

CHAPTER XXIII: THE TALE OF OLLESON AND MEREDITH

"Is it much further?"

"That's the third time you've asked that!" Barret snapped. "Damn, you're worse than a little kid! Think you could shut up for five minutes?"

"Oh Barret, shut up yourself," Yuffie returned, turning to stare at him. "Not everyone's as thick skinned as you, or as thick headed. It hasn't been five minutes, we've been riding through this desert for hours now in this blasted heat. I'm staved, when are we going to stop to have something to eat? And this stupid beast," she kicked at the chendu they were riding for emphasis, but the beast didn't even seem to notice, "seems more interested in chewing on grass than moving. It'll take us forever to get there at this rate. We could walk faster. My legs are chaffed and itchy from the fur on this thing, and I'm sure you didn't notice, but they smell disgusting!"

"What do you mean by that?" Barret said indigently.

"Figure it out for yourself," Yuffie retorted.

"Why the hell I ever got on this with you is beyond me," Barret muttered.

"Oh cut it out, you two," Zack called back to them. He and Roshnialu were on the lead chendu. There hadn't been enough of the beasts for them to ride individually. Rude and La Li were right behind them, with Barret and Yuffie next, and Cid and Amanda in the rear. "Roshnialu says we're almost there."

"That's what you told me she said the last time," Yuffie grumbled. "Can we at least stop to have something to eat. I'm going to waste away to nothing!"

"Don't do us any favors," Barret mumbled.

"What was that?" Yuffie said, turning to glare at him again.

"Nothing," he replied.

"All right, all right," Zack gave in. "We'll stop. It has been a while. But don't take too long, everyone. We're still not that far from the city. I don't want to be spotted."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Yuffie said.

Zack just shook his head. The desert around them consisted of rolling hills sparsely covered with the course grass and shrubs that seemed to be the only flora able to eke out a living in this inhospitable environment.

Roshnialu brought their chendu to a halt.

"What? Right here? Out in the open?" Yuffie protested. She pointed over to the west, to a tumbled pile of rocks that formed a small hill. "Let's go over there. We'll probably be able to find some shade."

Zack and Roshnialu had already dismounted.

"First you want to stop, and now you don't?" Zack said dryly. "This is fine here. We can use the Chendu's for shade."

Yuffie made a face.

"And have to put up with this smell. No thank you," she said. "Barret, let's go over there."

Barret slid off the beast behind her.

"What are you doing?" she exclaimed.

"I'm tired," he said. "This seems like a fine spot to me. And as you so cleverly pointed out, I don't care about the smell."

"Barret!" she said angrily. "Get back on! I don't know how to make this thing go!"

"Just smack it in the rear with that stick," he replied. "Now quit your yapping, or I'll use it on you."

"I'd like to see you try!" she exclaimed, but Barret ignored her challenge and sat down beside the others, who had also dismounted and were hunting through their packs for something to eat.

Yuffie sat there for a moment until she realized that Barret wasn't going to take up the challenge. Then she pulled the stick out that Barret had been using and smacked the chendu with it. It gave a bellow of protest and started forward so quickly it nearly unseated her.

"Damn!" she exclaimed. "That's the fastest I've seen this stupid thing move."

She glanced back at the others but none of them were paying any attention to her. Fine, she didn't care. Let them all sit there in the heat and stink. She'd find a nice comfortable spot in the shade. They could all suffer!

It took her a few moments to get the hang of controlling the chendu. It wasn't really all that difficult, and she had been watching Barret do it. Soon she had it moving at it's normal ponderous pace towards the rocks. They weren't far away, no more than a hundred meters from where the others had stopped, but as they approached, the chendu started to slow down and become hesitant. When she smacked it with the stick, it bellowed some more, but did not increase it's speed. Eventually, when the rocks were about thirty meters away, it stopped completely, and in spite of all her protests, refused to move.

"What the hell's the matter with you, you stupid thing?" she yelled at it. She looked back and saw Barret watching her. She could not see his expression from this distance, but she could picture a look of amusement on his face, at her expense.

"Urghh! I hate this planet!" she exclaimed. She looked down at the beast. "Fine, you don't want to move. The hell with you. I can walk faster anyway!"

She slipped down off the beast and started toward the rocks on foot.

Barret had indeed been watching her. He didn't like the idea of her scampering off by herself, even though she wasn't going very far. In spite of her being a pain in the ass, she was still one of them. When he saw her having trouble a smile did indeed appear on his face.

"Looks like she's having some difficulty riding that thing," he said with a chuckle.

The others looked up to see Yuffie get down from the chendu and start toward the rocks.

Roshnialu suddenly stood up, talking rapidly, looking at Lai Li, who got to her feet as well, a look of concern on her face.

"Why did she get off?" Lai Li said, looking at Barret.

"The chendu refused to go any further," Barret said, a frown replacing the smile on his face.

Lai Li spoke to Roshnialu again, then looked back toward Yuffie.

"Stop her!" she said sharply. "Roshnialu says the chendu wouldn't stop without good reason. If it won't go there, there must be some danger."

"Yuffie!" Barret bellowed and they all ran toward her.

Yuffie turned around at the sound of the call to see the others all racing toward her. What the hell had gotten into them? Had they all suddenly decided that she had had a good idea after all? They were certainly being awfully enthusiastic about it all of a sudden.

She put her hands on her hips and glared at them. They were all shouting, and she had a feeling it wasn't because they were happy to see her. Abruptly Barret's deep voice rose above the rest.

"Yuffie, behind you!"

She spun around, her hand unconsciously slipping down to her shuriken. Six of the boulders, or what she had taken for boulders, were charging toward her.

She pulled out the conformer and threw it at the one closest to her. It hit the shell with a crack and bounced off, leaving the creature apparently undamaged. She knew she didn't have time to pull out any materia. She waited until the last second and then dived to the left. The creature's snapping jaw just missed her as it barreled by. She flung herself to the side once more as another nearly trampled her. On the ground now, she twisted round to see yet another one looming over her. As it's head lunged at her she kicked it in the jaw. It's claw swept out, tearing into her side and flinging her a meter through the air. The air rushed out of her lungs as she slammed into the ground.

Another one loomed up beside her, but then shrieked and backpedaled as a hail of bullets slammed into it. Most of them were deflected by the shell but a few found their mark on the creatures head and neck. It bellowed again and then collapsed to the ground.

Yuffie turned as the others came up to join the battle. Cid ran forward, thrusting with his spear at another one that was approaching Yuffie. The creature hunched over, ducking under its shell, and the spear glanced harmlessly off it. The beast lunged forward again, and Cid had to scramble backwards to avoid the attack. Zack ran up beside him and slashed at the creatures exposed leg. Blood spurted from the wound and the creature turned to snap at him.

"The shell is impossible to penetrate," he yelled to the others. "You've got to get them on their underside."

"Easier said than done," Cid called out as he retrieved his spear.

Lai Li was not far behind Cid, looking over at Yuffie. She could hardly believe the young ninja had avoided the initial attack. She looked at the others fighting and wished there was something she could do to help, but she knew there was nothing she could do. She was not a fighter, and she had no weapon.

She hadn't realized how close she was to the battle. But suddenly one of the creatures turned and charged straight at her.

She saw it coming, like a raging locomotive, barreling right at her. She stood there, rooted in place. A million thoughts raced through her head, foremost of which was the fact that she was about to die, but for the life of her, she couldn't get her feet to move.

Suddenly she was thrown to the ground. She cried out, but it was drowned out in the thunderous sound above her head. There was a blast of gunfire, and a roaring cry. She twisted round to find someone on top of her. She looked up to see Rude looking at her.

"You all right?" he questioned.

"Yes, I'm fine," she replied. She saw that the sleeve of his suit had been torn, and blood discolored it.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed.

He glanced at his shoulder.

"No time to worry about that," he said.

He pulled himself to his feet. Two of the creatures were now down, but the others were still full of fight. Barret was blasting away at one, while Zack hacked away at another one. He saw Amanda over by Yuffie. Two more of the creatures had just turned away from Cid, and were charging up behind Barret.

"Watch out," Rude yelled, firing rapidly at the beasts.

Yuffie had finally gotten to her feet and was fumbling in her pouch for a materia. She looked up at Rude's shout and she too saw the two creatures, almost directly behind Barret now. She desperately pulled out one of her materia, knowing she wouldn't have a chance to cast the spell before the beasts were upon him.

She saw Barret start to turn around, his arm coming up to protect himself as the beasts bore down on him. But even as he did so, there was a flash of light and flames suddenly enveloped the creatures. Roaring in pain, they stumbled and Barret scrambled out of the way. Yuffie stood there, the materia still in her hand, then looked over at Amanda.

The creatures burned furiously, and soon the smell of their burnt flesh filled the air. Yuffie looked around, seeing that everyone was still standing.

"Everyone all right?" Zack questioned.

"Rude's hurt," Lai Li said.

Zack looked at Yuffie. She took out a cure materia and quickly used it on their injuries.

"Well, looks like we found their weakness," Barret observed, glancing at the still smoldering remains of the beasts. He turned toward the young ninja. "Thanks, Yuffie."

"Uh hmm," Yuffie replied absently, letting her pouch drop to her side once more.

"C'mon, let's get out of here," Zack said. "He turned to glare at Yuffie. "And next time, you stay with the group. Understand?"

His face showed he expected an argument, but all Yuffie said was; "Yes."

They all started back. As she walked Yuffie stared at Amanda, who seemed bent on not returning her gaze. Finally Yuffie put a hand on her shoulder.

"What?" Amanda questioned, still not looking at her.

"Hold on a minute, will you?" Yuffie said. She glanced at the others, who didn't seem to be paying any attention. "We have to talk."

Amanda just stood there looking uncomfortable. She looked at the others as they walked away.

"Can't it wait?" she questioned. "C'mon, we're falling behind."

"No it can't!" Yuffie hissed.

Zack looked back at them and frowned.

"C'mon, you two. Hurry up."

"We're comin'." Yuffie retorted. "Don't worry about us, we're right behind you."

Zack looked at them a moment longer, then turned and walked on. Soon the others were out of earshot.

"How did you do that?" Yuffie demanded.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Amanda replied, looking down at the ground.

"Don't lie to me!" Yuffie said angrily. "I saw you! You cast that spell, not me. And you don't have any materia. I saw your eyes, they glowed, like..like mako eyes. How did you do it?"

She stepped closer, staring at Amanda, who still refused to return her gaze.

"HOW?" Yuffie demanded, stepping closer still.

Amanda turned away from her. She wrapped her arms around herself and stood there, staring off into the desert for some time. Finally she slowly shook her head.

"I don't know."

Yuffie grabbed hold of her and turned her around, forcing Amanda to look at her.

"You don't know? You don't know??"

For a moment Yuffie seemed to be at a loss for words.

"How could you not know?" she choked out. "Do you realize what this means? You can cast spells, without the use of materia. Do you know what I would give to be able to do that?"

"Stop it!" Amanda cried out. She pulled herself free from Yuffie's grip and turned away from her again. Yuffie just stood there staring at her.

"What's with you?"

"I've always been able to do it," Amanda said slowly. "For as long as I can remember. They told me it was a gift. They told me I was special, that I was blessed."

"They told you?" Yuffie said. "Your captors? Was that why they were holding you?"

Amanda nodded.

"But it's not a gift," she continued. "It's a curse. All those years of experimentation, all those years being poked and prodded and studied. I had no friends, I had no life. No one was ever interested in me, it was always the gift, always my special powers they were interested in, that they wanted. It didn't make me special, it make me a freak. I would gladly give it to you if I could, Yuffie. I would gladly give it up to be just a normal person, just another girl. How I would have given anything to have a normal life..."

Amanda bowed her head. Yuffie came up beside her and put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't realize."

"It doesn't matter," Amanda said. "There's nothing anyone can do about it."

She shook her head, then wiped her eyes and looked at Yuffie.

"Please don't tell anyone about this. I don't want them to know. For the first time in my life people have been treating me like a normal person. You don't know how much that means to me."

Yuffie nodded.

"Of course."

They stood there for a moment looking at one another, then Amanda finally forced a smile.

"You okay now?" Yuffie asked.

Amanda nodded.

Yuffie looked back at the others.

"All right, then we better catch up before they start yelling at me again."

She trotted back the way she had come. Amanda followed more slowly, the smile disappearing from her face as she looked at the others, as she looked at Barret. What had she done? It had been a perfect opportunity. Barret had not seen those creatures coming at him, had been defenseless. It was quite possible they might have killed him, and all without her lifting a finger. No one would have known she could have helped, no one would have blamed her. The successful conclusion of her mission had been right in front of her. And yet she had probably saved his life. What was the matter with her? What was she thinking? Could it be that Ice was right, was she getting too close to them, was she too soft? Calin was depending on her, but all she seemed to be doing was making a muck of the whole thing.

For the first time she wondered when it really came down to it, could she do this thing?

She shook her head. She didn't know what to think anymore. She didn't know what was right or wrong. She didn't want to kill Barret, she realized that now. But what choice did she have? Maybe Ice was right and it had been a mistake to get this close to them. Now she wished that they had gotten someone else to do this job. But it was too late now. She couldn't go back, she couldn't tell them that she couldn't do it. She couldn't fail, not for Calin's sake nor her parents. No matter how she felt about it, no matter how distasteful it might be to her, she had a mission that she had to complete. Calin was depending on her, she had to remember that and block out everything else. This was her first mission, she had to expect that it wouldn't be as easy as she had thought. She just had to work through it. There was still time. Yuffie had found out one of her secrets, but it didn't appear that would be harmful. She just had to be careful and use her head. One thing was for sure, if another opportunity arose, she must not pass it up!

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"How did you find us?" Aeris asked.

"It's a long story," Reeve replied. "Luck, mostly."

He recounted what had happened to him since he and Zack had started for the city. Aeris eyes filled with concern when he mentioned that Zack had been poisoned.

"Is he all right?" she asked.

"I don't know," Reeve replied. He looked down at the ground. "Vincent went to look for him. I never found out because I followed you here."

Aeris fell silent as Reeve continued his story.

"I snuck into town under cover of darkness, but I was spotted. I ended up hiding in the sewers. I kind of got lost down here, then ran into this huge ratlike creature. I jumped down that shaft to escape from it, and here I am."

"Some rescuer," Reno commented sarcastically.

"Oh leave him alone," Aeris said. "I think it was very brave."

Reeve did not respond. He looked at Cloud.

"So what do we do now?"

Cloud looked around for a moment.

"We get out of here," he replied. "I don't know if the guards have noticed our escape yet, but we know they were following you, so they're bound to be down here searching. The sooner we get out of here, the better."

"Well, then what are we waiting for?" Reno questioned impatiently.

"But what are we going to do about Reeve?" Aeris questioned.

"What about him?" Cloud asked.

"He's soaking wet. We can't leave him like that. We need to get him dry clothes."

"And where, pray tell, to you expect us to find those?" Reno asked. "You think there's a menswear store down here in the sewers? Unless you'd like to take off your dress and give it to him. It'd probably fit," he looked Aeris up and down, "and I for one would not object."

"Oh Reno, shut up," Tifa cut in.

"I'm fine," Reeve said, looking darkly at Reno.

"Unfortunately, I think that's pretty low on our priority list," Cloud said. "We'll find him dry clothes if we get the opportunity, but they won't do him much good if we end up back in one of those cells. We've got to get out of here first."

Without another word he led them up the spiral staircase they had seen when they first entered the room. They went up carefully, weapons ready, but they met no one. It went up a long way, up four floors, before it terminated in a large room full of instruments that hummed softly. Cloud looked around.

"Looks like this might be the control center for the sewer pumps. Looks like it's fully automated."

"Good," Reeve said.

"On the other hand, whoever is running this joint might just be on their lunch break," Reno commented. "C'mon, let's move along."

Cloud gave him a sour look, but he was right. There were two doors out of the room. Cloud picked one at random and let them out. They followed a long corridor. They passed a few doors on either side. Cloud was hoping to find another staircase somewhere, but they came around a turn and the corridor ended abruptly with another door.

"Do you have any idea where you're going?" Reno asked.

"Of course he doesn't," Elena snapped. "What a stupid question."

This time it was Reno's turn to glare.

Cloud opened the door and walked through it, weapon ready. The others followed him in and looked around in wonder.

The room was large, and circular. There was a pile of broken furniture in the middle of the room. Cloud couldn't tell what it once must have been, but whatever it was, he had a feeling it hadn't been disturbed in a long time, in spite of the fact that no dust had gathered on it. But that wasn't what caught their attention. The walls around them were covered with some kind of painting. A landscape, seen from above, of a vast area. It covered the entire wall, completely surrounding them. And more than that, the room itself seemed to give off a distinct light. He immediately recognized it, for he had seen that light before, in Ifalna.

"This place was built by the Cetra!" Aeris exclaimed, stepping forward and looking at the walls.

She turned and spoke to Jinn for a few moments.

"He says Daris was built on the remains of an old Cetra city. Some of the structures still stood, and were incorporated into the new city. He thinks we're safe here. None of the Chadara visit this area."

Cloud was looking at the painting carefully.

"This looks like a painting of the continent," he said. He walked over and pointed to a long line of mountains on the painting.

"Isn't this where we landed, and that the city we saw?"

Aeris spoke to Jinn again, then turned to Cloud and nodded.

"Uh huh," she said. "It looks like they painted a map of the area."

"It's beautiful," Tifa observed.

"So what do we do now?" Reno cut in. "Even if it's safe here, we can't stay here forever. We've got to find a way out."

"I agree," Cloud replied. "But we can take a little breather. I don't think that would hurt."

Reno looked unhappy but said nothing. He turned and started to wander around the room. Most of the others sat down on what remained of the furniture.

"What was this place?" Tifa asked.

"I don't know," Aeris replied. She looked at the wreckage they were sitting on. "These look like the remains of shelves. Perhaps it was a library, or some kind of hall of records. No way to tell now."

Cloud looked around slowly.

"I wonder what happened to the books?"

"Probably destroyed by Jenova," Elena said.

Aeris nodded.

Cloud suddenly looked up.

"Aeris, ask Jinn if he knows anything about the shield generator."

Aeris nodded and spoke with Jinn for some time. Finally she turned back to the others.

He says he doesn't know anything about it. But there were rumors. There is a rhyme that every Cetra learns at a young age. It was supposedly handed down from generation to generation from the time when the Cetra had first arrived here. Supposedly it was very important, and rumor has it that it held some kind of clue, but no one he had ever spoken to knew what it meant."

"So, what is it?" Cloud said impatiently.

She spoke to Jinn again, and her eyes becoming thoughtful as they talked.

"Well?" Cloud said as he finished.

Aeris looked at him.

"It goes like this:

To close the circle

Take the sunlight stone

to the eye of Aramus

in the Valley of Everlasting Longing

They all looked at Aeris.

"That doesn't rhyme," Cloud pointed out.

"Oh don't be so picky," Aeris exclaimed. "It does in Cetra."

"So what does it mean?" Cloud asked.

Aeris stood up without answering and walked over to the painting. She pointed to the city Cloud had pointed out.

"This is the city we landed near?" she questioned.

"I think so," Cloud replied, walking over beside her.

Aeris looked at the painting.

"So the city we are in now would be...where?"

"We went north," Cloud said. "So it would have to be...this, I guess."

Aeris stepped back, her eyes scanning the painting. She turned to Jinn and asked him something. He got up and came over. Aeris started pointing to features and Jinn named them for her. She went on for quite some time, the others all standing there wondering what the hell she was doing. Finally she stopped, apparently satisfied. She walked over to the painting again, a little farther away from them. She pointed to it and looked at the others.

"This is where we have to go," she said. "This is where the field generator is."

Cloud looked at her in surprise. The others must have felt the same way, for Reno came over as well.

"Now, hold on, back the truck up here a minute," Reno exclaimed. "How the hell did you figure that out?"

Tifa was just as surprised as the others, but she a double take when she saw Aeris expression. Was that a smirk on her face?

"It's kind of a long story," Aeris said. "It has to do with Cetra mythology."

"Mythology?" Reno said.

"Yes," Aeris continued. "Cetra mythology and the story of Olleson and Meredith."

"Olleson and Meredith?" Cloud repeated.

"Olleson," Aeris corrected.

"So spill it!" Elena said..

"A long time ago, there were two cities," Aeris began. "Olleson was the eldest son of the war counselor of one of the cities. Meredith was the daughter of the king of the other. When they were growing up, the cities were friendly, and they often met each other at court. Eventually, they fell in love."

"Before they could announce that love, however, a squabble started between the two cities, a squabble which eventually led to war between them. Olleson and Meredith were now enemies, and their fathers both told them to forget their feeling, for their love would never be consummated."

"But Olleson and Meredith could not forget. No one was allowed across the boarder, and it was closely watched. If either of them had been caught doing so they would have been hanged as spies."

"But there was a certain grove of trees in the land between the two countries, a sacred grove, dedicated to Jamilai, the Goodness of fruitfulness and plenty. It was forbidden for anyone to enter that grove, but there were no guards there, for it was thought the wrath of the Goddess was reason enough to keep everyone away."

"Still, it being the only way for them to get together, Olleson and Meredith transgressed upon the grove. Night after night they met there, whenever they could both slip away without being seen. They didn't care about the consequences. They only wanted to be together."

"But keeping a secret meeting is difficult to hide from a Goddess, and eventually Jamilai discovered them. She confronted them in a rage, and Olleson and Meredith cowered in front of her."

"Being a Goddess, she could have killed them on the spot, but she decided that they would be more useful as a warning to others. So she set them in the sky, Olleson represented by the sun, Meredith by the moon. And there they circle, always following one another, but never able to meet, longing for one another, forever."

She stopped and looked at the others.

"Oh that's so sad," Tifa said.

"Actually, the sun and the moon can sometimes be seen together during the day," Cloud observed.

"Well, maybe it's different on this world," Elena said.

"It's just a story," Aeris reminded them.

"Yeah, but you would think they would want it to be an accurate representation of the physical world," Cloud continued.

Tifa placed her hands on her hips.

"You know, sometimes I don't think you have a romantic bone in your body," she said.

"Can we get back to the subject at hand?" Reno interrupted. "What the hell does this have to do with the generator?"

"I asked Jinn to name some of places on the painting. He told me one of them is called Meredith valley. Olleson and Meredith. Everlasting longing?"

Tifa's eyes widened.

"So you think that's what the rhyme means?"

"Yes," Aeris replied. "It's something that every Cetra learns as a child. Or used to," she said, glancing over at Jinn. "And it's something Jenova would never know. It's a perfect clue."

"What about the Armasi thing?" Elena asked.

"Aramus," Aeris said. "He was the God of mountaintops."

"Mountaintops?" Reno said. "Just the tops? What, do you have a God of left hand turns in the river too?"

Cloud rolled his eyes.

"So, you think the generator is on a mountaintop in Meredith valley?" Reeve said.

"Yes," Aeris replied.

Cloud was studying the map.

"I don't know if this thing is to scale, but it looks like that valley is not too far from here."

He stepped closer to the painting. "We'll have to go...northeast."

"So what are we waiting for?" Elena said.

"We still have to get out of here," Reno pointed out.

"Yes," Cloud agreed. He looked around at the others. They all seemed to be anxious to get on their way.

"Let's go," he said.

They left the room through a door opposite the one they had come in. Cloud led them down the hall, always keeping an eye out for stairs, as well as any Chadara. They walked for a long time, occasionally finding a staircase to go up, but still they saw no one. Cloud was grateful for that, and the fact that there were stairs at all. This place had probably been constructed by the Cetra or Jenova, beings that occasionally had a need for stairs, fortunately.

Eventually they opened a door to see the darkness of night in front of them.

"Thank God," Elena stated.

They stepped out into the darkness and looked around. There was no one in sight, and the city seemed quiet around them. Off to the south they could see the glow of lights, but it was far enough away to leave them in darkness. Cloud was more concerned when he looked to the east, and saw the faint glow of light on the horizon that signaled the coming of day.

"We've got to get out of here fast," he said. "The sun will be up soon."

"I can see some hills in that direction," Reeve said, pointing to the northwest. "They don't look too far away."

"Let's go then," Cloud agreed.

He led them quickly away. They had weapons now, they could at least defend themselves. But they couldn't fight the entire city. It would be best if they could slip out without a fight.

Cloud wasn't sure how long it took, but eventually the buildings started to thin out and become scattered. They could see the hills clearly now in front of them. Reeve looked up at them, wondering if this was the exact place he had entered the town. They looked back, but saw no sign of pursuit.

They reached the foothills and faded away into them just as the morning sun broke over the city.