

CHAPTER XVII: OPENING MOVES

"The situation appears hopeless," Red said unhappily.

Cid's eyes widened in surprise.

"Are you sure?"

Red nodded slowly in affirmation. He looked up at Lai Li

"I resign," he sighed.

"I don't believe it," Cid muttered.

"That's three times in a row," Nipala added, sounding slightly awestruck.

Lai Li made no attempt to hide her glee as she quickly reset the chess pieces.

"Well, my chess instructor when I was in school said that he had never taught a student as gifted as I," she stated. "So it's not really all that surprising that I beat you."

[Transcript of game]

Red did not reply. Not being human, his expression was difficult to read, except for Nipala, who could see that he was a little bit miffed, though he was trying his best to hide it. Red had really never struck her as the sore loser type, but Lai Li did have a tendency to rub it in.

"You do seem to be improving though," Lai Li continued magnanimously. "A dozen more games and you might even win one. What do you say, shall we continue?"

"A dozen times?" Cid stated, looking at Red carefully and a grin forming on his face. "If I were playing a two hundred pound carnivore, I'd let him win more than that."

Red shook his head.

"No, I think I've had enough. You're more than a match for me."

He got up and padded away from the board. Lai Li looked up at the others.

"Anyone else?" she questioned.

"Don't look at me," Cid snorted. He was sitting in the pilots chair with his feet propped up on the instrument panel, puffing away on a cigarette.

Nipala shook her head.

"I didn't have much time to learn the finer points of chess when I was growing up," she said.

Lai Li looked over at Amanda, who was sitting in a chair staring out the front window. She hadn't paid any attention to them at all. Lai Li turned and saw Rude looking at her. She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

Rude hesitated a moment, then came over and sat down opposite her.

"What the hell," he said. "I have nothing better to do."

"Okay," Lai Li said, her face brightening. "I'll let you have white."

"Actually, I prefer black," Rude said.

Lai Li shrugged.

"Suit yourself," she said and made her opening move.

Red had made like he was going to walk away, but now he came back and stood beside Nipala, watching the two as they made their opening moves.

At Rude's next move Lai Li nodded.

"The King's Indian defense," she commented. "Very flexible, but a little outdated. I used to use that all the time when I was younger."

"Younger?" Cid said, looking at the young woman. "When was that, when you were ten?"

"Six, actually," Lai Li replied quite seriously.

Cid just shook his head and blew an enormous smoke ring.

Lai Li kept up a rapid banter as she played. She started out moving her pieces crisply and confidently, but as play progressed the look of confidence on her face slowly was replaced by one of concentration. By the time an hour had gone by a frown had appeared on her face and she had fallen silent.

"Check," Rude said quietly, the first time he had spoken since the game began.

Lai Li sat there contemplating her positions for a few minutes. Finally she moved the king out of danger. She looked up at Rude.

"You're very good," she stated. "But you can't keep up this attack. Eventually you're going to regret that rook sacrifice."

Rude did not reply.

Nipala turned and looked at Red.

"He's doing better than you," she whispered.

Red just glared at her.

Cid got up and walked slowly over until he stood looking down at them. He wasn't much of a chess buff, but he couldn't help but be intrigued by this little struggle, especially after Lai Li had defeated Red with such apparent ease.

Rude made his next move and Lai Li stared at the board some more. It was obvious now that she was taking a lot longer to play than he.

Cid looked up and saw that even Amanda was coming over to take a look at what was going on.

Cid looked down at the chess board. He knew damn little about chess, but he knew enough to see that Lai Li was ahead in material, but that didn't always tell the whole story.

"Check," Rude said again.

Lai Li just stared the board, unmoving for a long time. Yet again she moved her king out of the path of danger. Rude spent a few minutes thinking, then moved again. Each time it was Lai Li's turn now, it seemed to take forever for her to make her move. The frown on her face had turned into a look of fierce concentration, and even Cid could tell she was battling desperately at this point.

Rude calmly made his next move.

Lai Li looked up at him.

"Why didn't you take the rook?" she sputtered.

Rude just looked at her.

With an angry toss of her hair then looked down at the board again. She stared at it for so long that it seemed she was trying to bore holes in it. Finally she lifted up her hands in a gesture of hopelessness.

"I resign," she stated.

[Transcript of game]

The others spontaneously erupted in a chorus of congratulations for the Turk. Lai Li just sat there looking at him, the sting of defeat somewhat overshadowed by wonder at his play.

"Where did you learn to play like that?" she questioned.

"From my Uncle Yuri," Rude replied modestly.

"Yuri?" Lai Li pressed. "Yuri who?"

"Yuri Asoredrev," Rude answered.

Lai Li's eyes widened in surprise.

"Grandmaster Yuri Asoredrev?" she said.

Rude nodded.

"I suppose that would be him," he agreed.

Even Lai Li couldn't help but join the others in laughter.

"That explains a lot," she said.

"There certainly is more to you than meets the eye," Cid observed.

"Did you play with him a lot?" Lai Li pressed. Now that she knew his background, the loss suddenly didn't seem to bother her so much.

"Quite a bit when I was a boy," Rude replied, sounding somewhat reluctant to speak. "My parents had problems of their own and didn't have much time for me. He was more like a father to me when I was growing up than my real father was."

He fell silent, looking slightly embarrassed. Cid had to admit he was surprised that Rude had even opened up that much.

"I'm surprised you didn't make a career out of it," Lai Li observed. "You're certainly good enough."

Rude looked idly at the chessboard as Lai Li reset the pieces. He remembered fondly the nights he had spent sitting on the stoop in front of his parents place playing chess with his uncle when he was a kid. Yuri had visited frequently then, and they had often walked down to the corner ice cream shop afterwards for some desert while they discussed their game. But as the troubles between Rude's parent's had increased, the visits had become less and less frequent. Rude could tell that the way his father was treating his uncles sister was causing a wedge. Eventually Yuri had spoken out against the man, and the two had nearly gotten into a fistfight over it. Rude hadn't seen Yuri at all after that.

"I kind of had other things to do," Rude replied noncommittally. He had often wondered how much different his life would have been if his father had not turned to alcohol.

"Want to give it another go?" Lai Li said, looking at him hopefully.

"Don't fall for it," Cid said. He had seen Lai Li's passion for the game when she was playing Red. He had a feeling she wasn't going to leave Rude alone until she got revenge for her loss.

Rude sat there looking at Lai Li thoughtfully. Her brown eyes were fixed on him, framed by her short black hair, barely masking her enthusiasm. He had to admit that enthusiasm was rubbing off.

"Sure, why not," he said.

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"Can we rest a minute?" Reeve asked.

Zack sighed irritably, but nodded and they both sat down unceremoniously in the shade of a large boulder. Reeve wiped the sweat from his brow and pulled out his canteen. He took a small sip, much less than he wanted to, but from the feel of it he could tell the container was nearly empty.

He looked out over the heat scorched plain in front of them. They could see the city clearly now, the dull white colored buildings shimmering in the heat of day, but they still appeared distressingly far away. The trail they had followed had led down into the foothills, but then had turned to the west, away from the city, and they had been forced to abandon it. Reeve had assumed that the most difficult part of the journey was behind them when they reached the base of the mountains, but he had been wrong. From up on the mountain, the foothills had seemed relatively flat, but when they reached them they found them jagged and irregular, with thousands of gullies and canyons criss crossing the ground in all directions. They had struggled laboriously through the latter part of yesterday and most of today trekking toward the city, but the terrain often forced them to go what seemed like miles out of their way. Their supplies were low, especially water. They had not started the journey expecting to be away for so long, and it looked now as if they would run out long before they reached the city proper. Reeve had a feeling Zack was regretting his rash decision to follow the others now, but he didn't bring it up, seeing that it wouldn't do much good.

"I just hope we can find some water once we reach the city," he muttered.

"Of course we will," Zack replied. "They wouldn't build a city out here without water. They have to drink too, don't they?"

Reeve did not reply. These were alien creatures, who knows what kind of sustenance they needed. For all he knew water might be poison to them, but again, he didn't think it would help the situation any by pointing that out.

"If the land flattens out a little, we should be able to get there in an hour or two," Zack stated bluntly. "We should be able to tough it out til then. But we've got to keep moving."

"I just need to catch my breath," Reeve stated. "Just for a few minutes."

He was beginning to wish he had listened to his own advice and turned around when Zack had started off in the first place. Reeve realized that his own arrogance had come into play there. Zack had practically challenged him to turn around, to take the cowardly way out. And even though Reeve knew that going ahead without telling the others was a foolish thing to do, he had still gone along. Yet he realized now that what he thought of as being brave had really been taking the easy way out. Standing up to Zack when he truly believed the right thing to do was to turn around would have been the braver thing to do.

Reeve sighed. He realized that he was still letting people push him around. Just like he had in Shinra.

He glanced back the way they had come. The cliffs rose formidably above them. They were much closer to the city now, and he realized that it was too late to turn back. Whatever happened, they were committed to going forward.

Reeve leaned back and rested his head against the rock. He felt exhausted. Even with his recent experiences, he still wasn't in shape enough to match the stamina of a trained SOLDIER. Zack had been pushing them hard. They had only rested for a few hours during the night, and Reeve had been uncomfortable and had only slept fitfully. He had to resist the urge to close his eyes and let his head sink down to his chin.

Zack let them rest ten minutes before he got so restless that Reeve agreed to move on. Zack planted his hand to push himself up, but then he jumped to his feet and turned around with a curse.

"What?" Reeve said, startled.

Zack stared at the boulder. Just for a second, Reeve thought he had seen something small scurry beneath it.

"Something bit me!" Zack growled, staring at the boulder. There was a crevice underneath it, just a few inches wide. Zack stared at it, but nothing moved. He crouched down warily to try to look inside, but the darkness beneath the boulder defeated him.

He stood up again as Reeve came up beside him. They both looked down at his arm. There were three small red marks just above his wrist.

"Does it hurt?" Reeve said. It didn't look like much, but for some reason Reeve didn't like the look of it. He couldn't help but remember they were on an alien planet far from help.

"It kind of burns," Zack said slowly. He moved his hand experimentally. He didn't seem to have lost any function.

"Little bastard," he muttered. "Oh well, let's get on with this. I'll be fine."

He turned and started toward the city once more, apparently no worse for the wear. Reeve shrugged and followed.

For another hour they struggled onward. At first Zack kept up his usual rapid pace, and Reeve was hard pressed to keep up. But gradually Zack began to slow down. His face became very pale, and he started to sweat profusely. Reeve felt his unease growing quickly. Eventually Zack stated to fall behind. He no longer looked ahead, his face set with a look of resolve, instead he walked with head bent, every step seeming to be a struggle. When he started to wander off in the wrong direction, Reeve called them to a stop.

"Let me take a look at that arm," he stated firmly.

Zack stood there shaking his head, but put up no resistance when Reeve grabbed hold of his arm. Immediately Reeve knew something was very wrong. Zack's arm was hot to the touch.

Reeve looked down at the arm and could not contain a quick intake of breath. Zack's arm all the way up to the elbow was swollen and red.

"My God, you should have said something," Reeve admonished, his voice filled with concern.

Zack continued to shake his head, not looking up.

"Got to get to the city," he muttered.

"Not in this condition you won't," Reeve stated. He eased Zack down to a sitting position. Zack feebly tried to resist, but he was too weak.

Reeve fumbled through his backpack and pulled out a green materia. He concentrated on it until a green glow suffused the air around him. When the glow faded he looked carefully at Zack again, then shook his head.

"The cure materia didn't seem to have any effect," he said slowly, obviously disappointed. "It seems to be some kind of poison, and I don't have an Esuna."

Zack did not reply, just sat there staring at the ground in front of him. Reeve felt his brow.

"You're burning up," he muttered.

He stood up and looked around. The city was still miles away. There was no chance of going back. Zack obviously was going no further under his own power. What the hell was he supposed to do now?"

He looked down at Zack again, silently cursing the man for leading them on this wild goose chase in the first place. If only Zack had listened to him, they wouldn't be out here at all!

But there wasn't much point in harping on that. What's done was done, and what he really had to determine now was what to do next. Unfortunately the options were severely limited. All thought of rescuing the others was out of the question now. The best he could hope for at this point would be that they could both arrive alive in the city. What happened after that, well, he didn't even want to think about.

Zack muttered something unintelligible and slumped further to the ground. Reeve cursed. He knew what he had to do, so he might as well get to it. There was no time to waste. If he didn't get help very soon, he thought there was a good chance Zack would die.

Reeve stooped down again. He grabbed hold of Zack and pulled him up, supporting him as best he could. Zack swayed a bit but remained on his feet. Reeve started forward once more.

It was difficult enough to support Zack, who didn't seem to be helping at all. It was even harder to keep him going in a straight line over the rough terrain, and after fifteen minutes of staggering forward, Reeve realized that this just wasn't going to work.

He eased Zack back down to the ground and looked around again, starting to feel desperate. He shaded his eyes and looked at the city, so close yet so far away. He would almost be relieved to see the creatures that had taken the others away appear in the air around them. At least then Zack might have a chance of survival, but he hadn't seen a hint of them since yesterday's attack.

No, there was no help ahead of them, or back. Whatever they did, Reeve was going to have to decide himself.

He scratched his chin nervously, and kept glancing at the city in the distance. It wasn't that far away now. He could probably make it in under an hour, but not burdened with Zack.

Zack had slumped over and was now lying unmoving in the desert sand.

Reeve stooped down next to him. Zack's breathing was erratic. He seemed to be getting worse.

Reeve stood up again. He knew what he had to do, but he was loath to do it. There only way that Zack would survive is if he got help, quickly, and Reeve knew he couldn't get help in time unless he left Zack behind.

Reeve chewed nervously on his lower lip. Every fiber of his being told him he couldn't leave Zack here, yet he knew he couldn't bring him. It was either try to get help or wait here for him to die.

"Damn," Reeve muttered.

He looked down at Zack once more, lying in the hot sand, the sun beating down on him.

He gazed around him. He couldn't just leave Zack there, exposed like that to the heat. If he was going to abandon him, he could at least make him as comfortable as possible. He spotted an jutting outcropping of rock not far away above the ravine they were in. It gave a promise of shade, and didn't appear too far away.

With a grunt Reeve lifted Zack up once more. This time it was even more difficult, for Zack barely helped him at all. But somehow Reeve managed to drag Zack over to the rock, and when he reached it he saw a dark irregular opening beneath the outcrop.

Reeve nodded in satisfaction at the sight of the cave. That would be a perfect place to leave Zack, out of the sun and somewhat sheltered from the elements and any predators that might happen by. Reeve lugged Zack into the cave and laid him down not far from the entrance.

Reeve looked around. The cave mouth was large, letting in plenty of light, and he could see far back into the tunnel. It was an irregular chamber about fifteen feet high in the center. It faded into darkness in the back, and he could not see any end to it. For a moment he hesitated, wondering what sort of creatures might inhabit the cave. Had he brought Zack in here just to become a meal for some dark cave dweller?

He stood up and shook his head fiercely. There was no time to worry about that. There was no place else to put Zack. He would just have to trust to luck. He just hoped that when he found help he would be able to find his way back here.

He stooped down once more. Zack's eyes were closed, but he was not unconscious, for Reeve could hear him muttering faintly under his breath.

"Zack!" Reeve said sharply.

The muttering got a bit louder, but Reeve still couldn't understand it.

"Zack, I've got to go somewhere. I'll be right back. I'm going to go get you some help. Do you understand? I'm going to get help!"

Zack gave no indication that he understood.

Reeve gave up. He stood up once more. He looked at the entrance. He knew he should be on his way, that every second counted, but he felt a strong reluctance to leave. It went against his grain to abandon someone in trouble.

"It's the only way I can help him," he muttered to himself.

He took a step toward the entrance and looked back at Zack once more. He remained motionless, caught between the urges to get help and to stay and comfort a dying man. If he didn't make it back in time, he didn't want Zack to die alone.

"I'm sorry," he said finally, then turned and walked out of the cave.

Zack made no motion, no indication that he had heard, and in truth he did not. Images swirled around him. He felt he was burning up, surrounded by flames, unable to escape. He was in constant pain, unrelenting pain. His mind was totally occupied with fighting it off. He had withdrawn into himself, concentrating on keeping one small part of his mind clear, focusing all his will. That small part of him was his last bastion of defense, defense against the sea of pain that even now threatened to overwhelm him. He kept telling himself if he just held on a little longer it would subside. A few minutes more, that was all he needed. But as the pain became even stronger the minutes were reduced to seconds. Unknowingly he clenched his teeth, his brow furrowed in concentration. Just a few seconds longer!

And then, as if by some miracle, the pain did subside. Not very much, but even that little bit was enough to give him hope, to help him keep up the fight for a little bit longer.

With the decrease in pain, a semblance of coherence returned to him. He realized he was lying on his back, and the ground below him was cool, at least compared to the desert heat he was so used to. He felt something else, something cool on his forehead.

With great effort he managed to open his eyes. The world was dim, his vision blurry, but he could clearly see a figure above him. A face, outlined in light, large eyes staring at him intently. He tried to will himself to see more clearly, but the pain had not disappeared altogether, and with the strain he felt it increase once more.

He struggled once more, moving his lips slowly, trying to form the words. And eventually he was rewarded with the vague sound of his voice.

"Aeris?"

The figure above him stirred. He struggled to rise, but something pressed against his forehead, easing him back with gentle pressure. He tried one last time to focus his eyes, but to no avail. Finally he gave in and laid back, feeling exhaustion suddenly overwhelming him. Somehow he felt he was in good hands, and that he no longer had to struggle. His was

convinced that Aeris had come to save him. That somehow Reeve had found the others, and brought them back. It made not a whit of difference to him that the eyes he had seen had not been emerald green, but a deep shade of blue.

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"Elena!"

Elena jerked up, looking around startled, her hand automatically reaching for her now empty holster.

Her eyes focused on the man looking down at her.

"Reno?" she said, the realization of where she was slowly returning to her.

"I can't believe you're alive," he said, and actually sounded like he meant it.

"How did you get here? How did you survive?" she heard another voice. She looked around to see Tifa, Cloud and Aeris standing nearby, all of them looking at her with expressions of relief.

"I was brought here by the Chadara," she said slowly. She struggled to get out of the bed she was lying in, but was not very successful. Finally Reno reached down and pulled her to her feet.

She looked out one of the 'windows'. It had been early evening when he had nodded off, but now she saw the rising sun of a new day. She must have slept for quite some time. Or maybe not, remembering how short the nights were here.

"How did you all get here?" she asked.

"The same way you did, apparently," Cloud replied. "We were brought here by those creatures."

"Are they really the Chadara?" Aeris questioned.

"I think so," Elena replied. "They recognized the name."

"So you've been talking to them?" Cloud said in surprise.

"If you can call it that," Elena replied. "I think we've got one word down. I'm afraid communication is going to be a serious barrier."

"So what are they going to do with us?" Reno asked.

Elena shook her head.

"I haven't the slightest idea," she replied. "But I don't think they mean us any harm. At least, they haven't done anything threatening since they saved me."

"Not to you, maybe," Reno muttered, rubbing a bruise on the side of his head.

Cloud walked over to the window and looked out thoughtfully.

"Well, they may not mean us any harm, but it appears they don't want us running away, either. In spite of how they may have treated you, it appears we are prisoners."

"Maybe they're just being careful," Elena suggested. "Would you trust them if you met them on our planet?"

Cloud conceded her point with a shake of his head.

"So what do we do now?" Tifa inquired.

Reno walked over beside Cloud and looked at the ground below.

"We get out of here," he said.

"And how do you propose we do that?" Tifa asked. "Sprout wings?"

Reno gave her a condescending look, then walked over to the beds.

"Simple," he said. "We push one of these out the window, then we jump down on top of it."

"I thought of that," Elena commented. "But Ellengio said we needed to make friends with these people. It might be better if we stayed and tried to talk to them."

"How can we talk to them?" Reno questioned skeptically. He didn't seem to think much of their captors. "We don't know if that nonsense they are spouting is really a language at all."

"It is," Elena replied firmly. "They seem to be highly intelligent. I'm sure with a little effort we can get our point across."

The look he gave her made it obvious he remained doubtful.

"Elena's right," Cloud cut in. "Besides, even if we escaped from this room, that doesn't mean we're home free. We'd still have to get out of this city. A city full of the Chadara. In broad daylight. The odds of actually getting back to the ship seem rather slim."

Reno gave him a dark look.

"Since when did slim odds bother you?" he asked.

"They don't," Cloud replied. "And if I was sure the Chadara were our enemy I wouldn't hesitate to chance it, but we don't know that. Except for abducting us, they've done nothing to indicate that they mean us harm. Let's give them a chance."

Reno took a deep breath, but said nothing further. His look made it plain he wasn't all that pleased with this course of action.

Cloud turned to Aeris.

"What about you Aeris, can you feel anything?"

Aeris hesitated. She stepped over to the window and looked out over the city.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "The whole city is so quiet, as if waiting for something. I feel a sense of anticipation, and...fear."

"Fear?" Tifa questioned. "Of what, us?"

Aeris shook her head.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "But not us. I don't think they fear us at all."

Cloud nodded, not sure that was a good thing. A little fear might earn them respect.

With a flapping of wings three of the Chadara flew into the room and landed nearby. One had a thick round flat board that it placed on the ground. The other two were carrying things as well, and they placed them on the board. They stood up and stepped out of the way. The captives saw that the board was covered with various foodstuffs. There were dark strips of some kind of meat in the center, surrounded by what was obviously vegetables, or perhaps fruit.

One of the creatures approached them, and Elena recognized it as the one she had spoken to yesterday.

"*Yago*," it said, sweeping its hand toward the platter.

"Looks like they want us to eat," Reno commented, stating the obvious.

Aeris eyed the uncooked meat.

"I'm not touching that," she said distastefully.

"I don't think any of us will," Cloud stated. He had no idea what sort of creature that meat had come from, and he really didn't want to know.

"For all we know, every item on there could be toxic to us," Reno stated pessimistically.

Cloud had to admit he had a point. Just because it was food for the Chadara didn't mean it would be good for them.

"We had food in our backpacks," Cloud commented.

"Which they took from us," Tifa pointed out.

The Chadara had removed their backpacks as soon as they had arrived here, and Cloud had no idea what they had done with them.

"Maybe we can get them to give them back to us," he said.

"How do you propose going about doing that?" Reno questioned.

The Chadara seemed puzzled by their reluctance.

"Hooman," he said, looking at Elena. Once more he gestured toward the food. "*Yago*."

The others looked at Elena.

"Human?" Cloud said.

"It's the only word he knows," Elena said with a shrug.

"I'm afraid the lessons didn't get much past that point."

"Maybe you can convince him to give us our backpacks back," Cloud said.

Elena frowned.

"What makes you think I can convince him of anything?" she questioned.

Cloud shrugged.

"I think he likes you," Reno observed.

"Don't be ridiculous," Elena countered.

"Just give it a try," Cloud said.

Elena just looked at him. What they hell did they think she was? She looked at the creature, which stood motionless, watching them all, an unreadable expression on his face.

"Oh very well," she said, giving in. It couldn't hurt to try.

She turned Cloud around and tapped him on the back.

"Backpack," she said, looking at the creature. "We need backpack."

She turned toward the creature and lifted her arms questioningly.

The creature did not move. He seemed however, to be very interested in what she was doing. She had to admit he seemed to be trying very hard to understand.

She said backpack a few more times, moving her hands to try to simulate the item, but the Chadara never indicated in any way that he understood.

The creature bobbed it's head around with an odd circular motion. Elena wondered if that was it's way of showing puzzlement, or shaking it's head.

"*Yago*," it said once more.

Elena's hands fell to her sides.

"We're not getting through to it," she said.

"Apparently," Reno concurred.

He walked over to the platter and looked down at the food.

"Looks like if we want to eat, we're stuck with this."

"I'm not hungry," Aeris stated, her voice leaving no room for argument.

Reno reached down and picked up something that looked similar to a tomato. He held it out.

"So who gets to be the guinea pig?" he asked.

He looked at the others, the expression on his face almost a challenge.

"Why don't you try it yourself, Reno?" Tifa questioned.

Reno smirked at her.

"I would, but as leader of little band, I think that honor should be reserved for Cloud here."

He stood up again and proffered the item to the blonde man.

"Unless of course, he hasn't got the guts," Reno suggested slowly.

Cloud hesitated a moment, then reached out and plucked the item from Reno's hand.

"Cloud.." Tifa began, but before she could finish he brought it up to his lips and took an enormous bite.

The others just stood there looking at him as he chewed it thoughtfully. It took him a long time to finish chewing, but finally he swallowed it down.

The others waited impatiently for his verdict. For an annoyingly long time he just stood there, looking at Reno.

"Not bad," he said finally, and took another bite. "Tastes like watermelon."

Reno looked almost disappointed.

"Maybe it's slow acting," he muttered.

"I think you're all being way too paranoid," Elena stated, reaching down and picking up one of the fruit herself. Without hesitation she started eating.

Tifs joined in as well. Reno stood there looking at them, then finally, after Cloud had eaten three without showing any sign of ill effects, he picked one up himself. Only Aeris remained apart.

As soon as they started eating two of the Chadara left. The one that has spoken to them remained. It sat down not far away from them, watching every move they made.

"He seems to be studying us," Cloud commented.

"I think he's very curious about us," Elena said.

"Seems like some kind of voyeur to me," Reno stated.

"Oh Reno, must you pervert everything?" Elena snapped. "I think he's just trying to understand us."

"If he's trying to understand you, good luck to him, I say," Reno retorted. "I've been trying to do that for years, and it's hopeless."

Elena smiled sweetly. She knew Reno hadn't meant it as a compliment, but she took it as one.

"Well, we can't just refer to him as 'it'," Tifa said. "We've got to give him a name."

"A name?" Reno said with a frown.

"Yeah," Aeris agreed. "He's got to have a name."

"How 'bout the Observer?" Cloud suggested.

"The Observer?" Elena said. "Oh, that's so cold. If we're going to name him, we've got to give him a real name."

"It was only a suggestion," Cloud said defensively.

"So what do you suggest?" Tifa said, looking at Elena.

Elena hesitated, looking over at the creature. He returned her gaze coolly.

"How about Violet?" she said.

"Violet?" Reno spat out. "What kind of stupid name is that?"

Cloud gave her a sour look as well.

"Well, he's got violet eyes," she snapped. "And it's certainly better than 'the Observer'."

"Hey, I said it was only a suggestion," Cloud said.

"It sounds like a girl's name," Reno said scornfully.

"Well, how do we know he's not a female?" Elena stated.

"He doesn't seem like a female to me," Tifa said slowly.

Elena was about to argue. How would they know what a female of an alien species would be like? How did they know they even had male and female? But she looked at the Chadara again and decided against it. It may be only a gut reaction on their part, but it seemed like a male to her as well.

"Okay," she said slowly. "How about...Winslow?"

"Winslow?" Reno said, shaking his head. "That's as bad as Violet. I wouldn't name my dog Winslow. Where do you come up with this crap?"

Elena pinned him with a glare.

"My father's name was Winslow," she said, her voice sizzling with venom.

Reno shut his mouth and looked up at the ceiling.

"Oops," Cloud muttered, unable to conceal his glee.

"What's so funny?" Elena said, his smile having drawn her attention.

"Nothing," he replied, the smile instantly disappearing. "Winslow it is."

Aeris suddenly turned her head. She stood there for a moment as if listening for something. Cloud looked at her.

"Aeris, what..."

The Chadara suddenly got to his feet. Outside they could hear what sounded like shouts. The creature unfolded its wings and quickly lifted into the sky. Aeris walked over to the window and looked out, the others coming up behind her. The mountains they had come from were behind them, and beyond the city in this direction they could see the dull red plain stretching off to the horizon. Far out on the plain, but close enough to see, they could make out a line of dark objects. The objects were moving slowly, and though they were kicking up a fine cloud of red dust around them, it was clear they were approaching the city.

Cloud shaded his eyes from the sun and squinted at the objects below. He couldn't tell whether they were vehicles or wagons or beasts, but it looked like some kind of caravan.

"Looks like these creatures don't spend all their time flying after all," he stated.

None of the others spoke. He glanced up at Aeris and saw she was staring out at the caravan, her face pale. Slowly she took a step back.

"What's wrong," Cloud said. "What is it?"

The others all turned to look at her as well. For a moment she just stood there, her eyes wide, slowly shaking her head. Then she spoke, and her voice quivered.

"Jenova," she said. "Jenova is coming."