

CHAPTER XXIV: THE CETRA BASE

"There it is," Zack said.

"About time," Yuffie snorted.

The others ignored her. Below them lay a shallow valley, the ground covered with brambles and thorny bushes, more vegetation, in fact, than they had seen before. The chendu moved down the trail-less slope, almost at a trot. It was faster than they ever moved before, in fact. Yuffie looked at the beast she was riding in surprise.

"What's gotten into them?" she questioned.

She heard Lai Li speak to Roshnialu, then turn toward her.

"They see food," Lai Li said, pointing to the ample vegetation.

Yuffie looked at the valley ahead of them and nodded.

"I should have known," she said. "So where's this Cetra base? I don't see anything."

Lai Li spoke to Roshnialu once again.

"It's there," Lai Li said, pointing ahead.

Yuffie looked ahead of them once more, but saw nothing that looked like a building.

"Where?" she questioned.

"Up ahead," Lai Li replied. "See those mounds. That's it."

Yuffie frowned. Lai Li was pointing at what looked to be three weed and bramble covered hills.

"Remember, they haven't been used in hundreds of years, perhaps longer," Lai Li reminded her. "They're all overgrown. Even Cetra architecture doesn't last that long without some wear and tear."

Yuffie eyed the mounds dubiously.

"If it's been that long there probably won't be anything here of value at all. Why'd we even bother?"

"You got something better to do?" Barret snapped.

Yuffie made a face but did not reply. They had reached the valley bottom now, and the Chendu's had slowed down again, their heads constantly dropping to one side or the other to pull up some choice plants. It became almost impossible to get them to go forward.

Finally Roshnialu said something and slid off of hers.

"She says we might as well leave the chendu here," Lai Li translated, getting off her beast as well. "The base is just ahead, we can walk the rest of the way."

The others obediently slipped off their chendu as well, Yuffie grumbling about how this would never happen with any decent kind of riding beast. They made their way over to the nearest mound.

"Jenova doesn't know about this place?" he questioned.

"They might have at one time," Lai Li responded. "But Roshnialu told me they haven't been here in her lifetime."

"Does she know what's in these things?" Cid questioned.

Lai Li posed the question to Roshnialu.

"No," Lai Li replied. "She's never been inside. Nor has anyone in years. There's a story that there's a huge underground complex, and that Chadara have gone in on occasion and never been seen again."

"Great," Yuffie muttered.

"Well, if they never came back out, how would they know that there's a huge underground complex in there?" Barret questioned.

Zack shrugged and pulled out his sword.

"Doesn't hurt to be cautious," he explained.

They reached the first mound and it became clear that underneath all the vegetation there really was a structure. Surprisingly intact, in fact. The Cetra had built things to last. They slowly made their way around the mound until they saw an opening. Roshnialu made to walk in but Zack stopped her, then, sword ready, went in himself first.

The others followed. They found themselves in a small vestibule, with openings leading off into other rooms. There was a table and chairs, still intact, though one chair was overturned, and everything was covered with a thick layer of dust. Though there were no windows, the walls still glowed faintly, giving off enough light for them to see by. The floor was covered with dust as well, and cracks could be seen in it.

"Nu Corte de," Roshnialu said, heading for one of the openings.

"Follow me," Lai Li stated.

They walked through a few more rooms, similar to the first, with nothing in them of interest. They came to another opening, and Zack saw that it was a stairway leading down.

Roshnialu started down without hesitation. Yuffie looked at the opening suspiciously.

"We're not going to go down there?"

Zack didn't even hesitate, but followed Roshnialu.

"Move along," Cid said, from behind Yuffie.

She glared at him for a moment, then followed the others as they walked down the stair.

There was a long corridor at the bottom, with openings on either side. They made their way slowly down the hallway, peering into the rooms as they went by, but most were empty.

They eventually came upon a room filled with what looked like some sort of machinery, as well as tables filled with what appeared to be laboratory instruments, all cast about randomly, with many items strewn across the floor.

"This looks like some kind of research center," Lai Li stated.

"Umm," Zack responded.

He wandered around the room, looking at the instruments. He had no idea what any of them might be for. But then again, he wasn't a scientist, in fact, he had never been entirely comfortable in laboratories, even before Hojo had experimented on him.

The others were wandering around the room as well. Lai Li made a beeline for some dust-covered books and papers scattered on one table. Cid had walked over and was looking over one of the instruments. He turned to the others.

"This looks like some kind of radio equipment."

Zack walked over to Lai Li, with Roshnialu and Rude right behind him. She was just opening one of the books. It looked like some kind of notebook. Zack was surprised to see that the pages still appeared to be in decent shape, and the writing, though faded, could still be made out.

"Can you read it?" Zack asked.

Lai Li did not answer for a moment, then shook her head.

"No, it's in Chadaran." She looked at Roshnialu and they exchanged a few words.

"She can't read it either," Lai Li said. "It's an ancient form of the language. But it looks like it's the same form as was in the book we found in the cave. I think I may be able to translate it, or at least some of it, but it may take a while."

Zack looked around.

"Well, I guess we can take a break here. How long do you think it will take you?"

"For the whole thing?" Lai Li said. "A couple of days, probably."

"I don't think we can wait that long," Rude observed.

"Wait a minute," Yuffie cut in. "You think you can translate the entire notebook in a couple of days? How can you do that if you don't know the language?"

"I saw some of it in the book Ellengio has, although I wish I could have looked at it more. He did seem kind of possessive about it. But it was enough to give me an idea. I've always had a talent for this sort of thing."

"If you say so," Yuffie said skeptically.

"I'll do what I can now," Lai Li said. "We can bring the notebook along when we leave."

"All right," Zack agreed. "We'll take a little break here while Lai Li and Roshnialu take a look at these notes."

Yuffie walked over and plopped herself down on one of tables, looking incredibly bored. Amanda came over and sat beside her. Barret stood by the door, looking warily back the way they had come.

There was another doorway opposite the one they had come in. Zack walked over to it and looked in. The room also held laboratory equipment, though it was somewhat smaller than the one they were in.

He wasn't tired, and he had never liked standing around doing nothing. If there was something here, he wanted to find it now.

"I'm going to go take a look around," he said.

Barret looked over at him.

"Don't get lost."

"I won't be long," Zack replied.

He walked into the next room. He looked around slowly. This one had a number of small cages along the wall, all empty. There were more instruments in this room, but he didn't have anymore idea what they might have been for than the ones in the other room.

A soft footfall behind him made him turn around suddenly. He relaxed when he saw Roshnialu standing behind him.

"Oh, it's you," he said, lowering his sword and smiling. "What, come to keep me company?"

She did not reply, but came up and stood beside him. He didn't know why she had followed him, but it somehow eased his mind that she was there. He had been uneasy since the moment they had entered this place. Though he had seen nothing out of the ordinary his instincts had him on alert. There was something here that was not quite right, but he couldn't tell what it might be.

He continued through the room and into a hallway beyond, Roshnialu silently following. He saw another stairway leading down to the right. He walked over and glanced down the steps, but saw nothing. He paused for a moment, then thought better of going down. He didn't want to get too far away from the others.

He walked further down the hall, passing more rooms on either side. He still could not shake the uneasy feeling. The hall turned twice, and each time he came to a corner, he gripped his sword just a little tighter, but each time the hallway was empty when he stepped around the turn. Finally he paused for a long moment to listen, but the corridors around him were absolutely silent. He examined the floor they were walking on. The thick covering of dust would have betrayed any feet that had passed by recently, but it was undisturbed. Every indication was that the complex had been completely deserted for many years.

Finally he stopped. The uneasy feeling would not go away, but it did not seem to be translating into a real threat. Perhaps he was just imagining things. They were on a strange planet, inside a complex not created by human hands. Was it so unlikely that in itself might make him uneasy?

He turned to Roshnialu.

"I guess we better go back."

She looked at him but said nothing. He retraced his steps, a simple matter with their footprints acting as a trail. So it was that his eyes grew wide with surprise when they came around a turn and found a dead end in front of them.

Zack looked at the wall in surprise. He was certain this was the way they had come. They had followed the hallway, and had not turned off to either side.

"What the hell?" he muttered.

He looked down and saw that their footprints were indeed there, seeming to appear right out of the wall.

"It must be a fake wall," he stated.

He walked up to it and rapped on it. It felt and sounded quite solid. He pushed against it, but it didn't budge. He turned to Roshnialu.

"It must be some kind of trapdoor or something. We must have triggered it somehow."

Roshnialu was examining the wall nearby. She turned at his voice and looked at him, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Looks like you're as lost as I am on this one," he muttered.

He tried pushing harder, then kicking it and finally slamming his shoulder against it, but the wall rebuffed his every advance. He looked around for some sort of trigger mechanism, but saw nothing. The hallway was empty, with nothing on the floor or projecting from the walls.

"What is going on here," he said, anger and concern mixing in his voice. At first their predicament seemed like an irritant, but now he was beginning to realize just how serious this could be. They were trapped underground with no way to tell which direction was which. If they couldn't get back the way they had come, they would have to find another way, and even if there was one, and there was no guarantee even of that, who knows how long it would take them to find it?

He looked at Roshnialu again. She walked back down the hall a bit and pointed down a corridor, then looked at him.

He stepped over to her.

"We didn't come that way," he said. The last thing he wanted to do was wander off even further. Not while there was still a chance they could get back the way they came.

"C'mon," he said suddenly, grabbing hold of her hand. He led them back the way he had come, until he reached the point where he had stopped, then retraced his steps yet again. Perhaps if they had triggered something, in the floor or whatever, if they walked over it again, it may reverse the process. It seemed a slim hope, but he couldn't think of anything else to try. But when they returned to the hallway they found it still blocked off.

Zack cursed and kicked the wall yet again. He stood there looking at it for a moment, as if he could open it by sheer force of will, but the wall did not budge.

Finally he folded his arms across his chest in exasperation. It appeared that no matter what they did they weren't going to be returning by that route. He was not anxious to try to find another route. It would be too easy to get lost, but it was becoming more and more apparent that that might be their only alternative.

He shook his head. That was the last thing he wanted to try, and he still had one more option before that, though he didn't think it would do much good.

He walked up right beside the wall.

"Cid, Barret, Yuffie, Anybody!!" he yelled as loud as he could. "Can you hear me? We need help!"

~*~

A sudden humming sound made Yuffie look up.

"What's that?" she said, staring at the machine Cid was examining.

Cid just stood there for a moment, a look of surprise on his face. Then he turned toward her.

"It still works," he stated.

Barret walked over to stand beside him, taking an interest for the first time.

"Where's the power coming from?" he questioned.

"I don't know," Cid replied. "There must be some kind of generator somewhere in this place. Still, this must have been sitting here for a zillion years. I can't believe it still functions. Those Cetra sure know how to put together a piece of machinery."

Cid leaned forward and started fiddling with the dials.

"What are you doing?" Barret questioned.

"If I can get this to work," Cid replied slowly, "maybe we can contact Cait."

"Do you think you can?" Yuffie asked, coming up right behind him. He turned to look at them all.

"Back off a minute, will ya?" he snapped. "Can't ya give a guy a little room to work."

The others stepped back.

"Yeesh, what a grouch," Yuffie muttered.

Cid continued turning the dials and switches for quite some time.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Yuffie eventually ventured.

"Shut up," Cid grunted. He picked up a set of headphones and put one to his ear. "I think I've almost got it."

Yuffie did not look pleased, but she said nothing more.

"Cait, Cait, can you hear me, over," Cid said.

He fiddled with the dials again and repeated it.

He turned to look at them.

"Got 'em!"

"All right!" Barret said.

"Cait?" Cid continued. "Tell the others were not at the ship."

There was a short pause.

"That's right," Cid continued. "We had to abandon it. No, the Chadara found it. That's right. It's a long story. Where are you?"

Cid listened then nodded slowly. He turned to the others once more.

"They know where the generator is!" he said.

"Great!" Barret said.

"Uh huh," Cid continued. "Okay. No, not sure, but we can ask Roshnialu. Huh? Roshnialu. It's another long story. Tell Ellengio that he was right, or partially so. She's half Cetra. That's right. I know, hard to believe. Okay, we'll try to meet you..."

There was a crackling sound and a puff of smoke. Cid dropped the headphones and quickly turned some dials.

"What happened?" Barret asked.

"Somethings shorted out," Cid said. He pulled on of the panels off and looked inside. He poked around for a moment.

"Hmm. I think I see the problem, but I can't fix it with my hands."

He stood up.

"Yuffie," he said. "I saw some things that looked like they might be tools in a room when we were coming down the hall. Bring them to me, will ya?"

"Why should I do it?" she questioned. "You've got legs."

"Yuffie.." he began.

"I'll get them," Amanda volunteered.

She ran out of the room. Cid turned back to the panel and continued to poke around inside. A few minutes later Amanda came back. He turned to look at her but she was empty handed.

"Couldn't you find them?" he asked.

"I...no, actually I didn't see them at all," she said hesitantly.

"The second room back that we passed through," Cid said. "On the left. They were right in plain view."

Amanda shook her head.

"That's just it..." he said. "Maybe you better come look for yourself."

Cid frowned, then they all followed her as she walked back out the door, curious as to what she was talking about. She stopped in the doorway to the second room. Cid looked in and frowned. The room was empty.

"What the hell?" he muttered. "They were on a table, right there."

He pointed to the left. There were no tools in sight. In fact, there was no table.

"Did someone come and take them?" Barret questioned.

"And the table too?" Cid said doubtfully.

"No," Lai Li said, coming up beside them to peer in the room. "Look at the floor."

They all looked down. Barret frowned.

"I don't see anything," he said.

"Exactly," Lai Li replied. "Nothing. No footprints."

Cid's eyes widened. She was right. There were no footprints in the room. No sign that they had passed through it previously.

"Did someone wipe them out?" Barret said doubtfully.

Rude bent down and examined the floor. He shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said. He stood up and looked around, then turned to look at them. "We've never been in this room before."

"Huh?" Yuffie spoke up.

"This isn't the same room we passed through," he said.

"How could that be?" Barret questioned. "What, are you telling us the rooms are moving?"

Rude shook his head slowly.

"I don't know," he replied. "I can't think of any other explanation."

Cid looked around slowly.

"This place was built by the Cetra. Who knows what they were capable of. But why would they make the rooms move?"

They stood there in silence for a moment.

"Some kind of trap?" Yuffie suggested.

Cid shrugged.

"Maybe Roshnialu will know something," Barret said.

Cid looked back down the hallway. He had forgotten about Zack and Roshnialu. Where had they gone off too? If they wandered away, and the walls did move...

"We better go find them!" he exclaimed.

They trotted back down the corridor until they were once more in the radio room. Cid went to the opposite door, the one Zack and Roshnialu had left through. Their tracks in the hallway made an easy trail to follow.

"C'mon," he said to the others.

They followed the trail down the hall. It didn't go far. They made one turn before it ran into a dead end.

Cid walked up to the wall. Zack and Roshnialu's footprints appeared to walk right into it.

"Looks like this wall moved too," Cid said.

"Shit," Barret exclaimed.

Cid pushed against the wall, but it didn't move.

"Do you see any kind of mechanism?" he asked.

The others looked around for a few moments.

"No," Lai Li said finally.

"Damn," Cid muttered. He stood there for a few moments staring at the wall.

"So what do we do now?" Yuffie asked.

Cid shook his head.

"I have no idea."

"That really inspires confidence," Yuffie commented.

"I'm open to suggestions," Cid responded.

"It's like a maze," Amanda said.

"With movable walls," Barret replied. "That's cheating."

"Even so, there may be some pattern to it," Lai Li said.

"Maybe," Cid replied. "Think you can figure it out?"

Lai Li shrugged.

"Perhaps, but who knows how long it would take. In a normal maze, constantly turning in the same direction can often get you through. But this is no ordinary maze."

"You can say that again," Barret said. "And what are we supposed to do about Zack and Roshnialu? Even if we find a way out, we can't just leave them in here."

"I know," Cid replied. "But it doesn't look like we can do anything for them, now does it? Looks like our options are pretty narrow. Go back to the radio room and hope that Zack or Roshnialu can figure this out, or wander around ourselves."

"If we start wandering around, we probably would not be able to find a way back here."

"I'm well aware of that," Cid said. "Which means if Zack and Roshnialu did find a way back here, they wouldn't be able to find us. A pretty fix we're in, I'd say."

"So I say again, what do we do?" Yuffie said.

Cid stood there pondering for quite some time.

"Let's go back to the radio room," he decided. "We can rest there for awhile. If Zack and Roshnialu don't return, we'll have to try to get out on our own. If they can't get back, I'm afraid they're going to be on their own."

~*~

Zack folded his arms across his chest in frustration and leaned against the wall. He didn't know how thick they were, or if it was just that no one was in earshot, but for whatever reason, no one was responding to his shouts.

"Damn," he muttered.

Roshnialu came up beside him and took hold of his hand.

"What is it?" he asked.

She led him back down the hallway and pointed at the side corridor she had singled out before.

"You want to go down there, don't you?" he said.

She looked at him and nodded toward the corridor again.

He looked down it for a moment. There was nothing out of the ordinary about it. She tugged on his arm. He hadn't really wanted to go wandering off at random, but it seemed as if they had no alternative. Besides, Roshnialu seemed pretty adamant. Perhaps she knew more than he realized.

"Is that a way out?" he questioned.

He gave in to her tugging and followed her as she led him down the hallway. They walked for some time, turning every now and then, seemingly at random, yet Roshnialu appeared to know exactly where she was going. Zack had given up trying to figure it out. They were now completely in her hands.

They turned down another hallway and Zack suddenly heard a thudding noise in front of them.

"Is that the others?" he said excitedly.

But Roshnialu had stopped dead in her tracks. She turned to look at him and he immediately drew his sword when he saw the expression on her face. Out of a room in front of them, a large clawed leg appeared, followed quickly by another, and then another. A moment later a large hairy body squeezed itself out of the door, and Zack found himself face to face with a spider like creature that filled the corridor in front of them. He could see four bright red eyes staring at him, and below them fangs dripping with a yellow fluid. With a speed that belied its bulk, the creature rushed toward them.

"Get back!" Zack shouted, stepping in front of Roshnialu, his sword poised in front of him.

Zack swung his sword, and one of the legs flew from the creature. Blood splattered, but the beast did not slow down. One of the legs lashed out, the claws on the end of it trying to pin him down, but he dodged out of the way and swung again. Another leg was clove in two. With a piercing hiss the creature snapped at him. He threw himself to the side, the fangs just missing him.

Another leg lashed out. The narrow corridor left him little room to maneuver, and this one slammed into his side, sending him spinning and knocking him to the ground. The creature was on him in an instant. The dark bulk of it looming over him. He could see the red eyes staring down at him. Some of the yellow fluid dripped from its fangs onto his leg, and he felt a burning sensation.

He swung his sword again, slashing against the underbelly of the creature. Blood poured out of the wound, but the creature's hide was thick, and he didn't seem to do much damage.

He turned suddenly at the sound of a bestial cry. He looked in shock as Roshnialu leaped at the spider. Shocked not from her attack but the sudden change in her appearance. Her hair flew around her face, her eyes burning with fire, almost as if possessed. Her mouth contorted in a snarl of rage. She seemed to have been transformed into a beast herself. She grabbed hold of one of the creature's legs and snapped it off as if it were a twig. Blood spurted out of the wound, splashing across her, but she took no notice. She slammed into the creature like a pile driver, rocking it and nearly knocking it off its remaining legs. The creature hissed again and turned toward her, snapping at her with its fangs.

Zack sprang to his feet. Roshnialu's attack provided just the diversion he needed. The creature's head was right beside him, but focused on her. Without hesitation Zack drove his sword with all his strength right into the creature's neck.

The creature lunged backward, pulling the sword from his grasp. For a few moments it thrashed about wildly. Then it suddenly collapsed to the ground. They stood there watching it until the feeble movement of its remaining legs stopped.

Zack walked over and pulled his sword out of the creature's neck. He looked at Roshnialu, who once again appeared as she always had.

"Thanks," he said. "Looks like there's more to you than meets the eye. Almost forgot you had that Chadara blood in you. Remind me never to get you angry."

He smiled at her. She took his hand again and pointed down the corridor.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "Let's get going."

The continued on their way. Zack had his sword ready now, in case they ran into any more of those creatures. He wondered if it had just wandering in here or was left here deliberately to take care of any trespassers. Didn't seem like something the Cetra would do, and anyway, how could it have survived all that time?

Roshnialu continued confidently forward. By now Zack had no idea where they were, how to get back, or which direction they were going in. There was nothing he could do at this point but follow and hope that she knew what she was doing.

As they walked down another hall Zack's grip suddenly tightened on his weapon as he heard a noise ahead again. But then his uneasiness turned to excitement as he recognized the voices of his friends.

"Cid, Barret, Yuffie!" he called out.

He moved in front of Roshnialu, pulling her ahead now. In the corridor in front of them Yuffie suddenly stuck her head out of a doorway.

"It is them!" she called out.

The others rushed out as Zack and Roshnialu came up to them.

"How the hell did you find your way back?" Cid exclaimed.

"I don't know," Zack replied. "It was Roshnialu. She knew how to go, somehow."

Lai Li stepped forward and Roshnialu began talking to her quickly. It went on for some time.

"She says the Cetra part of her has a sense that can tell direction underground," Lai Li said finally. "Even with the room shifting she could tell which direction she had come from. She says she thinks the shifting rooms are protection for intruders. Only a Cetra would be able to navigate them."

"So she can get us out of here?" Yuffie said.

"Yes," La Lai replied.

"Good," Yuffie said. "So what are we waiting for?"

~*~

Cloud and his companions had slowly worked their way northeast throughout the day, steadily away from the city they had escaped from. With no supplies their situation would have been dire, but Jinn knew the area, and was able to lead them to a small supply station on the outskirts of the city. There they managed to 'borrow' food, water, and a few basic needs. Nothing extravagant, but enough to keep them alive for a while. By the time the sun went down they were all exhausted. They made camp soon after nightfall in a shallow ravine below a promontory of rock, which they believed would keep them hidden from any prying eyes. As with most deserts, the light colored sands of Grouchoon absorbed very little of the sunlight that fell on it during the day. As a result, when the sun went down it cooled rapidly. Temperatures of almost a hundred degrees could swiftly drop to near freezing. They had started a fire as the night grew colder, and now they huddled around it, wrapped in blankets. Jinn had fallen quickly asleep, and Cloud saw Tifa looking at him with odd expression.

"What?" he said, looking at her.

She turned toward him, startled out of her musing.

"Oh, nothing," she said. "I was just...it's funny, he looks a lot like you."

"You mean Jinn?" Cloud said in surprise, looking at the sleeping figure of the young blonde boy. "No way."

"Yes," she replied. "Not exactly the same. His hair isn't as spiky. But a definite resemblance."

Aeris smiled and looked over at the boy.

"How cute, a little Cloud," she said.

"He doesn't look that much like me," Cloud protested, slightly embarrassed.

"Cloud, have you been sowing your wild oats on other planets?" Reno questioned.

"Not likely," Cloud responded.

Now they had caught Reeve's attention as well.

"Kinda a preview of what your own kids will look like," he said.

"Yeah," Elena added. "When are we going to see some little Cloud's running around?"

"One's bad enough," Reno muttered.

"So have you thought of a name?" Aeris said.

Tifa and Cloud just looked at one another.

"Cirrus, Stratus, Cumulus," Reno suggested.

"Hey, hold your horses," Cloud said defensively. "We're not even married yet!"

"Yeah, there's no rush on that," Tifa added quickly.

"You mean you haven't even thought about it?" Elena pressed.

"No," Cloud said immediately.

"Not really," Tifa replied more slowly.

The fire crackled in the dark, and the others fell silent. A fact for which Tifa was grateful, as this wasn't really a topic she was comfortable discussing.

"Well, we seem to have gotten away, hard as it may be to believe," Reno said after a while, lounging with his feet almost in the fire. "So what do we do now?"

Cloud tossed another small branch on the blaze.

"Well, we know where the generator is now," he said thoughtfully.

"If Aeris is guessing correctly," Reno reminded him.

"I'm sure of it," Aeris said firmly.

Reno still looked doubtful, but said nothing.

"It sounds to me like you're planning on us going there," Reeve said. "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

Cloud looked at him.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, we don't have the crystal materia. Ellengio does. Without it we can't turn on the generator. Don't you think it would be wiser to return to the others. To let them know we've found it?"

"As Reno was so quick to point out, we're not sure we've found it," Cloud replied. "I'm not sure I want to go back and bring them all to this valley only to find out it's a wild goose chase. Besides, we've have to go back towards the city to return the way we came. I don't want to risk getting captured again."

"Well, we've got to back eventually," Reno commented.

"I know, but if we find the valley first, maybe things'll have calmed down by the time we return."

"So you'd rather just head off into unknown territory," Reno stated. "Sounds pretty reckless to me."

"Since when did that matter to you?" Cloud said caustically. "And it's not unknown territory. We saw it on that map."

"On that painting, you mean," Reno corrected. "It wasn't a map. We don't know how accurate it was. For all we know, this Meredith valley could be a hundred miles away."

"Aeris said Jinn told her it wasn't that far," Tifa interjected, glancing over at the young boy.

Aeris nodded.

"That's right. He said it was only a couple of days travel."

"He's a kid," Reno replied. "He's been locked up for who knows how long. I'm not sure we can put much faith in what he tells us. And I don't think we'll have a problem getting by the town. We just won't get too close."

"So we'll have to go even farther out of our way," Cloud responded. "Besides, it would take us days to get back on foot."

"Those creatures we rode didn't go much faster than a man walking anyway," Reno pointed out. "I think we should go back."

"What makes you think we're interested in your opinion to begin with?" Cloud shot back.

Reno sat up and glared at him.

"He we go again," he snapped. "The great commander speaks and we're just supposed to follow blindly. Well, you may have your cronies from Avalanche trained to do that, but that doesn't mean we're all going to listen."

"Oh shut up, Reno," Cloud declared, getting angry in turn. "We all know you're going to argue with any decision we make just because you're a jerk."

"We?" Reno said. "I don't think WE made any decision. The only person we've heard from is you. I'm kind of interested in what everyone else thinks."

He looked over at Reeve.

"How about you?"

Reeve looked uncomfortable.

"To tell you the truth, I think it would be prudent to go back," he said. "But if the majority says we go on, I'll come along. I don't think it's a good idea for us to split up."

"When did this suddenly become a democracy?" Cloud questioned.

"I thought it always was," Elena cut in.

Cloud gave them a sour look.

"We can't be debating every move we make," he said. "If things get dangerous there must be someone in charge. We've got to have a leader."

"So who elected you?" Reno questioned.

"You want to take a vote?" Cloud challenged.

Reno looked around slowly.

"No point in that. You've already got them all brainwashed. Except for maybe Elena here. I just don't get how they can come up with you as a leader. You wandered around following Sephiroth, flipping out and getting your ass kicked, and finally by dumb luck you managed to beat him and they all think you're wonderful. Well, I got news for you. Dumb luck isn't going to help you this time. It's not just Sephiroth we're up against, it's a whole planet full of Jenova. We make one stupid move and we're all going to wind up dead."

"So you think you can do better?" Cloud said.

"Of course," Reno replied.

"Yeah, right," Cloud exclaimed, standing up. "To tell you the truth, I've had just about enough of you."

Reno eyed him but did not move.

"Oh sit down before I kick your ass again," he stated dismissively.

"Again!" Cloud exclaimed. "I was beating the crap out of you last time."

Reno looked at him and slowly got up himself.

"Sure. Seems like you have a rather muddled recollection of the event. The truth is I would have wiped the floor with you if your friends hadn't stopped us."

Cloud took a menacing step forward.

"Reno, I..."

"Oh stop it," Tifa cut in, getting up herself. "Before I kick both your asses."

"You stay out of this!" Cloud said, glancing over at her.

Tifa stepped between them.

"No I won't stay out of this, Cloud Strife!" she said angrily, looking right at Cloud. "You're both acting like little kids. Do I have to remind you of what Ellengio said? We've got a mission to perform, and we don't have time for any petty squabbling between you two. Now sit down and shut up or we'll leave you both behind!"

Cloud stood there, obviously unwilling to back down. She took a step toward him, staring at him, her fists clenched. Finally he sighed and shook his head.

"He started it," he mumbled petulantly.

"Oh cut it out," Tifa said.

"Fine," Cloud said. "But I'm not going to stand around here and listen to his crap."

With that he turned and walked away.

"Sensitive little fellow, isn't he?" Reno commented.

Tifa immediately swiveled toward him.

"You too," she said.

Reno just smiled at her.

"Do you realize how cute you look when you're mad?"

Tifa frowned and stepped toward him, raising her fists threateningly. Reno immediately dropped to the ground, raising his own hands defensively.

"All right, all right," he conceded. "Sheez, can't you take a joke? You know, you were a lot nicer on the southern continent."

Tifa stared at him for a moment.

"What are you talking about?" she said. "I nearly beat the stuffing out of you then too."

Reno smirked.

"C'mon. Your boyfriends not in earshot anymore. I know we promised not to say anything, but no one else will tell."

"What?" she said angrily. "Tell what? There's nothing to tell."

Reno looked at her knowingly.

"Aww c'mon. You can't tell me you're forgotten about our little skinny dipping foray in that pond. And you told me yourself that you'd never forget that night we spent in the hotel room."

Tifa's jaw dropped.

"Reno, you are such a jerk!" she exclaimed, looking at the others nervously. "We didn't go in the pond together. Although you tried your damndest, you didn't see a thing."

Reno looked at her smugly.

"Are you sure?"

Tifa clenched her fists.

"RenoooO!"

"Even if I didn't," he continued. "It didn't matter after you threw yourself at me like that in the hotel room."

Tifa looked around, shocked.

"Can you believe this guy?" she asked. "Reno, the only thing that happened in the hotel room was you drugged me!"

"Aw c'mon Teef," Reno said calmly. "You don't have to lie in front of them. I'm talking about before that, when you tore off your clothes and attacked me."

Tifa put her hands on her hips and looked at him indigently.

"You are such a liar," she exclaimed. "I wouldn't do that with you if you were the last man on earth."

"Oh really?" Reno said, looking at her slyly. "Then how do you explain the fact I know about that birthmark on your right thigh?"

Tifa's eyes widened and she flushed crimson. Suddenly she lunged forward and grabbed hold of his collar.

"How do you know about that???" she shouted.

Reno cringed.

"I told ya..." he began.

"Don't lie!" Tifa snarled, her eyes blazing.

"All right," he said. "I saw it after I drugged you," he admired.

"After you...what, were you looking up my skirt?"

Reno just looked heavenward.

Tifa shook him violently.

"What else did you see???" she demanded.

"Well...I..."

She grabbed hold of his neck.

"Why you...!!" she shouted.

Suddenly Aeris came up beside her and pulled her away.

"Calm down Tifa," she said placatingly. "We all know he's a liar. He's a worm but he wouldn't do anything like that. Would you Reno?"

Reno looked at them for a minute, then shook his head. He waited until he caught Tifa's eye and winked.

"Urgh!" Tifa exclaimed. She broke out of Aeris grip and stomped away. She glanced back at Reno again, looking daggers at him, but he was talking with the others now. She walked into the darkness, but didn't get very far when she saw Cloud sitting on a rock, looking at her.

"What was that all about?" he questioned.

"Nothing," she said. "That Reno is such a jerk."

She kicked a small rock and sent it spinning across the desert floor for emphasis. Then she plopped herself down beside Cloud. He sat there looking at her for a moment.

"Remember when I had that fight with him?" Cloud said. "And afterwards you told me how immature I was acting and not to let it get to me?"

She did not reply. He leaned closer and looked at her face.

"Hmm?"

She glared at him.

"Oh shut up!" she grumbled.