

IC CHAPTER XVIII: RIDE 'EM COWBOY

Tierlok sat on the back of the chendu, staring at the city ahead of him as the caravan slowly approached it. A hot wind blew from the west, scattering dust into the air, and he had to pull his hood down to prevent it from blowing in his face.

How he hated traveling to the outer districts. The infernal dust got into everything, even the food and water, no matter how tightly sealed. And it was hell on machinery. Nothing worked for long out here in the desert. The sand always managed to find its way into the the most delicate places, and was constantly causing breakdowns.

Tierlok stared down in disgust at the beast he was perched upon. Filthy creatures. They were ungainly and covered with coarse hair that itched like the devil when it got on one's person, and they stunk. But they were bred for desert life, and could go weeks without food, and never seemed to need water at all. For all their technology, when it came to traveling in the desert, these awkward creatures were more efficient than any vehicle they possessed.

He glanced once again at the city ahead of them. He couldn't remember the last time he had been here, but he saw that the city had expanded quite a bit since that time. When he had last come here, it had been nothing more than a small town. These Chadara were quite industrious when left to themselves.

Well, that was fine with him. Let the Chadara do whatever they want in this God forsaken place, as long as they didn't interfere with Jenova plans. Tierlok would have been perfectly happy to never see this place again, to totally ignore the Chadara living out their puny little lives here.

But the information he had received was impossible to ignore. Strangers, strangers that were not Chadara had been found here. Beings the Chadara had never seen before. Even if he thought it was some mistake, there was no way he could ignore it. He had wanted to send a Chadara lieutenant out to bring the strangers in, but Dujin had commanded he go himself, and had made it apparent that he would settle for nothing less. Tierlok had not argued. He hadn't reached his position as master of the northern region by disagreeing with Dujin.

So now he was out here, traveling through this dust covered hell, on a mission he was certain was a complete waste of time. The Chadara weren't the brightest of creatures in the universe. They had probably just found some kind of animal that they thought was intelligent. If that were the case, someone was going to pay dearly for dragging him all the way out here.

They were moving steadily towards the city. The chendu were not known for their speed. No one had ever seen one run, and he wouldn't be surprised if they were incapable of it. They just plodded along, slow but sure.

They had just passed over a rickety wooden bridge that spanned a narrow ravine when he felt it.

He sat bolt upright, his back stiffening, his eyes growing wide. Involuntarily his hands dropped the reins of the chendu, and the beast halted. The Chadara lieutenants around him also stopped, looking curiously at him. But he didn't paid them any attention. He was staring at the city in front of them. It couldn't be, it wasn't possible, but there was no mistaking this feeling, this sensation that had been handed down through generations of Jenova consciousness. In spite of never having felt it in his lifetime, he recognized it immediately.

Somewhere in the city in front of them was a Destroyer.

The caravan stood motionless around him, the Chadara glancing at him and looking at one another in puzzlement, but he made no motion for them to continue. Finally, after a long silence, Zarkierilee, the captain of his guard, rode up beside him.

"Master?" he questioned hesitantly.

Tierlok turned toward him so sharply it made the Chadara flinch back.

"Get the strangers," he commanded. "Get them and bring them to me immediately."

Zarkierilee nodded. He barked out some orders and he and six other Chadara spread their wings and lifted into the air, the silver armor that marked them as Jenova guards glinting in the sunlight. Each one carried a long silver rod slung across his back as well, a rounded knob on one end. They quickly flew off in the direction of the city.

For a moment Tierlok watched them winging their way to the town, then he spurred his beast forward, and the caravan began moving once again.

Tierlok cursed the beasts for their lack of speed. All thoughts of his discomfort and the desert around him had vanished, as well as any punishment for dragging him out here. His one thought now was to see these strangers as quickly as possible. If

there was truly a Destroyer here, and if he brought them back with him to present to Dujin, who knew what kind of honors he would obtain? Master of the northern region would become just a stepping stone. If he captured a Destroyer, anything became possible. He could imagine himself one day even replacing Dujin as Prime Leader of Grouchoon.

But that was in the future. He kicked angrily at the chendu beneath him, trying to force more speed out of it, but the beast was impervious to his exhortations. He looked up and saw that Zarkierilee and his men were returning. With a curse he called for the caravan to halt. What little progress they could make on the ground was not going to make any difference. Zarkierilee was going to reach them in a few minutes, whether they continued forward or not.

He stared at the Chadara as they approached, looking carefully at the burdens they carried. There were five of them. The feelings inside him became stronger, and suddenly he felt a sudden fear. The Jenova consciousness told him the Cetra were a fierce enemy. More dangerous than anything else they had ever faced. And now he was about to face five of them, with no other Jenova to assist him, only the Chadara guards. Was this some kind of trick, some Cetra tactic to lure him into a trap?

He looked around hesitantly. He could see the remaining Chadara looking at him curiously. He knew they could sense his unease. He deliberately forced himself to relax. They stood on an open plain, far from any possibility of ambush. The Cetra had been easily captured by the Chadara, of all people. What could he possibly have to fear from them?

Nevertheless, though he managed to suppress the fear, he couldn't eliminate it all together.

Zarkierilee swooped down out of the sky and landed beside the caravan, right in front of Tierlok. He dropped his burden, drew out the long rod he carried, and walked over to stand beside Tierlok's chendu. The other's quickly followed, until the five prisoners stood on the ground in front of Tierlok.

They didn't look particularly dangerous, Tierlok thought, beginning to feel a bit better. In fact, they looked downright puny. Still, the age old loathing he had for the Destroyers refused to let his fears fade away completely.

As he looked at them a frown formed on his face. There was something wrong. The feeling...the feeling didn't seem to emanate from all of them. He slowly looked at them all, and his gaze fell on the woman with light brown hair and green eyes. That was the one, that was the only one. She was the only Cetra among them.

Yet there was something else. Slowly his eyes turned to the young man with blonde hair. For a moment Tierlok stared at him, and slowly his eyes widened in surprise for a second time that day. Again there was no mistaking the feeling, it was very weak, weaker than he had ever felt it, but it was there. This creature was a Jenova!

But it couldn't be. No, not a complete Jenova. There was something missing. It was so faint he could barely feel it. It wasn't a Jenova, but it was some part of Jenova. But how could that be? How could something be Jenova and not be Jenova? Yet there was no denying it.

"What are you?" he found himself saying.

The creature just looked at him. Then it spoke, turning to look at the others. Tierlok could not understand what it was saying.

He looked at the other three. He got no feeling from them whatsoever. They were not Cetra, even though their appearance was similar to the Destroyer. Nor were they Jenova. And they were obviously not Chadara. He could sense nothing at all from them. Were they some kind of faulty Cetra?

He realized whatever he had here, it was totally beyond his ken. He was not a scientist, he was an administrator. But it didn't matter. There value was in his bringing them back. What they eventually turned out to be was not really his concern. The important thing was they did not appear to be a threat. He had to get them back to Daris as quickly as possible. Dujin would decide what to do with them after that.

"Separate them and put them on chendus," he commanded. "Have a Chadara assigned to each one. I don't want them to cause any trouble, and if any of them escape, someone will pay with their life."

Zarkierilee nodded.

"Yes, master."

Tierlok looked back at the caravan.

"Turn the caravan around. We're heading back to Daris as quickly as possible."

With that he swung his own beast around. Behind him the Chadara scrambled to get the prisoners on chendu and turn the caravan around. Tierlok did not look back. He knew the Chadara would obey. They had no choice. His only thought now was getting away from this hellhole as quickly as possible. He wrinkled his nose. Though the trip had been worth it, it was still going to take him a week in the baths to get rid of this stink.

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Reeve stopped for a moment to catch his breath. For the last hour he had made his way toward the city as fast as he could go, and now he had nearly reached the first outlying buildings. He made no attempt to hide, in fact, he wanted to be seen. He figured capture was inevitable now, and it might be the only way he could save Zack.

But now that he wanted to get their attention, none of the creatures seemed to take any interest in him. Something to the north seemed to be occupying their full attention. He could see a cloud of dust off in that direction, but there was something else there as well. He couldn't see very much, but he could make out a long line of what appeared to be some kind of beasts.

There were many of the creatures in the air, but they all seemed to be focused on the beasts to the north. Even when he jumped up and down, waving his arms and yelling, he had not gotten any response. So he just kept moving toward the city, thinking eventually one of them was bound to notice him.

Even now there were six or seven of the creatures in the sky, hovering above the city to the north of him, though they did not seem to be doing much of anything. As he looked up he saw six more climb up from the city below. He looked at them with interest, for they were different. The creatures he had seen so far were grayish in color, and had not seemed to be wearing any kind of garment, but these wore what appeared in the distance to be some kind of armor, for it was silver and reflected the sunlight. He had seen them fly into the town from the north a short while ago, and that was when they had first attracted his attention, but now they appeared to be returning the way they had come, and though they were still far away, he could see that some of them were carrying a human form.

"Hey!" he yelled, waving his arms again, jogging forward.

The creatures quickly flew off to the north, obviously heading for the long line of beasts.

Reeve stopped and shook his head in disgust.

"What do I have to do, shoot up a flare?" he muttered.

He walked on. He passed one of the buildings, noting the odd holes in the sides. The buildings looked like they had been attacked by a giant woodpecker.

The creatures that had been in the sky dropped down and disappeared, much to his chagrin. He looked to the north again and saw that the line of beast was moving away.

There were buildings all around him now, yet incredibly, he was still being ignored. He took a close look at one of the buildings, thinking perhaps he would find something inside, but there seemed no way to get in, at least not from the ground. The large holes in the sides started far above his head.

"Hello? Anybody home?" he called out as he walked between the structures.

He looked up to see one of the creatures peering down at him from a nearby building. He stopped and put his hands on his hips.

"Well it's about time," he stated.

The creature spread its wings and glided out of the building, heading straight for him. It spread out its clawed hands.

Reeve resisted the urge to turn and run. The creatures had abducted the others, but they hadn't invaded its city. For a fleeting moment the thought came to him that the creature would just kill him.

He gritted his teeth as he stood his ground. The creature rushed toward him, and then the air was knocked out of him as it made contact. He felt himself being wrenched backward, then he was in the air, firmly held in the creature's arms.

"You've got to help me!" he shouted, pounding on the creature to try to get its attention. "I've got a friend who needs assistance. Over that way!"

He pointed back the way he came, looking up at the creature, who seemed to be completely ignoring his protestations, and instead was winging its way quickly to the north, toward the long line of beasts that had now disappeared from view, although the cloud of dust it was kicking up was still plainly visible on the horizon.

"No, we've got to go that way!" Reeve shouted, still pointed. "We've got to go help my friend!"

After a few minutes it began to sink in that he wasn't going to get through. The creature could not understand him, and if it was paying any mind at all to what he was doing, it was probably just thinking he was protesting being taken by it. His whole focus up to this point had been to somehow get to the city, but now he realized he had never really considered what would happen then. He had just assumed that he would be somehow able to communicate with them, to make them understand that he needed to help Zack. Only now did he realize just what a barrier lack of a common language could create.

"Damn, how the hell am I going to get through to you?" he shouted.

Reeve felt the bottom drop out from under him as the creature suddenly dived to the left.

"What the hell?" Reeve protested.

He turned just in time to see another of the creatures diving down towards them.

A clawed hand reached out and grabbed hold of his arm. Another claw slashed. Reeve heard a screech, and then found himself soaked in crimson. The original creature let go of him, and he found himself dangling fifty feet above the plain, one arm firmly held by the second creature.

The beast that was holding him dived down now, plunging downward at gut wrenching speed. For a moment Reeve thought it was going to drive right into the hard packed dirt below them, but it leveled off about ten feet off the ground, and let him go.

Reeve hit the ground and tumbled to a halt. He pulled himself up, ignoring the cuts and bruises from the landing, and looked up at the creatures battled above him. It didn't last long. The one that had originally caught him had been severely wounded in the first attack, and did not put much of a fight before it dropped to the ground not far away from him. The impact kicking up a cloud of dust and surely finishing the creature off if it still lived.

The second beast glided down to land not far away from him. He stood there, motionless. He didn't know what had happened. This creature had killed the other one, and it seemed pretty obvious he was the reason, but the creature's motives for doing so were lost to him.

The creature stood there for a moment, head bowed, not even glancing over at him. Then with a cry it transformed and Vincent stood before him.

Reeve felt a flood of relief washing over him.

"Vincent, thank God it's you!" he exclaimed.

The ex-Turk just stood there looking at him, his face expressionless.

Reeve walked over to him and quickly explained what had happened to Zack. Vincent was silent when Reeve finished, the story not appearing to make much of an impression on him.

"We've got to get help for him," Reeve said urgently. "I didn't know what to do. He could be dead already!"

Reeve stopped. Vincent was looking at him, but he didn't really seem to be paying any attention. His face was expressionless and he had a far away look in his eyes.

"Vincent?" Reeve said.

Vincent was silent for a moment, then seemed almost to have to force himself to look at Reeve.

"Where is he?" he questioned.

"Back that way," Reeve pointed. "By the ridge. I left him in a cave just beneath it."

Vincent looked back the way Reeve indicated. Again he was silent for a long time.

"We've got to do something!" Reeve exclaimed.

Vincent nodded.

"And you say the others were carried off to the north?" he asked.

"Yes," Reeve replied. "But finding Zack is more important right now. I think if he doesn't get help soon, he's going to die."

Even this seemed to provoke no reaction. Reeve frowned.

"Vincent, what's wrong with you?"

Vincent slowly turned toward him. He understood that what Reeve was conveying needed urgent attention, he understood that Zack might die at any moment, yet he did not feel Reeve's desperation. He did not feel anything at all. It was almost as if this whole thing were a dream, and he was just an outsider observing it, but not interfering. He had almost let the creature pass when he had seen it flying by bearing Reeve. It had taken a struggle of will to remind himself that this was his friend, that they needed his help. He shook his head to try to clear it. Was **was** wrong with him?

"I'm not sure," he replied. "But it's of no concern."

He stared at the craggy ridge that Reeve had pointed out. More than anything he just wanted to get away. Now would be a good time. He had already left them and he didn't want to face them again. A clean break was the best thing. If he went back and helped now, he might not get this chance again.

But much as he wanted to, he couldn't just abandon them. He knew going back would just make it more difficult for all of them, but he couldn't just leave them like this. He had to at the very least alert the others of the problem. Zack's life might depend on it.

"I'll try to find him," he said. "Or at least let the others know."

Reeve nodded, relief written on his face.

Normally transformation was a difficult thing, and Vincent could only do it in times of stress, more or less uncontrollably. But now it seemed almost the opposite. Even now, with no provocation, the urge to transform was strong. In fact, he had had a difficult time transforming back to human after he had rescued Reeve. He wasn't sure what was happening, but whatever it was, it was aiding them at the moment. He could easily transform into the chaos beast and fly back to the ridge. He looked at Reeve. He could carry Reeve back with him, but it would slow him down, and speed was obviously of the essence. Besides, they still had the others to worry about.

He looked to the north.

"You follow the others."

Reeve looked at him in surprise.

"Follow the others?"

"Yes, it might be a good idea to have someone who knows where they are being taken."

Reeve could barely make out the dark cloud of dust to the north. He looked back at Vincent, confused.

"How do you expect me to follow them?" he questioned. "I can't fly, and I'll never catch up with them on foot."

Vincent pointed to the left. Reeve turned to see three large beasts near one of the buildings of the city.

"Take one of those," he replied.

Reeve just stared at the creatures.

"But...I don't even know..."

He turned and saw that Vincent was no longer there. He had already transformed and was even now flying rapidly toward the ridge Reeve had pointed out. Reeve stood there shaking his head.

"He's nuts," he muttered.

He turned once more and started walking over toward the beasts. As he approached he saw that they resembled a cross between a camel and an elephant. They were about the size of an elephant, and had a trunk, though it was shorter than an elephants, but they were the color of camels and had the camel's hump backed shape. They seemed to be grazing on the sparse tough grass that grew in ragged clumps across the plain. There was no fence, and they did not seem to be restrained in any way, yet the reins and saddles clearly indicated that these were not wild creatures, or were at least tame enough to ride.

Still, just because someone rode them didn't mean he could. Sure, he had ridden chocobos, but somehow he suspected the experiences would be vastly dissimilar. How the hell did Vincent expect him to ride one of these things?

He stopped and looked back, but Vincent was no longer in sight. He turned back toward the city. No matter how reluctant he might be, he didn't have much in the way of alternatives. Any minute now he could be spotted again, and this time he didn't want to get captured and Vincent wasn't around to save his neck. All he could do on foot was head back to the rocket, and he wasn't going to do anyone a bit of good by doing that.

He reluctantly approached the animals in front of him. As he neared the closest one looked up at him and seemed to eye him warily.

"Nice...thing," Reeve said, trying to make his voice sound soothing and calm. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just need a little ride."

The creature went back to pulling up tufts of grass.

"That's it," Reeve said, walking slowly toward it. "Just take it easy."

When he was only a pace or two away the creature lifted its head again. At full height the beast towered over him. He cringed as it let out a loud bellow.

He stood there motionless, waiting for it to get fed up and just step on him. But eventually it lowered its head and started feeding again.

He stood right beside it now. All that was left to do was reach out and haul himself aboard.

"This is insane," he said.

He took a deep breath and grabbed hold of the reins, then pulled himself up the short rope ladder that hung from its side, before the creature had a chance to react.

He sat there, waiting for it to throw him off, but nothing happened. The creature just continued to feed, ignoring him.

He looked around thoughtfully.

"Well, that wasn't so bad," he commented.

He slapped the reins against the beast side.

"Giddy-ap."

Again, nothing happened.

Reeve sat there for a few moments. He experimented with the reins, pulling them this way and that. He kicked his feet into the side of the beast, all to no avail. The creature acted like he didn't exist.

"Damn," he muttered. "Where's the start button?"

He noticed a wooden rod in some sort of holder at the back of the saddle. He pulled it out. It was about six feet long and felt quite solid in his hand.

He looked down at the beast, then hesitantly smacked it on the shoulder with the rod.

Still nothing happened.

"C'mon," he muttered angrily.

He looked back and smacked it on the rump.

With a bellow of protest the creature lumbered forward, so expectantly that Reeve was nearly tossed from his seat. It took him a moment to steady himself. Finally the damn thing was moving! It was walking forward at a steady pace, in exactly the opposite direction that he wanted to go.

"No, the other way!" he cried out.

He pulled on the reins, tugging this way and that, and after a few minutes the beast turned. It seemed to take it forever, but eventually he had it moving in the direction he wanted to go.

He looked ahead, out over the plain. A cloud of dust still hung in the air to the north, like a finger pointing to his goal, though he could no longer see any sign of the caravan itself. He was probably hours behind it by now.

He looked back and saw the city slowly but surely dropping behind him. He had to be crazy to be doing this, riding this strange beast to some unknown destination, on a planet thousand of miles from his home. If he had any brains at all he'd head back to the mountains, back to the ship to get the others. He'd never catch up to the caravan. In fact, he would probably just end up getting captured again, or lost in the desert, or trampled by the beast he now sat upon, or anyone of a dozen different and painful ends. The only logical thing to do was to turn around.

In spite of that he did not alter course, but he kept the beast heading north, following the dust trail of the caravan that had left him far behind.

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"This is hopeless!"

Barret glared at Yuffie.

"You haven't stopped complaining since we walked out of the rocket. Why did you even come along?"

"You know you're going to need me if you have to fight," she replied.

"Yeah right," Barret replied.

They stood just at the edge of the foothills. In front of them was the open plain, with the city in plain view no more than a kilometer or two away.

"We're never going to find him," Yuffie continued. "He can fly, for christ sake. How are we supposed to track him? It's impossible!"

Barret just mumbled something unintelligible. Much as he didn't want to admit it, she had a point. Altim had turned out to be quite adept at tracking, and they had come quite a ways on Vincent's trail, but now it had suddenly vanished, and Altim had not been able to pick it up again. If he had transformed, there was no way they could follow. He turned to look at Ellengio.

The Ancient looked around for a moment.

"The trail led in a fairly straight line toward the city," he said. "It seems logical to conclude he was headed in that direction."

"Logical?" Yuffie stated. "Need I remind you we're talking about Vincent here. You know, the guy who totally loses it and turns into a raging beast?"

"Oh shut up, Yuffie," Barret snarled.

"Calm down, you two," Ellengio said irritably. He turned to Yuffie. "Look around you. There really isn't any place else he can go."

Yuffie looked about to snap back at him, but held her tongue.

"Let's get going," Barret said.

As they started forward Yuffie muttered something under her breath.

"If you don't want to go, you can always go back," Barret snapped. "Or sit here waiting for us to return."

"I didn't say anything," Yuffie retorted.

"I heard you say something," Barret replied.

Yuffie gave him a frustrated look, but said nothing.

They picked their way slowly across the rocky expanse, heading slowly closer to the city in front of them.

"Cait, let Cid know we're headed for the city," Barret said abruptly.

"Right," Cait replied.

Altim was in the lead, his eyes cast downward for any sign that Vincent might have been here before them. Ellengio followed, with Barret right beside him. Cait was not far behind them, while Yuffie quickly fell back and trailed them by a considerable distance.

"Do you think we might run into Cloud and his group?" Barret asked. "They were headed for the city. Cait, they haven't returned to the ship, have they?"

Cait shook his head.

"Cid hasn't heard anything from them at all," he replied.

"I hope they haven't gotten themselves in any trouble," Barret said.

The hint of a shadow glanced fleetingly on the rocks nearby brought Altim to an abrupt halt, his hand reaching for his dagger.

The others saw him and stopped as well.

Altim looked up.

"There!" he exclaimed.

They followed his gaze and saw one of the flying beasts diving down towards them.

At first Barret thought the creature was coming right at them. He lifted his gun arm, but hesitated when it flew to the side and dropped down to the ground not far away from them.

Yuffie ran up beside them, drawing her shuriken back.

"Wait!" Ellengio commanded.

The creature was standing nearby, making no threatening moves. In fact, it seemed to be ignoring them completely. It stood motionless, looking down at the ground, as if concentrating on something.

For a long time nothing happened. Then the transformation took place.

"Vincent!" Yuffie exclaimed.

They all rushed up beside him. He had a dazed expression on his face, and at first just looked at them all blankly. But then his senses seemed to return to him.

"It's getting more and more difficult," he said slowly.

"The transformation?" Ellengio questioned, looking at him carefully.

"Yes," Vincent replied. "It used to be difficult to go from man to beast, but now it's reversed. I think it has something to do with this planet."

"You could very well be right," Ellengio agreed. "I have some theories on that."

Vincent shook his head.

"We don't have time for that now."

He explained to them what Reeve had told him.

"I was returning to attempt to find Zack when I spotted you," he finished. "The ridge Reeve said Zack was near is right over there," he continued, pointed to a sharp crag not far away. "It might be quicker if we all search. According to Reeve, Zack could die at any moment."

"Let us make haste then," Ellengio said.

It only took them a few minutes to reach the area in question. When they did so they fanned out. Altim almost immediately found the trail that Reeve and Zack had left. They followed it straight to a cave, but when they entered they found it deserted.

Altim bent down and carefully examined the floor of the cavern while the others stood by.

"Well, what happened?" Yuffie questioned impatiently. Perhaps Reeve had overestimated the danger. Maybe Zack had recovered. "Did he walk out of here on his own?"

Altim did not answer. He wandered around the cavern a bit, finally stopping near the back and calling them over.

"Zack didn't leave on his own," he said. "Both Reeve and Zack's footprints come in, but only Reeve's leave. But look at this."

He pointed to the ground. They could make out faint footprints in the dirt, and it was clear that they were not made by a human.

"A Chadara?" Barret questioned.

Altim shook his head.

"I don't think so," he replied. "I took a good look at the tracks of the one that Vincent killed, and although they are similar, there are some significant differences."

"So what the hell was it then?" Yuffie questioned.

"I don't know," Altim replied.

He led them back to the entrance of the cave.

"Yes, the tracks do come out," he confirmed.

"But Zack's don't," Cait said.

"Correct," Altim confirmed. "And since Zack is not in the cave, the only conclusion we can come to is that this other creature took him out."

"Or ate him," Yuffie stated pessimistically.

"Possibly," Ellengio said, taking her comment surprisingly seriously. "But you would think if that were the case there would be some remains."

Altim walked slowly out of the cave, scanning the ground, stooped over so low he was practically on his hands and knees. After a few minutes he stood up.

"The trail disappears here," he said.

"Just vanishes?" Ellengio questioned.

"As far as I can see," Altim replied. "The ground is hard here. It didn't leave much of a trail, but it does seem to just disappear."

"Like it flew," Barret stated.

Altim nodded.

They stood there in silence for a few moments.

"So what do we do now?" Barret questioned.

They all turned to face Ellengio.

"It would appear that finding Zack is no longer an option," he said hesitantly. "We can't track these things through the air, and he could be anywhere by now. If the creature took him, it would have to be for some purpose. If we assume they are intelligent, then we can only hope that the creature can help him somehow."

"That seems to be an awful lot of assuming to me," Yuffie stated.

"You're right," Ellengio agreed. "But there isn't anything we can do about it. I'm afraid it's out of our hands."

None of the others looked too pleased with this assessment.

"I think we have little choice now but to head back to the ship and regroup."

"But what about Cloud and his group?" Barret objected. "Reeve told Vincent they were captured. Can't we do anything for them?"

Ellengio looked around. Except for the city the plain for as far as they could see was empty and barren. There was no sign of the caravan Vincent had mentioned.

"We don't know where they were taken, and in any case we can't follow on foot. We have no supplies for an extended journey. We're just going to have to depend on Reeve on that one."

"Great," Yuffie muttered.

"Once we get back to the ship we can decide on our next step," Ellengio finished. "Unless someone had a better idea?"

He looked around, but no one spoke.

"All right, let's go."

"I'm not going with you."

They all turned to look at Vincent.

"What do you mean?" Barret questioned.

"I've caused too much pain," Vincent said. "Every time I interact with others, it leads to disaster. It's my fault that Elena died."

Barret frowned.

"That's ridiculous," he said. "You had nothing to do with Elena's death. You weren't even there!"

Vincent shook his head.

"No, it was my fault. Anything I hold dear turns to dust. That is my curse. The moment I first took her in my arms, she was destined to die."

Yuffie looked at him like he had two heads.

"Have you lost your mind completely?" she questioned.

"It is true," he said simply.

"It's bullshit!" Yuffie retorted.

Yuffie!" Ellengio warned. Vincent made no reply, but there was no hint of anger on his face.

"Vincent," Ellengio said. "I know this is difficult. I know Elena's death was a horrible thing. But we need you. Now more than ever."

Vincent shook his head.

"You don't need me," he replied. "I never really made much of a contribution to the group. Avalanche will get along fine without me."

"No, not this time," Ellengio countered. "This time your role is vital. In fact, you are the one we can least do without. You are our link."

Just a hint of puzzlement clouded Vincent's eyes.

"What do you mean?"

Ellengio walked up until he stood right beside Vincent.

"It's just a theory," Ellengio said. "I'm sure you've noticed the similarity between the chaos beast and the Chadara."

Vincent nodded.

"It seems to me that the odds of that happening by chance would be vanishingly small."

"I thought the same thing," Vincent said.

"Which means that it's more than simple chance. I think there's a connection, and I think it has to do with what Hojo did to you."

Vincent did not reply to that. They all stood there in silence, waiting for Ellengio to continue.

"Hojo had access to Jenova cells, and implanted them in a number of people," Ellengio went on. "But he also had knowledge of the Chadara remains that were found with the book. It's possible he could have extracted some DNA from those remains, and injected it in you as part of his experiments on you."

Vincent's eyes widened just a hint to suggest his surprise.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that the chaos beast is similar to the Chadara. I think there's a direct connection. The chaos beast is a Chadara. Which means that when you transform you are a Chadara."

Vincent took a deep breath. He had to admit what Ellengio was proposing made sense, made perfect sense.

"We need to communicate with the Chadara," Ellengio continued. "We need to know everything we can about them. You might not know their language, but short of capturing one, you're our best chance of learning more about them, and you might be our only hope of reaching them, making them understand that we are both on the same side. We may not be able to do it without you."

Vincent did not reply. His mind raced, looking for loopholes in Ellengio's logic, but deep down inside, he had the growing conviction that everything Ellengio was telling him was true.

"Remember, we're not just doing this for ourselves," Ellengio went on. "Our whole planet is at stake. And this planet too. If we succeed, it is inevitable that any Jenova on this planet will be doomed. By helping us you will be saving not only your home world, but the Chadara's as well."

Vincent turned and walked away, thinking furiously. He didn't want this to be true. He didn't want the burden. All he wanted to do was leave, to go far away, to leave all responsibility behind him, to just have to worry about himself. To walk out into the desert, to not have to worry about hurting anyone else, would be a relief. He didn't want this to happen, he didn't want to play such a vital role. Not now, not when he finally understood what he had to do.

But he couldn't just abandon everyone. Not now, not when the stakes were so high. No matter how he felt about it, no matter how reluctant he was, he couldn't ignore the logic of Ellengio's argument. He turned back toward them.

"Very well, I'll stay with you. I'll help you however I can. But I promise you this. When this is all over I'm going to walk out into the desert, and I don't want anyone to try to stop me. I will stay with you only on that condition."

"Vincent, be reasonable," Barret began.

"That is my condition," Vincent retorted. "There will be no negotiation."

Barret looked helplessly at Ellengio.

"Fine," Ellengio said slowly. "If you are still determined to leave when we have completed our mission, no one will attempt to stop you, or try to talk you out of it."

Vincent looked at them all closely, then nodded.

"I know what you are thinking," he said. "You think I will change my mind in that time. Very well, believe that if you must. Believe whatever you want, but no matter what you think, when this is all over, I **will** leave."