

## CHAPTER XXVII: WOLF IN THE FOLD

Tifa wiped the sweat from her brow and looked up at the sun glaring down at them. Each day seemed to be hotter than the last. She thought after all this time she would start to get used to it, but it didn't seem to be working that way. Each day out here seemed to be more intolerable than the previous. For a day or two it wouldn't have been so bad, but the unrelenting nature of it was taking its toll. She was beginning to think it would have been better to face Jenova right now, at least that would be over quickly.

She looked behind them. They had been climbing slowly up into the hills for most of the day. The slope was gentle, however, so she was surprised to see just how high they had gotten. The plain was far below them to the south, stretching off into the distance, while the dark granite bluffs surrounded them on three sides.

Turning forward once more she looked ahead to see the mountains rising up in front of them. Tifa had always liked mountains, but she had to admit she was beginning to get sick of them. Admiring their beauty from afar had always left an impression of awe, but climbing up them every day was another matter entirely.

Ahead of them a narrow gorge opened up, a jagged rent in the mountains in front of them, as if they had been split by a giant ax. The ground leveled off as the walls of the gorge rose around them. As they proceeded forward it narrowed, the rock walls pressing in around them, until they could barely walk two abreast.

"How do we know this canyon just doesn't dead end?" Reno asked.

No one answered him, though it was obvious the same thought was on the mind of most of the others. Tifa saw Cloud looking around suspiciously. She could tell he was thinking what a perfect spot this would be for an ambush. The walls were far too steep to climb, and the narrowness of the canyon floor made it almost impossible to run or maneuver. If someone got up on the cliffs above...

She looked up at the forbidding walls around them. Far above she could see the sky, and the top of the gorge's walls. Anyone up there could attack at will, and they probably wouldn't even be able to retaliate.

Tifa looked over at Jinn, walking in front alongside Cloud, and once again was reminded of how similar the boy looked to Cloud when she had known him in Nibelheim, before he had left to join SOLDIER.

But Jinn seemed unconcerned. There was no reason to believe there was any threat nearby. They had left Jenova and the Chadara far behind. This was far from their civilization, and no one knew that they were coming here. The chances of them being ambushed were nil.

Still, she would be glad when they got out from underneath those menacing cliffs.

The gorge wound its way through the mountains, twisting and turning, leaving them little chance to see what was ahead of them, and Tifa thought it was more likely they would come around a corner only to find themselves in a dead end than to be ambushed, or to find a way out. But slowly the ground started to slope downward, and the cliffs above diminished in height, until finally they came around a turn and the canyon walls fell away from them, revealing a wide valley in front of them.

They all stopped, looking down at the valley below. To call it lush on any other planet might be an overstatement, but that's exactly how it looked compared to the normal deserts of Grouchoon. Spartan bristle-like grass grew scattered across the valley floor below them, covering perhaps one third of it. Jagged leafed bushes and long cactus like foliage were less abundant, yet were still grown in far greater numbers than anywhere else they had seen. The slopes right in front of them were blanketed with a thorny bramble studded with small flowers. The first such type of vegetation they had seen here.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Aeris said approvingly.

Jinn pointed ahead of them and spoke.

"Meredith valley," Aeris translated.

"Bout time," Reno said grumpily.

Cloud folded his arms across his chest.

"This place looks more suited to habitation than anywhere we've seen here," he mused. "How come it's deserted?"

"This whole damn planet is ass backwards," Reno said.

Aeris spoke to Jinn.

"He says it's sacred ground. It's taboo to live here."

"Figures," Reno snorted.

"Well I wouldn't complain because it helps us," Elena said. "No one is here to interfere with us."

Tifa felt a touch on her arm. She turned to see Jinn standing beside her, an orange flower in his hand.

"For me?" Tifa said in surprise.

Jinn did not say anything, just stood there looking at her, holding the flower expectantly. She took it and inhaled its fragrance.

"Thank you Jinn," Tifa said, taken completely by surprise. "It smells wonderful, and it's my favorite color too."

"Your favorite color is orange?" Cloud questioned.

"Something wrong with that?" Tifa said, looking at him.

"No," he said quickly. "I just never heard of anyone who's favorite color was orange."

"I'm unique," she responded.

"I think he likes you. Maybe Cloud should be jealous," Elena said.

"He's just a little kid," Cloud said quickly and much too seriously.

"Well I think it was very sweet," Tifa commented.

They continued down the slope, and soon found themselves at the bottom of the valley. The mountains completely surrounded them here. Cloud looked up at them.

"So what now?" he questioned. "We're here. Where are we supposed to go now? What did that rhyme thing say. On a mountaintop somewhere?"

"In the eye of Aramus," Aeris said.

"That doesn't appear to be very helpful," Reno said. "There are mountaintops all around us. How do we know which one is the right one?"

They all looked at Aeris, who was just gazing at the mountains. Finally she pointed one out.

"That one there. That kind of looks like a face at the top of it, don't you think?"

"Which one?" Cloud said, following her gaze.

"That one there," she said, walking over next to him and pointing.

Cloud tried to distinguish exactly where she was pointing, but there were several peaks in that direction.

"I still don't see which one you mean," he said, shaking his head.

Aeris sighed impatiently.

"You see those two tall peaks," she said. "The one's taller than any of the others?"

"Yes," Cloud said slowly.

"Okay, to the left of them, one, two, three peaks over. Just past the one with the whitish coloring."

"Okay, I see it now," Cloud said slowly.

"I don't see a face," Reno cut in. He had come up to stand beside them as well.

"Right near the top," Aeris said. "See that depression, that's the eye, and then the nose sticking out underneath. And then the mouth."

They looked at it for a few moments.

"You're out of your mind," Reno said. "It doesn't look anything like that."

"It does too!" Aeris insisted. "What are you blind?"

"You must be hallucinating," Reno retorted.

"You see it, don't you Cloud?" Aeris said, turning to look at him.

Cloud hesitated.

"I think I can make it out," he said slowly.

"See," Aeris said, looking at Reno with apparent vindication.

"He doesn't see a thing," Reno snorted. "He's just agreeing with you. Besides, that was two thousand years ago, everything might have changed by now."

"It still looks like a face," Aeris said stubbornly.

"I think I see it," Tifa volunteered.

Reno just shook his head.

"So you think they meant it literally?" Cloud asked "You think we should look up in that 'eye'?"

Aeris nodded.

"Looks like a difficult climb," Reeve said, gauging the mountain.

"Especially for nothing," Reno said bitterly.

"Nobody said this was going to be easy," Cloud pointed out.

They started off once again. The gently sloping ground in front of them made traveling easy, and soon they found themselves at the bottom of the hills. Here the flora was even more abundant. Most of it was the flower covered brambles. And indeed, in some places it grew so thick that the ground was impassable, and they had to go around. Tifa stopped for a moment to examine the plant. Along with the flowers it was studded with tiny leaves, It grew about waist high, so thickly that it was impossible to determine where one plant ended and another began. Then again, for all she could tell, the entire patch could very well be just one plant. The streams were almost black, and covered with thick thorny spines. Somehow that seemed appropriate. No plant life on this planet survived without a struggle.

As she bent closer a shrill piping sound made her jump back with a cry. There was a scrambling sound, and the bush shook as something darted through it. She caught a glimpse of a small brown creature, no bigger than her hand, before it disappeared further into the bramble.

"What was that?" Cloud said, suddenly standing beside her, the Chadara weapon ready.

"I'm not sure," Tifa replied. "Some kind of small animal. I must have disturbed it. It ran away, over there somewhere. I don't think it was anything to be concerned about."

Cloud nodded, slowly lowering his weapon. He looked at Aeris.

"Does Jinn know anything about this?" he asked.

Aeris spoke to Jinn for a moment.

"No," she said. "He can't really say what it might have been, since he didn't see it. But Tifa was probably right. It's most likely harmless."

Cloud looked at the bramble again, then, with a curt nod of his head, led them away. Harmless it might be, but he wasn't going to take any chances. They still didn't know much about the fauna on this planet. Small size didn't necessarily mean it wasn't dangerous.

They headed steadily across the valley floor, straight at the mountain Aeris had pointed out. This range wasn't as tall as most of the others they had seen, and the one they were heading for was smaller than most. Still, he couldn't tell from down here how difficult it would be to get up. He looked up at the sky. The sun was so bright he could barely stand looking in it's direction. It was nearly at it's zenith now, which meant they only had about four hours before nightfall. He wanted to reach the summit before then, not that it was a big deal. He was just impatient, nothing new for him. He cursed silently about the length of the days here.

They reached the foothills an hour later, and started uphill once again. At first the climb was easy, the slope curving gently upward. Plant growth had stabilized these mountains, and they weren't jagged and rocky like most of the others they had seen here. The lack of rough edges smacked of long years of erosion. In this almost water-less region, erosion must be a much slower process. He had a feeling the mountains around them were very ancient, perhaps having looked much this way thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of years in the past.

Two hours into the climb they stopped to have something to eat. Cloud was pleased with their progress. He estimated they were perhaps three quarters of the way up. Looking up he could plainly make out the summit above them, but he also noted that the mountain seemed to get steeper near the top. He could see the dark gouge in the mountain that he thought Aeris had taken for an eye, tantalizingly close. So far they hadn't had any problems, and he was hoping that would continue until they reached the top.

Even though they had made good time, Cloud was still anxious to get to the pinnacle as quickly as possible. He finished eating quickly, practically wolfing down his food, then stood there making no attempt to hide his impatience as the others ate. Noticing this the others finished quickly as well, all except Reno who, obviously as aware of Cloud's impatience as the others, took his sweet time.

Eventually they started off again. They didn't get very far when the slope climbed sharply upward. The plants were fewer here, and they were mostly surrounded by naked rock. Even so it was not the crumbly reddish sandstone of most of the mountains, but gray colored granite, smooth to the touch and solid as...well, solid as a rock. They had to pick their path much more carefully now, suddenly acutely aware of just how high up in air they were, and the unpleasant consequences of a fall. At least with the solid nature of the rocks, and unlike the other mountains they had climbed, they didn't have to worry about a piece coming loose in their hand as they grasped it.

They came to a narrow level area and paused for a moment. The mountain was almost vertical above them now, and they could not see far ahead, but Cloud knew they were very close to their destination.

"This is ridiculous," Reno muttered, looking up. "It's a nearly vertical slope up above us. It wasn't so bad when it was easy to climb, but this is too much. I'm not going to climb up there on some wild goose chase."

"It's not a wild goose chase," Aeris said.

"You don't know that for sure," Reno replied. "All we have to go on is your interpretation of seeing a 'face' here. There are dozens of other mountains here, some we couldn't even see from where we came in. Any of them could be the right one. Besides, we don't even know for sure if that rhyme really means anything at all. For all we know, it could just be something someone made up."

"We've got nothing else to go on," Cloud snapped.

"Then it looks like we've got nothing," Reno replied.

"So what, you just want to give up?" Tifa said. "We can't go back now."

"We've come to the valley, it would be foolish to go back now," Reno said. "But we could at least take a look at the other mountains in the valley. Maybe one of them would be more obvious."

"You want to go back down after all this climb?" Reeve questioned. "We're so close to the top."

Reno snorted.

"Close doesn't count," he said. "Look up above you. It's nearly vertical. We don't have any climbing equipment. Do you realize how difficult it will be? I'm not going to take a chance on falling and getting myself killed. Not without more proof."

"Don't be an idiot," Cloud said, getting annoyed now. "There's no way we're going to turn back now."

Reno folded his arms across his chest and looked at Cloud, the challenge clear in his eyes.

"Well I'm not going up there," he said firmly.

"We've got to," Aeris said.

"Don't you see how stupid this is?" Reno snapped at her. "Who would build something up here? How could they get the equipment up here? There's no road. You think they carried it all on their backs, up that?" He pointed to the slope above them. "That's insane!"

"I have no idea how they might have done it," Cloud said. "But I know they wished to conceal it, so putting it somewhere no one would suspect probably was an idea that appealed to them. Perhaps they had a road, and removed it, perhaps the Chadara flew everything in. Perhaps there was a tunnel from below that they closed up. I don't know. But I'm going to find out for sure."

"Well I'm not going up there," Reno repeated.

Elena stepped forward.

"C'mon Reno, this is no time to be stubborn. Let's get this done first, then you and Cloud can have your little ego battle. This isn't the time!"

"This isn't about ego!" Reno said. "It's about stupidity. As in, this entire little adventure. We should have gone back to the ship once we escaped from the city. Now we're out in the middle of nowhere, with almost no clue as to what we're doing and lacking the provisions to make our way back. I have to admit, Cloud, you couldn't have made things worse for us if you were consciously trying. Are you sure you're not working for Jenova?"

"Reno.." Tifa began, but Cloud cut her off.

"Fine," Cloud said in a surprisingly calm voice. "I'm not going to argue with you anymore. I'm going up, and anyone who wants to come with me is welcome. If anyone wants to stay here, or go back down, or try and make their way back to the ship, that's fine too. I can't make anyone come with me. In fact, I don't want anyone to come with me if they don't want to. So Reno, you do whatever you want."

With that he turned and started up the slope, not even looking back to see if the others were following.

For a moment they all just stood there. Reno looked at Cloud angrily, but he said nothing. Tifa looked like she was going to say something, but then turned and followed Cloud, Aeris and Jinn right behind her. Reeve turned to go but Elena spoke.

"I don't think it's a good idea for anyone to be alone," she said. "I'll stay here with Reno. Let us know if you find anything."

Reeve looked back and forth between them for a moment, then nodded and followed the others.

"I don't need no babysitter," Reno protested. "Besides I've got a good mind to go back down."

"Oh shut up!" Elena snapped. "You're not going anywhere."

Reeve shook his head as they dropped out of earshot below him. The others were already making their way up ahead of him, and he climbed quickly until he caught up. He had to admit Reno was right about one thing, it was a difficult climb, although more in a psychological sense than a physical one. There were plenty of handholds, but the climb was straight up now, and the thought that one slip would send one plummeting downward, most likely to their death, made every movement nerve-wracking. Reeve kept his eyes fixed firmly on the handholds he was using above him, never once looking down. He could see the others above him, and he noticed that none of them did either.

The climb wasn't really that great a distance. On level ground they would have covered it in minutes, nevertheless, it took them nearly a half hour to finally haul themselves up over the top, much to their relief.

They stood at the bottom of a huge bowl, tilted vertically. The upper rim of it perhaps ten meters above their heads. This was obviously the eye they had seen from afar.

Cloud looked in the other direction, out over the valley below them. He could see the entire valley now, and the mountains that rimmed it. It was an impressive sight.

He stood there for a minute, looking at the mountain below, and a frown slowly formed on his face. They couldn't see anything directly below them, but the bottom the mountain flared out, and they could see the lower slopes.

"I see something moving down there," he said.

The others were immediately beside him.

"Where?" Reeve questioned.

Cloud pointed.

"Down there, to the south, coming up the slope. It's looks like...those chendu things?"

No one spoke for a moment. Beside him Aeris stared.

"It's definitely men on chendu," she said. "I think...I think it's Ellnegio! And Red and Nipala. There's no mistaking them. And some other's as well."

"The others are here?" Tifa said, surprise and excitement mixing in her voice.

"I can't tell if it's all of them," Aeris replied. "It's hard to make out the figures. There are four chendu, so it can't be everyone."

"Still, this is great," Tifa said. "If the others are here, it means they had reason to find this place as well. Which means it's that much more likely we're on the right track."

"Uh huh," Cloud agreed, speaking calmly but the smile on his face giving away his own excitement. He looked critically at the group below.

"It's going to take them a while to reach us," he said. "Let's see what we can find."

The group turned to look at the mountainside. Tumbled piles of rounded rocks were scattered all around. They could see the entire interior of the 'eye' in front of them, but they saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"So what are we looking for?" Cloud questioned.

"Some kind of entrance," Aeris suggested. "If the generator's up here, they must have built it inside the mountain. We've got to find a way in."

"Spread out, everyone, and look around," Cloud commanded.

They obeyed, scattering up into the rocks. Looking for any sign of an entrance, anything unusual or out of the ordinary. The area was not very large, and it didn't take them long to scour through it.

"What's this?" Reeve called out after a while. He was standing near the center of the 'eye'.

The others came over to him. He was looking at the stone wall in front of him. They could make out the faint outline of something carved in the rock.

Aeris walked up to it and carefully brushed the dirt and dust off it. Some kind of symbol became visible, etched in the rock.

"The symbol of Aramus!" Aeris said.

"There's something underneath it too," Reeve said.

Aeris nodded, noting the smooth crevice in the wall beneath it, as if it were not natural.

"It seems like some place to place your hand," she said slowly.

Before anyone could protest she fitted her hand to the spot. Immediately the wall swung inward soundlessly to reveal a dark passage.

"Damn!" Cloud muttered. It had worked, but if he would have had time he would have stopped her from doing it. Did she have to be so hasty?

"This must be it!" Aeris said excitedly.

"I guess so," Cloud said. He stepped up to the entrance and peered inside. It was dark, but he could see a faint glow coming from further inside, recognizing it immediately as the glow that seemed to emanate from all Cetra buildings.

"This is it alright," he agreed. He looked behind them.

"I guess we better go get Reno," he said, somewhat reluctantly. "Although I don't think it would be a great hardship to just leave him there."

"That wouldn't be fair to Elena," Tifa pointed out.

He walked over to the edge and peered down. He could not see the others below. He wasn't anxious to climb back down.

"Reno! Elena!" he shouted. He stood there listening for a response, but heard nothing.

"Damn, they must be too far away to hear. We have to send someone down to get them."

"I'll go," Tifa volunteered. She had found that she was getting used to climbing the mountains, and it hadn't really been that difficult.

"You sure?" Cloud asked. He was willing to climb down himself if need be.

"Yes," she replied. "Just promise me you won't go in there without me."

"Of course," he replied.

"All right then, I'll be back soon."

"Be careful," he warned.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine," she said and started back down. Cloud stood at the edge looking after her until she disappeared. Then he turned back to the others. Aeris stood beside Jinn right next to the entrance.

"I'm going in," she said.

Cloud looked at her in surprise.

"What?"

"I'm going to go see what's in there," she said.

"We have to wait for the others," Cloud reminded her.

"I've been talking to Jinn," she said. "He tells me he's heard something about this. He was told by his father that the generator has a protective field around it. Only the Cetra can approach it, anyone else who tries cannot get through the field. There's no sense in waiting, none of you can go in anyway."

Cloud just looked at them for a moment, frowning. He didn't like this idea at all.

"Aeris, you can't go in there alone. We don't know what's in there. We don't know what other dangers there might be."

"I'll be fine," she said reassuringly. "This place has been hidden for two thousand years. No one knows about it. It was built by the Cetra. There is no danger to a Cetra inside. Besides, Jinn will come with me."

"He's just a kid," Cloud pointed out. "He's not any protection."

"He's much more mature than he looks," Aeris defended him. "You have no idea what he's gone through. He lost both his parents, had to fend for himself while in the captivity of Jenova. He saw his parents and all that was left of his people killed right in front of him. When I asked him how he could go on he told me by remembering his parents, and all that they had gone through for him, to try to make him safe. He said he got lonely sometimes, but he comforted himself with the thought that even though it was a tragedy that he had lost his parents, he considers himself lucky for having known them in the first place."

"That's all well and good," Cloud replied. "But maturity doesn't have anything to do with it. He's still a kid, he's not going to be able to help you if you're attacked."

"There's nothing to worry about," Aeris said stubbornly. "We'll just go in and take a look around. Don't you even want to be sure the generator is in there?"

"What else could be there?" Cloud said, still not happy with the idea. "Besides, there's nothing you can do in there without the crystal materia. Ellengio's got that and he's on his way. It's foolish to go in there now, all by yourself."

"I'm not going to be by myself," Aeris repeated.

"And I told you Jinn..." Cloud began, then shut up, realizing his voice was rising rapidly. He knew yelling at Aeris wasn't going to help. If anything it would make her more determined. Why did she have to be so damn stubborn?

He turned to Reeve, imploring him with his eyes to intervene.

"I have to agree with Cloud," Reeve said slowly. "It's too dangerous."

Aeris dismissed it with a wave of her hand.

"You're all being way too cautious," she said. "I want to see what it looks like. We'll be right back."

And without further discussion she walked into the cave, Jinn right behind her.

"Aeris!" Reeve called out. Cloud came over and put a hand on his shoulder. Reeve looked at him to see him shaking his head.

"It's not going to do any good," he said. "I've seen her like this before. Once she's made up her mind, wild horses can't change it."

"But..." Reeve said. "Isn't that what got her killed once before?"

Cloud just sighed.

"Maybe. It might have killed her, but it sure didn't change her."

He walked back to the edge of the cliff and looked down. Tifa was nowhere in sight. He plopped himself down on the edge. Things were not going as he had planned. Not that that was anything new. No matter what he did, no matter how careful he was, things always seemed to go awry. Was it the natural way of things, or was Reno right, was he just a poor leader?

They had found the generator, he was sure of it. All they had to do now was wait. Ellengio was on his way. He had the crystal materia. Everything they needed to complete the mission was almost in place. He should be pleased with himself. Yet doubts nagged at him. He didn't like the fact that they were split up. He didn't like the fact that Tifa was risking her life to climb back down the cliff, all because Reno had been too stubborn to climb up himself in the first place. And he especially didn't like Aeris running off by herself. Not by herself, he corrected, with Jinn. He had a real bad feeling about that. Something about that whole conversation they had just had bothered him. But he wasn't sure what it was.

He stared out into space, thinking about all they had gone through to get here. He heard Reeve moving around behind him for a few minutes, but then he fell silent. Cloud looked down again. It hadn't been long, and it was a difficult climb. He knew Tifa could not make it back this quickly, but he was terribly impatient. The sooner they were all together again, the better he would feel.

He sat there for a long time in silence, going over all that had happened to them. The entire chain of events since they had been captured. Something was odd about the whole thing. Slowly a frown formed on his face.

Suddenly he stood up. He started to turn around to talk to Reeve when he heard a voice from below.

"Cloud!"

He looked down and saw Tifa climbing up the slope, Elena and Reno not far behind her.

"Right here," he called. "Hurry up!"

He watched them nervously as they came up the final few meters, but they made it without incident. Cloud grabbed hold of Tifa's arm when she reached him.

"I have to talk to you," he said urgently.

"What is it?" Tifa said, worry creasing her face as she glanced past him. "Where are the others?"

"Aeris and Jinn went into the cave," he replied. "Reeve and I..." he stopped when he looked behind him and saw no sign of Reeve.

"Shit!" he exclaimed. He ran over to the entrance and looked inside. There was no sign of anyone.

"I don't believe this!" he exclaimed.

"What happened?" Tifa asked.

Cloud quickly recounted the events that had occurred while Tifa had been absent.

"Reeve must have gone in after them," Cloud stated bitterly when he had finished. "Why couldn't he have said something to me!"

"What a mess this has turned out to be," Reno muttered, looking not at all happy to have been dragged up here.

"Do you think we should go after them?" Tifa asked.

Cloud took her by the arm again, leading her away from the others. Tifa followed, looking at him curiously.

"Cloud, what is it?" she asked.

Cloud stopped when they were out of earshot of the Turks.

"I need you to tell me what happened to you back in Darius, when they took you away."

Tifa did not reply for a moment, her face paling slightly.

"I know you don't want to talk about it," Cloud said. "I know it's painful, but it's important."

Tifa still did not reply. She had tried to purge all thought of what had happened that day from her mind. All she wanted was to forget about that horrible horrible feeling she had had as Jenova had crawled around inside her head. She couldn't see how that could possibly have anything to do with what was going on now, but it was obvious Cloud had something in mind. He knew how she felt about it, he wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important.

She had never really told any of them exactly what had happened, not even Cloud, just had given vague hints, and no one had ever questioned her.

Slowly she began to recount what had happened. It was difficult to talk about it, even now. After all this time of trying so hard to forget it, to force herself to remember was not a pleasant experience. When she got to the part where Jenova had entered her mind, she faltered.

Cloud placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"It's all right," he said softly. "It's over now, and I swear it'll never happen again. But I need to know this. Jenova entered your mind. Read your thoughts?"

Tifa nodded but said nothing.

Cloud stood next to her for a long time, thinking furiously. Finally Tifa looked at him.

"What's this all about, Cloud?"

He gave her a grim look.

"There's something odd about everything that's happened to us since we escaped from Darius. Tiny things. Things that taken my themselves would mean nothing, but when added together become very disturbing."

"What sort of things?" Tifa asked.

"First of all, how easily we escaped. We were in a city full of these Chadara creatures, once we got out of the sewers we walked blocks through a crowded city, yet we didn't come across one single Chadara."

"It was early morning," Tifa reminded him. "The sun wasn't even up yet."

"That's true," Cloud replied. "Taken by itself it's probably meaningless. But there's more. And it all has to do with Jinn."

"Jinn?" Tifa said in surprise. "What's he got to do with it?"

"I probably wouldn't even have noticed myself, except for something Aeris told me. While you were gone, Aeris was talking about Jinn, and she said he told her he felt bad that his parents had died, that it was a tragedy, but he took comfort from the fact that he had known them at all."

Cloud looked at her pointedly. Tifa just looked confused.

"So?"

"So," Cloud continued. "That's the exact words I once spoke to you. Remember, when Zangan died?"

Tifa stood there for a moment, deep in thought, and slowly the color drained from her face.

Cloud stepped closer to her.

"He looks like me, when I was young. You said so yourself."

He was right in front of her now.

"He knew your favorite color."

Tifa remained silent for a moment, her eyes growing very wide.

"Jenova had been trying for two thousand years to find the hidden generator," Cloud continued emotionlessly. "And for two thousand years they have failed. And then, literally out of the blue, we appear, with knowledge of what had happened, with clues to find the generator. We are a threat to them, they found that out from you. So why didn't they just kill us? Why did they suddenly decide to put us in a cell, a cell with a Cetra in it, no less, a cell that conveniently had an escape

route? Maybe it's not a coincidence Jinn looks like me. Maybe the pattern for his form was taken straight from your mind, because it was someone they knew you would be comfortable with, that you, that all of us, might trust."

"Oh God, oh God," Tifa said slowly, her head shaking back and forth, a look of shock on her face.

Cloud grabbed hold of her hand.

"The barrier Jinn told us about is probably fiction," he said. "Just a ruse to get away from us. Aeris is a Cetra, so he probably assumes she's his biggest threat. We've got to help her!"

Tifa did not protest as Cloud pulled her up. They both ran back to the others. Reno and Elena both looked at them in surprise.

"We think Jinn is one of the Jenova!" Cloud stated. "We're going in after them. If you want to help, go back down and guide Ellengio and the others up here as quickly as possible. We don't have any materia and I don't have my sword. It may be difficult to beat him so we can use all the help we can get. Hurry!"

"You want me to go back down after..." Reno began, but Cloud was already plunging into the cave entrance, Tifa on his heels, running as fast as they could and praying that they wouldn't be too late.