for a moment.

"I'm going to take a look in that direction."

"I thought the point of us all coming was to protect one another in case we're attacked," Tifa pointed out.

"Attacked?" Yuffie exclaimed. "Attacked by what? Look around you. There's nothing but barren rock for as far as the eye can see. There ain't nothing here that's a danger!"

"We don't know what could be hiding out there," Aeris said quietly.

Yuffie gave her a scornful look.

"What could live here?" she said contemptuously. "I'm telling you, this place is deserted."

Aeris stood looking around for a moment.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I feel...something."

"What is it?" Cloud asked.

She stood there for a moment in silence, then shook her head.

"I don't know. It may be nothing at all. Just a feeling....that there's something here."

"You see that, it could be nothing at all," Yuffie said, as if Aeris had proven her point.

"I'm not about to dismiss Aeris instincts out of hand," Cloud replied. "She's been right more often than not. We don't all have to go, but Ellengio and Aeris shouldn't go wandering around by themselves. We'll split into groups."

He looked them over for a minute to see who seemed to be holding up the best.

"We'll cover more ground if Ellengio and Aeris separate. Tifa, Cid and I will go with Aeris. Red, you, Nipala and Vincent go with Ellengio. The rest of you stay here and make camp. We'll head off in opposite directions, and if we run into any trouble, we'll call and you can come help us out."

He waited to see if anyone would protest. Amanda looked at Barret and seemed about to say something, but she did not speak.

"Okay," Cloud said. "We'll circle around on each side of the crater and go as far as we can while the light still holds out. If anyone runs into anything suspicious at all don't hesitate to give a holler. And don't anyone here in camp wander off by themselves," he finished, looking straight at Yuffie.

The young ninja looked pained at the implied accusation.

"Let's go," Cloud finished.

They slowly made their way westward, while Ellengio and his group went off in the opposite direction. Aeris walked in front, her eyes scanning her surroundings but not really paying attention, focusing instead on the flow of the lifestream. It was always there, in the back of her mind, surrounding everything and everyone on the planet. But to sense subtle changes in it, the kind she supposed the black materia would cause, she had to concentrate.

But what she sensed was very confusing. She felt dozens of fluctuations around her, all coming from different directions. They couldn't all be the black materia. So what were they?

She led them slowly off to the right, back uphill, toward where she felt the greatest concentration of the disturbance lay. A short time later they came upon a pit, a dark hole that suddenly seemed to open up in front of them, perhaps four feet wide filled with inky blackness. Aeris stopped and stared down into it.

"Don't tell me..." Cloud started, looking at her.

Aeris nodded.

"I'm afraid so," she replied. "The disturbance is focused down there."

"Great," Cloud muttered. He pulled off his backpack and fumbled through it for a moment, then pulled out a small flashlight. He shone it into the hole. It went straight down. Cloud peered in, but he could see no sign of the bottom.

"How are we going to climb down that?" Tifa said, sounding as if she wished someone would say it was impossible and they could just leave.

"The sides are rough, with plenty of handholds," Cloud disappointed her. "It's also narrow enough so you can brace your back against the wall and shimmy down. I'll go first."

Cloud hesitated for a moment and looked at the others, who were all eyeing the hole dubiously. Then he eased himself down into it.

"Be careful," he heard Tifa say as he slowly he made his way down. The climbing was not difficult at all, the rough walls offering easy purchase for his hands, but it was difficult to see below him in the narrow confines of the vent. He went down for quite some time, and after a while he could make out solid ground below him.

He dropped the last couple of feet and found his feet landing in soft sand. He looked up, shining the flashlight above him. He had come farther than he thought. He could just make out a pale circle of light that was the opening above his head.

"I've reached the bottom," he shouted. "It's all right, you can come on down."

He heard the faint echo of a response, then he shone the flashlight around him. A narrow tunnel led away, barely large enough to walk through. There were no side passages. The floor of the cavern was covered with a grey gravelly sand.

He took a few steps down the tunnel, but then stopped, deciding he was better off waiting for the others. Slowly he unsheathed his sword. He had seen no indication of danger, but he felt uneasy, and Aeris instincts weren't the only one's he trusted.

Still, nothing disturbed the darkness around him until he heard the rustle of clothing and the scrap of boot against sand as the others reached the bottom of the vent.

"So where to from here?" Cid questioned, the glow of his cigarette standing out in the darkness.

"Only one way to go," Cloud replied, pointed down the tunnel. He looked at Aeris.

"Still feeling it?" he questioned.

"Yes," she replied. "Stronger than ever. Whatever it is, we're getting closer."

Cloud nodded and led them down the tunnel, Cid right behind, and Cloud noticed he had his spear at the ready. Hopefully what Aeris was feeling really was the black materia, and they would find it without any trouble, but the further along the tunnel they went the more his unease increased. Somehow he had a feeling it just wasn't going to be that easy.

The passage seemed to lead in a straight line, with no turnoffs. But it was uncomfortably small, just barely allowing passage without having to duck, and their arms scarped along the side walls occasionally from lack of space. It made all of them very uncomfortable.

Suddenly Cloud heard a strange humming noise. It took him an instant to realize that the sound was not a sound at all, but was inside his head. He turned to ask if anyone else felt it.

And Aeris screamed.

She staggered against the wall and fell to her knees, her hands clutching her head, her body convulsing involuntarily.

"Aeris, what's wrong?" Cloud cried out. One glance at the others, who were staring at Aeris much as Cloud must have been, convinced him that she was the only one affected.

"Oh God," she shouted. "My head! Make it stop, oh please make it stop!"

She tried to get up, but she seemed to have lost all control of her body, and she fell back instead. She lay on the ground, her body jerking spasmodically, while the others just stood there looking at her helplessly.

Tifa knelt down beside her and grabbed hold of her, but Aeris did not even seem to notice. Her body continued to jerk, and she cried out again. Tifa looked up at Cloud with tears in her eyes.

"Cloud, what do we do?" she pleaded.

Cloud stood there for a moment, feeling sick to his stomach. Aeris was obviously in agony, but there seemed to be no danger around them. He flashed his light down the tunnel, but it was empty. He had no idea what was happening to her.

Aeris screamed again.

"Cloud!" Tifa shouted.

And Cloud ran. Down the tunnel, as fast as he could go. Whatever was happening, it had to have something to do with what she had felt, and what she had felt had to be down here somewhere. Something had to be causing this, and since it appeared it wasn't coming to them, then he would have to find it.

The tunnel was still narrow, making rapid movement difficult. He could still hear Aeris screams behind him, and it only made him force himself to go faster, ignoring the rocks that scraped against his hands and arms, drawing blood. There were no side tunnels, whatever was here had to be ahead, and he had to reach it before it hurt Aeris any more.

And suddenly there it was, a huge bulbous gray blob, moving slowly along the tunnel in his direction, filling the tunnel completely with its bulk. A sudden reeking smell filled the air, almost causing him to gag. The creature seemed to have no head, and Cloud could make out no sense organs at all. The only distinctive feature was a large mouth filled with gaping sharp yellow teeth.

With a roar Cloud sprang forward, slashing with the Ultima weapon. The creature made no move to defend itself, indeed, it gave no indication it even knew Cloud was there. The sword slashed through it cleanly, opening it up, and suddenly a huge amount of brown liquid came pouring out of the wound.

Cloud ignored the blood, even as it splashed onto the floor around him, making him slip slightly as he drove forward, bringing the sword down again and again. Suddenly the humming sound in his mind changed to a high pitched whine, running up and down the scale. Cloud did not pause, bringing the sword down over and over, his only thought the total destruction of the beast in front of him.

And suddenly there was silence. He paused for a moment to look around him. He was standing ankle deep in brown gore, his sword, his clothing all covered. Of the creature he had been fighting there was not a single piece left large enough to be recognizable.

He stood there for a moment catching his breath, then started back to the others. When he reached them he saw Aeris sitting up, her back to the tunnel wall, looking pale but unhurt. They all looked at Cloud, still dripping with gore.

"I see you took care of it," Cid observed.

"Yeah," Cloud replied.

"What was it?" Tifa asked.

"Some kind of weird looking blob," Cloud answered. "Aeris, are you all right?"

Aeris nodded and forced a smile.

"Yes, thank you. I've never experienced anything quite like that. It was horrible. It was like when Quays used the super materia to hurt the planet, but that had only lasted a moment, this went on and on..."

Tifa laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Well, it's all over now."

"Thank God," Aeris said.

"Do you still feel the fluctuation?" Cid asked.

Aeris shook her head.

"No, it's gone. It must have been that creature. I guess it can somehow cause it's own disturbances in the lifestream, though I've never heard of that happening before."

"Who knows what kind of strange creatures were created by the radiation from holy," Cloud said. He looked around and took a deep breath.

"Well, looks like this was a wild goose chase. I guess we better get back to the surface. Are you up to it?"

Aeris stood up slowly, then nodded.

They made their way back the way they had come. Climbing back up the vent was not difficult, even for Aeris in her weakened condition. When they reached the top they found Ellengio, Red, Nipala and Vincent waiting for them.

"What happened?" Ellengio said. "I felt something in the lifestream. Something unpleasant."

Aeris explained what had happened to them down in the vent. Ellengio stood there thoughtfully for a few moments after she was done.

"Interesting," he said. "A creature that can use the lifestream as a weapon. I've never heard of anything like that before. It was lucky for you the others were with you."

"Yeah," Tifa replied. "For once I don't feel so bad about not being able to feel the lifestream myself."

"But what are we going to do now?" Nipala said. "Apparently this creature mimics the disturbance caused by the black materia. If there are more of them around, how are we going to know that it's not another one of those creatures next time you feel a disturbance?"

"I don't know," Ellengio said. "It's possible there was only one of these creatures, in which case we should have no more problems. But until we know for sure I think it might be best if we all stay together."

"Well, we better get going then," Vincent said. "It's getting darker by the moment."

They started off again, with Ellengio in the lead. Aeris followed the others slowly, still not completely healed from the encounter, but knowing things could have been a lot worse.

"I suppose the creature lured things sensitive to the lifestream into it's cavern and then incapacitated them with some kind of lifestream mind blow while it came to feed," Red mused as they walked along. "It obviously was expecting a helpless prey, and had no weapons with which to defend itself against an active enemy. What an intriguing creature, I would be interested in studying it."

"Some other time, perhaps," Cloud muttered.

"Of course," Red replied. "I did not mean now. We have much more urgent business to attend to at the moment."

"I think I feel something off this way," Ellengio said suddenly.

He turned to the left and started to pick his way over the rocks. A few moments later he stopped and looked down at his feet.

"Aha," he said.

The others came up beside him and saw a dark pit in the ground.

"Not again," Tifa groaned, glancing toward Aeris.

Ellengio looked down at the pit in front of them.

"It appears to be identical to the previous one," he commented.

Cloud shook his head.

"These things could be all over the place," he said in disgust. "There could be dozens of them, hundreds. We might never find the black materia."

"Not so fast," Red said thoughtfully. "You're assuming these pits are made by the creatures, as some sort of lair, and it seems highly reasonable to me to suppose that is true, but that information could actually end up helping us."

"How do you mean?" Cloud asked.

"Assuming each pit is a lair for one of these beasts, then every time we follow a disturbance and it leads to a pit, we'll know we've run into one of the creatures."

"So?" Cloud asked. He did not see any point to this.

"So," Red continued. "But what if we follow a disturbance and it doesn't lead to a pit?"

"Then that'll be the black materia!" Cid concluded.

"Exactly," Red replied.

Cloud's face immediately brightened at that prospect.

"All right then," he said. "But let's hurry. Like Vincent said, it is getting late."

Once again they started off, moving as rapidly as they could through the broken land. Many times either Ellengio or Aeris detected something around them, and every time it lead them to another one of the pits. And with each false trail the light around them faded a little bit more.

After nearly twenty such journeys they barely had light enough to see the ground in front of them, and Ellengio was thinking that soon they would have to quit for the night, but finally they followed one disturbance and found themselves standing not in front of a dark pit, but instead a jumbled pile of boulders.

"Do you suppose there could be a pit underneath those rocks somehow?" Cloud ventured.

Ellengio shrugged.

"I suppose it's possible, but all the others were right out in the open."

"Well, let's check it out," Vincent said.

"Can you find it in there?" Cloud asked.

"The disturbance is a general thing," Ellengio replied. "We can't pinpoint it exactly. I'm afraid from here on in we'll have to rely on our eyes."

They started walking slowly among the rocks, looking at the ground, sifting and pushing aside rocks as they went. For nearly twenty minutes they combed the area, when suddenly Nipala called out.

"I've found something!"

The others hurried over to see her pawing something on the ground. Ellengio bent down to pick it up and the others immediately saw that it was not a materia orb.

"What is it?" Tifa questioned.

Ellengio held it out for them all to see.

An old and very dented cigarette lighter.

"Hey," Cid exclaimed. "I wondered what happened to that!"

Ellengio looked at him.

"This is yours?"

"Sure is. I had it for years," Cid replied. "See," he said, pointed to the faded image on the side of the lighter, "it's the same picture I had painted on the side of the Highwind."

Cloud squinted and looked closer. It was indeed the same bikini clad woman.

"So this is where we must have fought!" Tifa exclaimed, suddenly excited.

"Yes," Red said. "Which makes it appear that we may be on the right track. C'mon everyone, keep looking!"

They got back to work, all of them invigorated by the find. And in fact, it was no more than fifteen minutes later when Vincent suddenly pulled a dark object up out of the stones beneath his feet.

"I found it," he said.

The others ran over to him as he held out the dust covered jet black ball.

"We did it," Cloud said, his breath coming out in a sudden gasp. He looked around to see grins on the faces of everyone else, except Vincent, of course.

"I can't believe it," Tifa muttered.

"Neither can I," Nipala agreed.

"Yes!" Cid exclaimed.

Ellengio took the materia from Vincent and stared at it for a moment.

"So this is the black materia," he said softly. "Hard to believe such a small thing can hold so much power. Good job, everyone. And now I think it's time we got back to camp."

"Yeah, the others are probably fit to be tied by now," Cloud said.

"It will be nice to get back to camp and get a little rest," Tifa said. "I fell like I've been walking for weeks."

"Me too," Cloud said. He looked up at the dark rim of the crater far above them. "But it's not over yet. Tomorrow we've still got to climb back up out of here. The journey is only half over."

Tifa stood beside him and looked up as well.

"Don't remind me," she replied.