

CHAPTER XIII: INFINITY AND BEYOND

The roar of the engines suddenly diminished, then faded away entirely. The pressure that had been pushing them back in their seats faded away. Tifa took a deep breath and looked out the window, to see the darkness of space amid a backdrop of stars.

"Okay, you can all relax now," Cid stated. "The launch was successful and we are in space. Feel free to get up and move around if you wish."

"So what happens now?" Vincent questioned.

"First we get a little farther from the planet," Cid replied. "Wouldn't want to call a wormhole too close to that, it could destroy it as well or better than meteor would have. Then Ellengio does his thing with the black materia. The wormhole appears and we go through. That's that."

Tifa glanced over at Cloud. Somehow she didn't think it would be quite that simple, and from the look on his face, he was thinking the same thing.

"How long before we can call the wormhole?" Cloud asked.

"A couple of hours," Ellengio responded. "That should put us far enough away from the planet to pose it no danger."

"And how long will it take to go through the wormhole?" Reeve asked.

Ellengio hesitated for a moment.

"Can't really say," he replied. "It's really just a connection between two points in space, there shouldn't be any distance to it at all. But I can't really say for sure."

"And how close to this other planet will we be when we come out?" Zack asked.

Ellengio shook his head.

"I have no way of knowing," he replied. "I would assume we'll be about the same distance as we are from our planet when we enter the wormhole."

"You assume?" Reno questioned. "Sounds like there's a lot of guesswork involved in this."

"Yes there is," Ellengio agreed. "Since we are the first one's to ever attempt such a thing, except for Jenova, and we could hardly get answers from that creature, we just don't know what's going to happen."

"Exactly," Reno replied. "You've never called a wormhole before. How do you know you can even do it?? And even if you do, how can you be sure it's going to send us to the place we want to go? How do we know it's not just going to send us out into the middle of space somewhere a gazillion miles from where we want to go?"

"I admit calling the wormhole will not be a simple procedure," Ellengio said. "It's going to take a tremendous amount of mental power to use the black materia for that purpose. I'm pretty sure I can manage it though, with Aeris help. But if we can't, well, then the trip ends pretty quickly and we return to our own planet. As for us ending up in the middle of nowhere once we go through, well, that is a possibility. But the black materia is programmed to send us back to the point of origin of it's first use, and as long as Aeris and I keep our minds focused on it, it should send us straight back to where we want to go."

"How do we know you're strong enough to do that?" Reno questioned.

"We don't," Ellengio replied simply. "We're just going to have to find out when we do it. Nobody said this would be easy, or that there wasn't any danger involved. If I remember correctly, you volunteered to come along, no one forced you to. You're just going to have to accept the risks involved whether you like it or not."

"Yeah, Reno, quit your yappin'," Barret cut in. "We've got enough things on our minds without having to listen to you."

"Oh shut up, Barret," Reno shot back. "All you do is follow the other members of Avalanche around mindlessly. If one of them told you to walk off a cliff you wouldn't even think about it first, would you?"

"Leave him alone, Reno," Tifa said. "It's called loyalty, something you've obviously never known anything about."

"It's called being used, you mean," Reno replied, turning toward Tifa. "And you should be the last one to talk. You're even worse than Barret. You've been following Cloud around like a little puppy dog practically your whole life, even when he was totally ignoring you. To tell you the truth, I find it sickening the way he manipulates you."

"I'm not manipulating anyone!" Cloud said, stepping forward angrily.

"Ohh, what are you going to do, slice me up and then tell everyone that you didn't know what you were doing? Personally I thought your claim about being influenced by Jenova was pretty clever. It certainly took the blame off you for all the stupid decisions you made."

"C'mon Reno," Aeris volunteered. "You know very well that Cloud wasn't making any of that up."

"You're defending him too?" Reno said, looking at her in apparent surprise. "Even after he discarded you like an old dish rag? Are you so thick headed that he can treat you like shit and you don't even realize it?"

"Leave her alone!" Reeve said immediately.

"Funny you should come to her defense," Reno turned his attention to Reeve without a pause. "You've become awfully brave all of a sudden, now that you've got the others to hide behind. Let me ask you something, where were you when Aeris had been captured by Tseng? You were in the Shinra building, you knew what was going on. If you care for her so much, why didn't you help her then?"

"Reno, you know I...," Reeve said hesitantly. "I hardly knew her then."

"How convenient," Reno replied sarcastically. "Figures you'd have an excuse for not helping her when it was actually dangerous to do so."

"Reno, just shut the hell up!" Cid growled from his seat. "We didn't ask you to come along. Who the hell put the bug up your ass today anyway?"

Reno rolled his eyes.

"And now we hear from the old washed up pilot who is risking the lives of all his so called friends just to try to lend some validation to his life by shooting off into space on some hair brained scheme. I have to admit I've never seen a more pathetic group of losers in my entire life."

"Boy, you're in rare form today," Yuffie spoke up for the first time. "But what makes you think any of us are interested in the opinion of someone who has no moral values whatsoever?"

Reno glared at her.

"I'm not even gonna get started with you," he said dismissively.

"Reno, just shut your mouth!" Cloud snarled, starting toward him menacingly. "I didn't come along on this trip to listen to your crap."

"Cloud, it's not worth it," Tifa said, coming up beside him and grabbing him by the arm. "You know he's just saying all this to antagonize everyone. Are you really going to pay attention to anything he says?"

"Just ignore him," Zack agreed. "You know he's just doing it to tick everybody off."

"Yeah, I've had enough of this, I'm gonna get something to eat," Barret said, and headed off to the galley.

"Sounds good to me. Hey Barret, wait up," Cid said, following him out.

"C'mon, let's go," Tifa said, looking at Cloud, who stood there for a moment, still looking like he was spoiling for a fight. Then he shrugged.

"Yeah, you're right," he said. He cast one last glance at Reno then he and Tifa walked out of the room. The others quickly followed until the three Turks were the only ones left. Elena came up beside Reno.

"Must you be so antagonistic?" she questioned.

Reno gave her a sly smile.

"You gotta admit, things would be awfully boring around here without me," he commented.

Elena looked him over.

"You enjoyed doing that, didn't you?" she said.

"Of course," he replied. "They're such easy targets. And what fun will this trip be if I don't rile things up a bit."

"Well, you just better be careful not to rile anyone up too much," she responded. "Cloud looked ready to beat the hell out of you."

Reno snorted.

"I'd like to see him try," he replied.

"Keep it up and he just might," she said. She looked around for a moment. "Well, no sense standing around here. Let's go get something to eat."

She led them into the other room. Cid, Barret and Cloud were sitting at the table. The others had scattered around the ship. They gave Reno a dark look, Cloud in particular, but no one said anything. Reno just ignored them and kept up a cheerful conversation with the other Turks, as if everyone there were all the best of buddies. Eventually Cloud picked up his sandwich and left the table. Reno looked at him as we walked towards the door.

"Was it something I said?" he inquired sweetly.

Cloud ignored him and left the room. The last thing he needed right now was to listen to Reno's annoying jabber. He walked down the passageway and peeked in the next room. Ellengio, Red, Nipala, and Lai Li were all deep in conversation, poring over some star charts, all discussing the finer points of space travel. Definitely not something he wanted to get involved with right now. At this point he just felt like relaxing for a little while. They were on their way, there was nothing more for him to do now but sit and wait. He was sure there would be more than enough for him to do once they reached this new planet, so he might as well just take it easy while he had the chance.

The next room was a lounge with a large window looking out into space. There was a couch in the center of the room, facing the window. Looked like a perfect place to relax for a bit.

He walked around the side of the couch and stopped, surprised to see Aeris curled up on it. She must have been staring out the window, but now she looked up at him. She smiled and sat up immediately.

"Am I disturbing you?" Cloud asked.

"Not at all," she said, patting the seat beside her. "I was just relaxing a bit."

Cloud sat down beside her.

"Exactly what I had in mind," he said. "We're probably going to get little enough of it once we get to this planet."

Aeris just looked out the window thoughtfully.

"I suppose," she said finally. She didn't really seem to be paying any attention to him. A faint smile played across her lips.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

For a moment she did not respond, just sat there motionless. Then she turned toward him suddenly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Nothing is funny. I was just listening."

"Listening?" Cloud said, puzzled. "I don't hear anything."

"You can't hear that?" Aeris said, then paused a moment. "Of course you can't. Sometimes I forget. It's the voices of the planets, they're all around us."

"Voices?" Cloud said. "You mean, you can hear more than one?"

"Yes," she replied. "There are hundreds, thousands. When we were on the earth, all I could hear was our planet, the sounds of it drowned out all this. It was like looking up at the sky during the day, you can only see the sun, but at night all the other stars come out. Up here in space, it's like seeing the night sky for the first time. I can hear all the voices, all together, like some kind of beautiful music. The harmony of the spheres. Oh, I wish you could hear it!"

Cloud just looked at her, amused by her obvious enthusiasm. Again he was reminded of just how different she was from anyone else he had ever met.

"I wish I could," he said. Looking at her, he couldn't help but smile. She had missed out on their first excursion into space, and it was obvious that she was quite excited about this one, perhaps almost as much as Cid. Sitting there, listening to sounds only she could hear, she seemed like a small child who had found a new and beautiful toy. And like a child, she seemed totally unconcerned about the danger they might face on this voyage. In a way he couldn't blame her. After all, she had already faced death once, and it was kind of refreshing to see such enthusiasm, but it also scared him as well. That kind of attitude could lead to reckless decisions, as it had when she had made up her mind to go up against Sephiroth alone. Whatever else was going to happen, he knew this mission was going to be fraught with danger. He couldn't help but worry about her.

"Aeris," he said seriously. "When we get to this new planet, could you just...I mean...I think it would be better..."

He faltered and she gave him a curious look. He took a deep breath. What could he say? Aeris, don't do anything stupid? That's what he wanted to say, but he knew he couldn't word it like that. It didn't matter anyway. He'd know Aeris long enough to know that she wouldn't listen to anyone else's advice, no matter how reasonable it might seem.

"Just be careful, okay?" he ended lamely.

"Of course I will," she replied. "What made you say that?"

Cloud just shook his head.

"No particular reason," he replied. His found his gaze drawn to her soft green eyes. "I just worry about you. We all do."

She smiled.

"And I hope you didn't take what Reno said seriously," he continued. "You know it wasn't like that."

"Of course not," she replied. "Reno was just being Reno. I'm not going to listen to anything he has to say."

"Good," Cloud said. Even though he loved Tifa, he still cared a great deal about Aeris. He didn't want to lose her as a friend.

"So there you two are."

They turned around to see Vincent standing in the doorway.

"It's almost time," Vincent said. "Aeris, Ellengio is getting ready to use the black materia, and he told me he might need your assistance. He said the rest of us should get strapped in. We might be in for a bumpy ride. The others have gathered in the control room. I haven't found Yuffie yet, have you seen her?"

"Nope," Cloud replied. "She's probably hiding in a corner somewhere puking her guts out."

"Wouldn't surprise me," Vincent responded. "You go back to the control room, I'll find her."

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"I'm hungry," Amanda said.

Altim nodded but said nothing. He had had nothing to eat since early that morning, and his stomach was growling to, but he chose to ignore it. He wondered how long it had been since they lifted off. He looked at his wrist, wondering wistfully why he hadn't bothered to wear his watch today. For some reason, he didn't really care for watches, and usually only wore his if he knew he was going to need it. He supposed that he must have figured a rocket ship would have clocks on it. Not in the cargo hold, of course, but he hadn't thought of that. Silly, he chided himself. He prided himself on thinking ahead. In his line of work, it paid to have all bases covered, and the person who planned best was usually the one who was most successful. He should have known better.

But there was not much he could do about it now, and the lack of a watch didn't seem to have done them any harm. He was kind of curious about how long they had been sitting here. It seemed like hours already, but he knew that time seemed to crawl when you were sitting around doing nothing. For all he knew, they might not have been in flight very long at all yet.

"Do you think we've gone through the wormhole yet?" Amanda asked, obviously feeling as impatient as he did himself. There was nothing worse than just sitting around waiting for something to happen. He had spent the time telling Amanda about his travels with the Swordsman, or Zack as he was now known, and how he had met Aeris. Amanda had told him a little about herself as well, but not much.

"I don't know," he replied. "I doubt it. You would think that we would have noticed it somehow."

"How would we notice anything in here?" Amanda questioned, waving her arms at the crates that surrounded them. He had to admit she had a point. An interplanetary war could be taking place outside, and they wouldn't have an inkling.

"I don't know," he repeated. "I would think we would feel...something."

They fell silent for a few minutes. Amanda looked around.

"I'm hungry," she said again. "I wonder if any of these crates have food in them?"

Altim looked over the crates as well.

"I suppose some of them must," he stated.

Amanda locked eyes with him.

"Well," she said thoughtfully. "Shall we see what we can find?"

Altim looked dubious.

"If we go around opening a bunch of crates, they're going to notice," he stated.

"It won't matter," Amanda replied. "Even if they find us now, they're not going to turn back. At this point they've got no choice but to take us along with them."

Altim still hesitated.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I'm...pretty sure," she replied a little less confidently. "I mean, it would be crazy for them to turn around now, wouldn't it? After all the trouble getting here. And they couldn't just turn around again once we got back to earth, right? It would take them a long time to get ready for a launch again if they went back now, wouldn't it?"

"I guess," Altim replied. What Amanda was saying made sense, but he really didn't know the logistics of space travel. Given the choice, however, he would prefer to remain hidden for as long as possible.

But Amanda took his reply as agreement and scrambled over the top of the crates, then started working her way toward the front of the room, looking at the crates closely and trying to read the labels. Now that it came down to it she realized she hadn't thought this whole thing through very well. She hadn't brought anything to eat along with her, and now she was regretting it. The truth of the matter was, she was ready to risk discovery for the sake of putting something in her stomach.

Altim belatedly followed, cringing at all the noise she was making.

"Could you at least keep it down?" he asked, trying to keep his voice from carrying. "Even if it's too late to turn back, I'd rather not advertise that we're here."

"Don't worry," Amanda replied. "No one's been in here since they closed the cargo doors. The place is deserted."

"I hope so," Altim muttered. He caught up with her a moment later. She was standing in front of one particular stack of crates. She pointed to the label, which read 'provisions'.

"Looks like we've got a winner," she said with satisfaction. "Help me open it up."

It took them a good ten minutes to crack the crate open. They had no tools, and finally Amanda sort of just toppled to top crate right off the stack. It fell to the floor with a crash. Altim looked daggers at her.

"Oops," she said innocently. Amanda knelt down beside the remains of the crate while Altim looked around slowly, but he saw nothing.

"Here we go," Amanda said contently. He looked down to see her neatly arranging the provisions on the floor beside the crate. "Come and get it," she said, looking up at him.

He took one last glance around then hopped off the crates onto the floor beside her. He had to admit, now that the food was in front of him, that this might not have been such a bad idea. He hadn't really realized just how hungry he had been. Amanda was breaking off chunks of cheese from a wheel and placing it on crackers. She offered some to him, which he gladly accepted. He wolfed them down quickly. They were quite good, though a little dry.

"Nothing to drink?" he said.

Amanda looked around and smiled.

"We'll have to do a little more hunting," she said.

"Who the hell are you?"

They both looked up, startled. Amanda turned and saw Yuffie standing on top of a nearby crate. She was staring at Altim.

With a curse Altim jumped up and pulled out his dagger. He knew it was stupid to let down his guard. He had let Amanda lull him into a false sense of security.

Yuffie immediately loosened her shuriken.

"Put down the knife," she demanded.

"Yuffie, stop," Amanda said. "This is Altim. We stowed away. I know it was a stupid thing to do, but I just couldn't let you all leave me behind."

"I said put down the knife!" Yuffie said again, ignoring Amanda.

"You put down your weapon," Altim shot back.

"Stop it!" Amanda said. "Yuffie, Altim is not an enemy."

"How do you know that?" Yuffie said. "Where do you know him from?"

"I just met him," Amanda replied. "He followed me on board the ship."

"You just met him?" Yuffie said suspiciously. "Then how do you know he's not an enemy?"

"Yuffie, don't be ridiculous," Amanda said. "I've been with him since we lifted off and he hasn't done anything to harm me or anyone else."

"Maybe not yet," Yuffie replied. "But who knows what he has in mind. Sometimes you're a little too trusting, Amanda. He might be using you for his own purposes."

"I'm not using anyone," Altim replied. "And I have no intention of hurting anyone."

"If that's true then put down the knife," Yuffie stated.

"You're not going to take my weapon," Altim said defiantly.

"Would you two stop it," Amanda cried out. "Yuffie, he's a friend of Aeris."

"So he told you," Yuffie said. "I'm telling you one last time, lose the knife or I'll lose it for you!"

"That might be a bit more difficult than you think!" Altim shot back.

Yuffie's shuriken whistled through the air. Altim lunged backward, almost falling over, the shuriken missing him by inches. Then he dashed forward. Yuffie leapt off the crate just as Altim reached it. He slashed at her with the knife, but missed as she found purchase on a higher crate. The shuriken returned to her hand and she pulled it back for another throw. Altim lunged forward, smashing his shoulder into the pile of crates she stood upon. Her arms pinwheeled wildly as she struggled to maintain her balance, then she leapt away just as the crates toppled to the ground, some of them falling on Altim, knocking him down. She landed awkwardly and stumbled, falling heavily into another stack of crates.

Amanda yelled for them to stop, but they seemed intent on ignoring her. She had to put a halt to this somehow, but it was obvious they weren't going to listen to her, listen to reason. She turned to run into the main cabin, figuring no matter what happened now, they could not hide any longer, and maybe the others could put a stop to this. But almost immediately as she turned her progress was halted by a dark figure standing almost directly behind her. A cold metal arm shot out and grabbed hold of her arm, and she gasped and looked up in surprise.

"Don't move!" a deep voice commanded.

Silence fell as both Yuffie and Altim looked up from the floor to see the tall figure of Vincent standing beside Amanda, gun poised in his hand.

"Have a seat," Ellengio said.

Ellengio was sitting on the floor in the center of the room, the black materia in front of him. Aeris slowly sat down on the opposite side of it and arranged herself until she was comfortable. Ellengio waited patiently until she was done.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

Aeris nodded.

Ellengio leaned forward and placed his hands on the black materia. After a moment he looked up at her.

"Remember, this is just like any other materia, only much stronger," he told her. "You use it the same way, only your concentration must be flawless. The sensations will be the same, but more powerful, so be prepared."

Aeris hesitated a moment, taking a deep breath and forcing herself to relax.

"Let's do it," she said.

Ellengio nodded.

"Place your hands on top of mine."

Aeris did as she was told. She almost jerked her hands back as soon as they made contact with Ellengio's. There was always a tingling sort of feeling when one touched functioning materia, but this feeling was so much different, so much stronger, it was almost as if the materia was a living thing.

She forced her hands to remain in contact, and told herself to relax. She didn't think she was going to get used to this feeling, but she could force herself to ignore it.

She glanced up at Ellengio. His head was bowed, staring, already concentrating fully on the stone, and what they had to achieve. Aeris lowered her head as well. At first she just concentrated on relaxing, slowly focusing on each part of her body in turn, and then clearing her mind. This was not ordinarily necessary when using materia, but this was no ordinary materia.

Once she felt sufficiently relaxed, her mind properly focused, she began concentrating on the task at hand. Normally when one used materia, one concentrated on the resultant effect, and visualized it happening, willing it to be reality. If it were lightning one was trying to create, one thought about lightning, concentrating on seeing it appear. She had been taught that the materia itself was just an amplifier, and it was the person's will that actually did the deed. Each different materia was just better at amplifying a different wavelength of human will, and therefore was better at creating a particular effect.

The problem was, she had no idea how to visualize a wormhole. She had never seen one, she had no idea what one would look like. She had asked Ellengio about this before they had lifted off, and he had told her it was like a hole in space, just visualize it anyway she wanted to that made that clear. The form didn't matter, it was the effect that counted.

She had never tried anything like that before, and she hoped he was right. But now that she thought about it, how was one to visualize a hole in space? Space was nothing to begin with, how could there be a hole in nothing?

The air about them seemed much warmer than when they had started, and the tingling sensation had increased, until now she felt like her whole body was trembling. But even so she did not see the familiar glow, or feel the buildup of power beneath her hands. She knew what she was doing so far was not enough, she had to focus her thoughts more clearly.

But she found that no matter how she concentrated, she couldn't focus on nothing. She had to have some kind of picture in her mind, she had to have something to concentrate on.

The wormhole was a hole in space, but there must be another way to picture it. It was also their way of getting from one point in the universe to another. It was a kind of gateway that opened up and let them through. Like a doorway. You opened it up and passed through to somewhere else.

It seemed kind of silly to picture a door in space, but that was exactly what she did. Ellengio had said the form didn't matter, as long as it worked in similar fashion to the wormhole. A doorway was something she could easily picture, and passing through it took one from one place to another, just like the wormhole.

Her brow furrowed, concentrating on picturing a door opening. And not just any door. She thought back to the house she grew up in. The thick wooden door of Elmyra's home. She had opened it a thousand times, she knew every detail of it's surface and every nick and crack.

The heat suddenly intensified, and she felt sweat beading on her brow. And suddenly she felt the power emanating from the materia. Again her hand almost jerked back, for she hadn't felt anything even remotely like this since she had used the super materia that Quays had created. She could feel wave after wave washing through her, and suddenly darkness fell all around them. The light faded rapidly away until she could barely make out the form of Ellengio sitting silently across from her. For a moment she didn't know what was happening, but then she realized that the black materia was glowing, enveloping them in its dark light.

The darkness increased, until she could no longer see Ellengio at all. In fact, after a few moments the darkness became absolute. It was as if her eyesight had suddenly been taken away. There was no hint of light, no shadow, nothing at all. She had never known such darkness, and she felt suddenly fearful.

The power ebbed, and she realized her concentration had faltered. Once more she forced herself to relax, shutting out everything else. She closed her eyes, finding it more natural in the darkness. The doorway, she had to think only of the doorway.

She felt like she was burning up. Her whole body trembled. She had to fight not to pull away, retreat from the black materia and the power that was flowing out of it. It seemed vast, untamable. How could one person harness such power?

But it was not just one person. She was not alone. Even though she could not see him, she could feel Ellengio's presence. With darkness all around her, the feeling was reassuring.

Suddenly the temperature shot up, and she felt white hot pain scorching through her veins. She heard herself cry out, and then the pain was gone. And she knew the materia had released. They had done it! The power diminished but it did not fade entirely. She opened her eyes. Ellengio sat before her in the room, his hair matted and sweat dripping from his brow. Aeris felt a sudden flush of elation, but she quickly composed herself. They had opened the door, but it was not over yet. Ellengio had explained that they had to stay focused on the materia until the ship had passed through the wormhole. Only that way could they be sure they reached the proper destination.

She tried to hold her concentration on the door, on picturing it wide open. Her hands were trembling violently now, and she realized that the strength she had used to use the black materia had left her exhausted, and she had a terrible time keeping them locked on Ellengio's. She felt herself starting to slip to the floor from her sitting position, and had to struggle to force herself to hold her position. She felt completely spent.

They sat there, unmoving, staring down at the materia in their hands for what seemed like ages. Over and over again Aeris felt herself slipping away, wanting nothing more than to lie down on the ground and close her eyes, and each time her body shuddered and protested as she forced herself to remain in place. The muscles in her arms and shoulders were screaming in protest. It seemed like they had been here for hours, for days. Surely it couldn't take them this long to pass through the wormhole?

And then her whole body shuddered. There was a sudden feeling of disorientation, and then it seemed as if her mind went numb. The ship was spinning around, and she couldn't get it to stop, didn't even try in fact. She could see her hands, but she couldn't feel them anymore. The world was starting to fade away, and there was nothing she could do about it. She knew this was unnatural, and she felt she should fight against it, but she was too tired, too exhausted from her previous struggles. She didn't even feel the floor as she slowly sank down onto it, and the last thing she saw was her hands slipping off of Ellengio's, before the world faded out into darkness.

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"Altim?" Zack said in surprise.

"I'm afraid so," Altim replied. He and Amanda had been ushered into the control room by Vincent, with Yuffie bringing up the rear.

"Amanda!" Barret shouted angrily. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Amanda pointedly looked down at the floor and said nothing.

"They were hiding in the cargo bay," Vincent stated.

Barret got up and stalked over to stand in front of Amanda, who refused to look up at him.

"Of all the hare brained things to do!" he shouted. "What the hell do you think this is, some kind of picnic we're going on here? This is dangerous. Do you know what kind of trouble you're going to cause us? Do you have any idea? I don't believe this!"

"I'm sorry," Amanda said softly. "I just didn't want to be left behind."

"Oh that's just great," Barret replied. He suddenly turned to look at Yuffie.

"And I suppose you knew about this all along," he accused. "In fact, I'll bet this was all your idea, wasn't it?"

Yuffie looked indigent.

"I had no idea she was going to do this!" she said. "I had nothing to do with it."

"Likely story," Barret snorted. "You trying to tell me Amanda came up with this idea all on her own?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," Yuffie retorted.

"Ha," Barret said in obvious disbelief. "Of all the stupid things to do. And now what are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to get Amanda to safety? We're going to have to turn around, and do you know how badly that will screw up our plans?"

"No," Amanda cried out. "You can't turn around. I want to go with you. You can't take me back, I won't let you!"

"Now listen here," Barret yelled. "No one here is interested in your opinion. It's too dangerous for you to come with us!"

Tifa came up beside Barret and took hold of his arm. He turned toward her angrily.

"Barret, calm down," she said. "No one's happy to see Amanda here, but I don't think there's anything we can do about it now. It's too late to turn back, she's going to have to come whether we like it or not."

Barret opened his mouth, and then shut it again. He looked around angrily, his gaze falling last on Cloud. Barret could tell from the looks on all their faces that what Tifa was saying was true.

"I don't believe this!" he finally growled. He turned around and looked at the two stowaways again.

"And what about you?" he said, staring at Altim. "Who the hell are you and where did you come from?"

"His name is Altim," Zack said, looking at the boy thoughtfully. "He was a member of Bennis' gang. The last I saw him was in Midgar. How did you manage to end up here?"

"It's kind of a long story," Altim replied. He explained how he had happened to come across them in Wutai, and how he had followed them and snuck into Lord Godo's house and overheard their plans.

"So was it you who erased the computer program?" Lai Li interrupted.

Altim gave her a puzzled look.

"What?"

Lai Li explained what had happened with the computer. When she had finished Altim shook his head.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he stated. "All I did was listen, and then I left right after. I never touched the computer."

"Oh," Lai Li said, sounding disappointed.

"How do we know he's not lying?" Yuffie snapped.

"I'm not!" Altim insisted.

"We don't," Zack said. "But I'm inclined to believe him. From what I know of him from the time we spent together, that isn't something I think he would lie about, unless of course, he had a very good reason."

"I'm not lying," Altim said resignedly.

"Whatever," Cloud cut in. "The problem now is, what do we do with these two?"

"Well, Tifa's right, we can't take them back," Red said. "Even now Ellengio and Aeris are using the black materia. If we turned around now it would be months before we could prepare the rocket to try again."

"So we're stuck with them," Reno said.

"I'm afraid so," Red replied.

"So we're just going to let them get away with it?" Barret said in disgust.

"What else can we do?" Red asked.

"I've got no problem with Amanda," Yuffie said. "But don't tell me you're just going to let Altim over here have the run of the ship now, are you? We don't know the guy from a hole in the wall. How do we know he didn't come along to sabotage this whole operation?"

"To what purpose?" Red questioned. "Are you telling me you think he's an agent of Jenova?"

"Maybe," Yuffie said. "I don't know. Maybe it's something else entirely. The point is, we don't know him, we don't know if we can trust him. We can't just let him wander around."

"So what are you suggesting, that we lock him up someplace?" Cloud asked.

"Yes," she said. "I guess. At least confine him to quarters or something. It's bad enough we got the jerks...er, Turks along with us, do you really want this character running around loose too?"

"Yuffie, do you really think something like that is necessary?" Cloud said. It seemed odd to him that Yuffie would be so adamant about this. She really didn't seem like the type to care.

Cid was sitting in the pilots seat listening to the others. Suddenly an alarm buzzed loudly on the console. He spun around to see that half of the instruments in front of him were going wild. He gripped the controls and slowly brought the ship around, staring out the windshield in front of him.

"They've done it!" he shouted. "The wormhole is open!"

The others fell instantly silent as all eyes turned to look forward. For a moment they saw nothing, but then they realized that the stars were missing from the space in front of them. Instead there was an inky blackness, the outlines vague and indistinct, with the stars right on the edges of it distorted and fuzzy.

Lai Li rushed up to stand directly behind Cid.

"Is that it?" she cried out.

"Uh huh," Cid acknowledged. The dark spot was growing rapidly, and already filled half the field of view in front of them.

"Better get yourselves in your seats," Cid shouted. "Don't know how rough the ride is going to be."

The others quickly sat down, strapping themselves in, the argument about Amanda and Altim forgotten for the moment. There was no longer any talk about turning back.

The blackness continued to grow in front of them, until it was all that could be seen. Cid stared at it, trying to find some hint of light, some possible clue to what lay beyond, but he saw nothing. It was like an inky wall in front of them, a wall they were about to penetrate.

"Here we go!" he shouted.

He could see nothing at all outside the ship now. It was total darkness. He couldn't tell exactly when they would cross the barrier, exactly when they would enter. He sat there unmoving, waiting for some sign, but nothing seemed to happen. He assumed they would be able to tell when they passed through, that they would feel...something. But he really didn't know if that were true. They might just suddenly find themselves on the other side. He found himself holding his breath, waiting for the stars to reappear in front of him.

And then the lights in the cabin suddenly seemed to dim. The world spun around him, seeming to lose all coherence. He tried to cry out, but his mouth would not move, his muscles refused to obey, and suddenly night descended upon his soul.

And a moment after the ship disappeared into the darkness, the darkness itself winked out of existence.