

CHAPTER XXVIII: THE CETRA'S FOLLY

"We can't take the chendu any higher," Vincent said.

Ellengio looked up at the slope above them. They had reached a relatively level plateau, but from this point on the mountainside grew steep. Vincent was right, they would have to continue on foot.

He slipped off his chendu. Vincent had already dismounted, and Cait and Altim followed suit. Nipala eyed the mountain above them dubiously.

"You're sure this is where we're supposed to be going, right?" she said.

Ellengio nodded. They had gone over this shortly after they had entered the valley. He had picked out the mountain with the appearance of a face on it and headed them that way without hesitation. He was on the right track, he was sure of it.

"I don't know whether Nipala and I can make it," Red said, looking up. "Though our four feet come in handy at times, climbing is not something they are particularly good for. Even with out claws, our paws cannot grip nearly as well as a human hand."

"We'll help you," Cait said reassuringly.

"We'll just have to do the best we can," Vincent said stoically.

"Well, if we're going, we better get to it," Altim said, looking up at the sky. "It's nearly dark. If we don't start now we'll never make it. I don't relish getting caught on the mountainside in the dark, even with our hands."

"He's right," Ellengio agreed. "Let's go."

They started up the slope, climbing carefully. They had made good time up to this point, but now the going became very difficult. Altim led the way, attacking the slope almost eagerly. He seemed to be a natural at it, finding handholds quickly and moving upward with almost reckless abandon. He would have quickly left the others in the dust had he not stopped periodically to wait for them.

Ellengio followed, climbing with a steadiness that belied his apparent age, though not nearly as well as Altim. Red and Nipala followed, struggling with nearly every step. Vincent and Cait stayed right behind them, helping to steady them or boost them up whenever it seemed needed. Though they seemed to be going at a snails pace, they steadily worked their way upward.

Still, Ellengio kept looking back, prodding them whenever possible to keep moving as quickly as possible. The sun had already sunk below the horizon, and although it was still light, the western sky a brilliant play of orange, purples, and reds, he knew it would not last much longer. He estimated that they had less than an hour before it would be too dark to continue.

Ellengio looked up. He couldn't tell how much farther they had to go. Altim had pulled ahead again, and had disappeared over an outcropping of rock ahead.

"Altim, can you see the top?" he called out.

There was no answer.

Ellengio frowned and pulled himself upward. The thought of falling was, of course, uppermost in their minds, but there were other threats here as well. He suddenly realized just how vulnerable and exposed they were on this mountainside.

He was about to shout again, when he heard a sound above him. It sounded like talking. For a second the thought Altim might be discussing something with himself, but then he realized it was more than one voice.

Almost at the same time Altim's head suddenly appeared above a ledge over his head.

"Elleng..oh, you're right here," Altim said. At that moment Reno materialized beside Altim and looked down at him. Ellengio looked at them in surprise.

"We've got company," Altim said, unnecessarily now. "Reno and Elena are here. And Cloud and the others are up at the top. Hurry up!"

Ellengio looked down and saw Red and Nipala coming up behind him.

"Hurry up," he called out, then scrambled up over the top of the ledge.

"Where are the others?" Ellengio asked.

"They're inside," Elena said, pointing up the slope.

"Inside where?" Ellengio said.

"The cave," Elena replied.

"You've got to help them, they think Jinn..."

She was cut off as the others pulled themselves up onto the ledge.

"I can't believe we're all here!" Cait exclaimed as they looked at each other.

Elena noticed Vincent as soon as he pulled himself up on the ledge. For a moment she saw him staring at her, then she turned to Ellengio once again.

"We've got to hurry," she said rapidly. "Cloud and the others are inside. We met a small boy on the way here. He claimed to be a Cetra, but now we think he's really a Jenova. He went in with Aeris, and Cloud thinks he's going to kill her and destroy the generator. We've got to stop him."

For a split second she could see the surprise in Ellengio's eyes, but then his face turned grim.

"Very well, there's not time to waste."

They started up the slope, headed for the door, but their progress was halted by an abrupt shout from Cait.

"What's that?"

They turned to see him pointing to the south. Looking in that direction they saw black dots in the sky, like a formation of dark birds.

Nipala stepped back to the ledge and stared at them for a moment.

"It's the Chadara," she said. "Dozens of them, all wearing some kind of silver."

"The Jenova guard," Ellengio said slowly. He could see them as well, and there was not doubt as to where they were headed.

"I guess this boy really must be a Jenova," he said. "And he's obviously alerted others."

Altim shaded his eyes and looked at the approaching Chadara.

"So what do we do?" he questioned.

Ellengio looked slowly around at each of them.

"We'll have to hold them off," he said.

Reno was shaking his head slowly.

"There's too many of them," he said.

"There's no choice," Ellengio said. "There's no place to run. We can't give up the generator now."

He looked back at the entrance to the cavern.

"And the others are in there, fighting Jenova. I'm needed there, yet you are sorely outnumbered out here as well. The choices are all poor."

"Well we better make up our minds soon," Vincent said, the Death Penalty already in his hands.

Ellengio nodded.

"I know," he said. He looked at the approaching Chadara one more time.

"If we can slay Jenova, there is a chance we may break the hold they have on the Chadara. I'm going to go help Cloud. The rest of you hold them off for as long as you can."

"Why do I get the distinct impression you're deserting a sinking ship?" Reno questioned.

"Oh shut up Reno," Elena said. "Would you rather go in there and face Jenova?"

Reno did not reply.

"Very well," Red said bravely.

Altim made a face.

"What if it doesn't work? What if you kill Jenova and it doesn't affect the Chadara. After all, there are other Jenova here."

"But none of them are nearby," Ellengio replied. "There are no guarantees, and perhaps no choice is a good choice. But it's too late now, we have to fight whether we want to or not, no matter what the odds."

"We're wasting time," Vincent stated.

Ellengio nodded. He took one last look at the approaching Chadara, then turned and made his way swiftly to the cave. A moment later he had disappeared inside.

"Reno and Elena, since you've got those Chadara weapons, you take the flanks. Cait and Red, you take cover behind those rocks in the center. You take to any Chadara that reach the ledge. I'll take the center. Altim and Nipala, you stay in the rear and help up whenever anyone gets in trouble. We don't have much time."

Reno gave Vincent a look that said 'who put you in charge', but he did as he was told. Each of them quickly found concealment among the rocks and ledges, then looked out to see the Chadara growing swiftly closer. Elena climbed up and wedged herself in a narrow crevice on the left side of the others, her position giving a clear view of Red and Cait down below, while concealing her as much as possible from the enemy. She could see Reno in a similar position on the other side. Any Chadara that landed on the ledge would be caught between them.

She turned to see where the others had positioned themselves and was startled to find Vincent standing right behind her.

"Do you have to sneak up like that?" she exclaimed. "I thought you were going to stay in the center. Shouldn't you get over there before the Chadara arrive?"

Vincent did not reply, just stood there looking at her silently.

She waited for him to speak, but he said nothing. She frowned.

"Vincent, we don't have time for this. Do you want something or not?"

He was looking right at her now, that same old unreadable expression, the one she had seen so often in the past. So much had happened so quickly, she hadn't really had time to think about Vincent. She had never asked Cloud or the others about Vincent's reaction to her going over the cliff. Things had just been too hectic. Knowing Vincent, she wondered if he had shown anything at all.

"There's a chance we might not survive," he said finally.

"Thank you for pointing that out to me," she responded.

Vincent glanced again at the oncoming Chadara. They could be seen plainly now, flying swiftly toward them. It would only be a minute or two more before they were in range. He really had to get back to his position.

Yet still he found himself staring at Elena, his mind filled with conflicting emotions. He had been thinking a lot since he had been told that she was alive. All these years he had thought himself cursed, fated by the gods to suffer, because of what he had done, or failed to do. And, odd as it may seem, there was a certain nobleness to that. He was weak, just the shell of what was once a human, but he struggled on, against all odds, with no one to rely on but himself. In spite of everything that had happened to him, he endured. Odd as it may seem, there was a certain comfort in that. There was a kind of nobleness in a man struggling on, no matter what the odds, no matter how things were stacked against him.

But enduring, he was just now beginning to realize, was not the same as living. He had always considered himself strong of spirit, and indeed, he must have been, to have even survived all that had happened to him. But in a way, believing that you were fated to suffer made things easy. It was a ready excuse for failure, or more importantly, for not trying in the first place. After all, why fight when you know you don't have a chance?

No, he wasn't strong, he was really a coward. Hojo had done horrible things to him, but one thing he had always believed, that he was proud of, was that Hojo had never broken his spirit, had never completely subdued him. And yet, now he found himself questioning that assumption. Hojo had wanted him to suffer, and wasn't that exactly what was happening to

him now? Had he bottled up his feelings, or had Hojo done it for him? Hojo hadn't made him less than human, he had done worse, he had made him give up the struggle to BE human. By believing he was fated to suffer, was he not just continuing to play Hojo's game?

Elena was alive. He could take that as a sign that his suffering wasn't over yet, that the gods were still playing with him. That they were just once more building up his hopes, only to crush him once again, perhaps killing her in the very battle they were about to participate in.

Or...he could take it as a sign of hope. Perhaps it wasn't fate, perhaps it was just what Hojo had done to him, and now he had a chance, a chance to finally break free from the man once and for all, a chance to finally show how strong he really was. A chance to lay Hojo to rest, once and for all.

But in order to do that, he had to say something he never thought he would again.

Elena's blue eyes were locked on him, the puzzled expression still on her face as he slowly drew closer, until their faces were just a few inches apart.

"Are you okay?" Elena finally said. She had no idea what he was up to, but he was acting very strangely. She could only surmise that this was another one of his games, and they really didn't have time for it.

She opened her mouth to say just that, but he spoke first.

"I love you."

Elena's eyes grew to the size of dinner plates.

"What?" she said, suddenly completely flustered. She couldn't help but doubt what she had just heard, even though it had been clear enough.

"I love you," he repeated. "I thought I lost you once, and that made me realize that I needed to say that because...well, I....I just wanted you to know."

He turned away, feeling embarrassed, another first, he had to admit, although even that felt good, somehow. Without another word he walked away, leaving Elena standing there with her mouth open. She stammered for words, but nothing came out. For perhaps the first time in her life, she found herself speechless.

A sudden streak of red light flashed in front of her, bursting into a ball of flame as it struck the rocks right beside Vincent, throwing him to the ground.

"Vincent!" Elena cried out.

For a moment he lay there, unmoving. For just a second Elena felt fear suddenly running through her veins like ice. But then he pushed himself up, turning and firing the death penalty in the direction of the Chadara. There was a scream, and the creature fell from the sky. He turned to look at Elena.

"You jerk!" she yelled at him. "You better not get yourself killed now!"

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"We'd better get going."

"Can't we wait just a little longer," Yuffie protested. "We've barely been here for fifteen minutes. We've been riding these stupid chendu for days now. My butt is so sore I think I'll never be able to sit again. I need more time to recuperate."

Zack scowled at her.

"According to Roshnialu the valley is just beyond those mountains," he replied, pointing to the line of peaks that dominated the landscape to the north. "If we start now we should be able to reach the base of them by tonight, and then the valley early tomorrow."

"So?" Yuffie questioned. "Why don't we just stop here? What's the big rush?"

"I want to get there as quickly as possible," Zack replied. "We don't know when Ellengio is going to arrive. I want to get there before him, if possible."

"What difference does it make?" Yuffie said stubbornly. "He's the one with the crystal materia. He's the one who can turn on the generator. They really don't need us at all."

Zack's scowl merely deepened.

"We don't know what kind of trouble they may run into," he stated. "They may need our help."

Yuffie looked unconvinced.

"Need our help with what? There's nothing..." she began.

"Mount up!" Zack cut her off, obviously fed up with arguing.

The others stood up to get their gear together. All except La Lai and Rude, who were sitting off to the side, with the Cetra notebook between them.

"Let's get going, the boss has spoken," Yuffie called over to them, casting a dark eye at Zack during the last half of the sentence.

Lai Li and Rude looked up.

"Wait," La Lai said.

"What?" Zack responded.

"Can we wait, just a bit?" she said. "I just want to finish this translation."

Zack frowned.

"I'd like to get to our destination as quickly as possible," he said. Was everyone going to give him a hard time?

Lai Li nodded.

"Of course, but this is important. It's information I'm sure you'll be interested in. It shouldn't take long."

Zack stood there for a moment, looking at them uncertainly.

"Well, what is it about, anyway?" he questioned. "Does it have a bearing on our mission?"

"Not directly," she replied after a moments pause. "But I still think you'll want to hear it."

Zack looked at the others. He made eye contact with Cid, who slowly nodded. Finally he sighed.

"All right, I guess we can wait a little longer."

Lai Li immediately went back to her translating. The others sat back down again, Yuffie muttering something about how it was fine for others to hold them up.

Zack did not sit down. He walked to the edge of their encampment and stood there looking at the mountains to the north, trying to judge the best way through. Every few minutes he would glance back at Lai Li impatiently, but she was engrossed in her translations, and did not notice him.

Roshnialu came up and stood beside him. Immediately he stopped his nervous pacing. He wasn't sure if it was a conscious thing on her part, but her mere presence was a relaxing influence.

"Sonisbu," he said.

She smiled.

"Sonisbu," she said warmly. It meant good evening in Chadaran. They had been making a little bit of progress in the language department themselves. He had already learned about two dozen words. Pretty good, he thought, considering they didn't have all that much time for it, and the fact that Lai Li was usually too interested in her notebook to give them more than minimal help. Not that he minded. He enjoyed trying to decipher the words with Roshnialu. It was almost like a game between them, and she seemed to enjoy it too. They only tried to go to La Lai when they couldn't seem to figure out what the other was talking about, no matter how they tried to explain.

In a way, Yuffie was right, there was no rush and there really wasn't anything they could do. Both the Chadara and Jenova were far from here, and he had seen no indication that they were being hunted. He had no idea where this urge to hurry was coming from.

He glanced over at Roshnialu, who was looking thoughtfully at the mountains in front of them. It was so strange, how he felt about her. He had never believed in love at first sight. He had known Aeris for some time before he had gotten up the courage to ask her out. Of course that was a long time ago. He had grown since then, but still. He had known Roshnialu for only a few days, yet he already felt he could spend his life with her. He had never felt like that before and he had to admit it was a bit scary. He wondered if the feeling would last or was just something that would pass. It just didn't make sense that he, that anyone, could fall in love that quickly.

But he had to admit he had never met anyone like Roshnialu. He cared for Aeris very much, but what he felt for her was not the same, not even back when they were together. He couldn't understand, but maybe it wasn't meant to be understood. Maybe it was just meant to be experienced and not analyzed. One thing was for sure, he didn't want to ever be parted from her.

He followed her gaze toward the peaks in front of them. Their destination was in sight. They would almost certainly reach it some time tomorrow. Ellengio might already be there. And once the task was completed, there would be nothing left for them to do but head home.

He found his hand reaching out and grasping Roshnialu's, almost without even thinking about it.

He didn't want to think about what might happen then. Could what he had found here all end so quickly? Could he go back to his own world, if she chose to remain? The thought had been nagging him on occasion for a while now, but he had not said anything. He had pushed it aside every time. It was something he didn't want to think about.

Perhaps there was some merit to taking their time.

"Listen to this!" he heard La Lai call out.

The others quickly gathered round her, summoned by the urgency in her voice.

"This is one of the last entries," La Lai explained. "The generator is completed, but they hadn't realized at first just how much power it would need."

"Disaster has struck. There is definitely a Jenova here. It has already attacked the Chadara, capturing Danong, one of my assistants, not very far from here. It's almost a certainty he will tell them everything. He is an excellent scientist and brave, but he will be no match for what Jenova can do to him. Danong knew everything, including the location of the lab, which means Jenova now does too. We do not have much time, and we do not have the manpower nor the weapons to fight. Even now I have the Chadara clearing out the lab. There can be no more research. I have to act now or it will be too late. Even worse, the generator is not complete. The power source, the final piece needed, is still being completed, and I doubt now it will be done in time. I have little hope. We have not heard from Rostalion or anyone from the planet in almost two days. I fear that it is too late there already, and Dal Centir has fallen. God help the Cetra left there now."

"And god help us too. I've decided to activate the generator, it will still work, though not perfectly, even without the main power source. I'm glad I at least had the foresight to hide the location of the generator. We will have to try to complete the crystal while in hiding, setting up a new lab someplace. It will be difficult, perhaps impossible, but it is all we can do."

"All is lost, yet I still find I cannot weep for my race. I pity them, but I feel disdain for their arrogance, which they clung to until the end. If only they had been more flexible, if only they had tried to reason with Jenova, instead of trying to sweep them under the rug, to wipe them out. There were so many chances to set this right, so much opportunity to turn the tide, to stop short of war, but no one had taken the first step. No one had been willing to accept any blame. Even after a thousand years we had stubbornly refused to accept the responsibility for having created this new species."

Yuffie let out an exclamation of surprise, but she was quickly hushed by Zack. Even Barret seemed suddenly interested in what La Lai was telling them.

"We considered ourselves enlightened. We considered ourselves reasonable. The genetic experiments performed a thousand years ago that created Jenova, created them from our own species, have been soundly condemned. It was a dark time for us, for our science, they say. Yet even now, a thousand years later, for all our enlightenment, we still cannot look upon Jenova, our own creation, with anything but revulsion and contempt. Since the moment their existence was divulged they were hunted down, locked away, never given a chance to lead a normal life. It is so much of a surprise that they wanted more, that they grew to hate us? They were different from us, and when they revolted it brought immediate hysteria. We feared they were out to destroy us, when all they really wanted was a chance. Funny how prophecy can be self fulfilling. By pushing them away, by treating them as a threat that must be destroyed we turned them into exactly that."

"In all this time, have we ever tried to reason with them as equals? The idea would be anathema to most of us. With all our advancement, we still are blinded by our beliefs and our prejudice. At any time for the last thousand years we could have done something to change this, but we never once reached out. And now, finally, we are paying the price."

"Sometimes I wish I had been born sooner. Perhaps while there was still time, I could have made someone see what we were doing, and somehow prevented all this. There is no stopping it now, not with Jenova well on their way to victory. After a thousand years of fighting there is nothing more that can be done. To them, we will always be the destroyers."

"We have both been twisted by this war. I fear whatever concept of mercy and humanity the Jenova may have had have been torn from them. They may not have been an evil race once, but I can see by the way they treat the Chadara that they certainly are now. Whether that is our fault is moot. Now, for once, we must think of others. Our crimes will be double if Jenova is allowed to roam free, to spread to other planets, to take innocent lives. Perhaps if I can stop them here, I can command a small amount of redemption for our race."

"I don't know if I'll be able to write anymore entries in this journal. We have to move fast, and every step we take could be our last. I just hope we are not too late."

Lai Li set down the notebook and looked at the others. For a long time no one spoke.

"I can't believe the Cetra created Jenova," Yuffie said finally.

Barret was just standing there shaking his head.

"This whole thing just keep getting crazier and crazier. I'd never have thought it would get this nuts though."

Cid stared off into space.

"Which means that Shinialynn is Jenova's home planet, as well as the Cetra," he said.

"This sure is going to come as a shock to Aeris, and Ellengio," Yuffie stated.

"Perhaps to Aeris," Zack mused. "Ellengio, I'm not so sure about."

"What do you mean?" Lai Li questioned.

"I'm not sure," Zack replied. "Now that I hear this, I can't help but remember how possessive Ellengio was to that book. It seems likely there was something about this in there."

"And he didn't want us to know?" Yuffie questioned. "But why?"

"Not sure. Pride in his species, perhaps. It's an embarrassing thing, what they did. It's not something you would want others to know about. Ellengio might be a Cetra, but that doesn't mean he doesn't suffer from the same sort of foibles that we humans do."

Lai Li gave him a long look.

"Do you think he could have been the one that erased that computer data?" she suggested.

Zack gave a swift jerk of his head.

"There's really no telling. That seems a bit excessive if he's only trying to protect his species. But who knows? He may just feel that strongly about it. On the other hand, there may be more to it that we don't know. And of course, we may just be letting our suspicions get the better of us, he might have had nothing at all to do with it."

He felt Roshnialu come up beside him again. She was looking at them with concern on her face. She may not be able to understand what they were saying, but she could clearly tell that something had upset them. He gave her a smile that he hoped was reassuring.

"I don't know whether this new information will have any bearing on our mission, but it still bothers me," Zack told the others. "I think the sooner we get to Meredith valley, the better I'll feel. Lai Li, is there anything more?"

The young linguist shook her head.

"All right then, we better get going. And this time for real. We're not going to reach the base of the mountains by dark, but I intend to press on until we do. I want to be in the valley tomorrow morning, no matter what it takes."

There were some groans from the others, but no one openly protested. Zack looked around. The shadows were deepening now, the sun just fallen below the horizon. Zack knew that riding on into the night would mean they would have little time

for sleep, but he didn't care. Things were coming to a head, with or without them, and he wanted to be sure they were there, if anything untoward happened.

Quickly they gathered their belongings together. Zack was about to mount his chendu when he heard a warning cry from Amanda.

"Look!"

He turned, along with the others, and saw her pointing to the sky. For a moment he saw nothing, then he noticed the dark specks, low on the horizon to the south, moving slowly across the sky.

"Chadara!" he hissed.

Quickly he scanned the surrounding area. It didn't look good. There were precious few places to hide on the open plain. They were still too far from the mountains to find refuge there. The ground around them was mostly flat, the sparse vegetation the only break in the uneven plain, certainly nothing that would provide them with cover. Farther afield, to the northwest, he saw a what looked like a gully. He couldn't tell how large it was from here, but there was nothing else around.

"Over that way," he said, pointing. They quickly mounted up and started off in that direction, the slow pace of the chendu more infuriating than ever. But nothing they could do could prod them to move faster. Zack cursed under his breath and kept looking to the south. The figures were growing quickly, and now the individual figures of the Chadara could clearly be seen. They seemed to be passing to the east of them, but close enough that they could easily be spotted.

Finally, after agonizing minutes, they reached the gully. Once there Zack realized it was woefully inadequate. It was long and narrow and only about three feet deep, not nearly enough to conceal the chendu from view.

"What do we do now?" Barret asked, as they slid off their chendu. It was apparent to all of them that this would not do as a hiding place.

Zack looked around desperately, but there was nothing else around them.

"I don't know," he said. "There's no place to hide. We'll just have to hope they don't spot us."

Yuffie's frown showed him how much the others believed that would happen. He looked at the Chadara again. There were dozens of them. Way too many if it came to a fight.

"We'd be able to hide fine without the chendu," Yuffie said bitterly. "They're too damn big, and slow. I don't know why we bothered with them in the first place."

Zack had to admit she had a point, but there was no use arguing about it now. He turned to look at the beast beside him. They were a dead giveaway.

He reached up and started to loosen the saddle.

"Take off their saddles," he said. "And all their equipment. Perhaps the Chadara will think they are wild."

A glance from Yuffie told him she didn't think much of that idea either, but the others started to pull on the saddles too.

Before they could finish, however, Roshnialu, who had been staring at the oncoming Chadara, suddenly leaped out of the gully, waving her arms and calling out.

"What the hell's the matter with her?" Barret shouted.

For a split second Zack almost panicked. His hand even came up to his sword, thinking Roshnialu might be betraying them. But then he lowered his hand. Barret stepped forward and Zack held out a hand to stop him. It was too late not to trust Roshnialu now. He could only assume these Chadara were not enemies.

"Tur don bontalis nu," Roshnialu said, turning to look back at her companions for a moment.

"They're friends," Lai Li said with relief.

A sudden change in direction of the Chadara made it apparent they had been seen. They were not far away at all now, and it only took them a few moments to glide down and land. Zack and the others found themselves completely surrounded. In spite of the reassurances, Zack felt his hand creeping toward his sword.

Roshnialu had stepped forward and was talking rapidly to one of the Chadara. Zack stared at him for a moment, a glint of recognition in his eyes. He was pretty sure that was the Chadara he had seen in Roshnialu's cave.

A second Chadara stood beside him, also involved in the conversation. The others hung back silently.

Zack came up to stand beside Roshnialu, Lai Li with him.

"What's going on?" Zack asked.

Lai Li held up her hand, apparently waiting until she understood the whole story herself. It seemed a long time before she finally spoke.

"There was some trouble in Daris. It seems Ellengio was there, and had been captured by the Jenova guard. Some of the Chadara helped them to escape, and in the process some of the guard were killed. Something like that hadn't happened in hundreds of years, and there was no doubt Jenova would eventually find out, and make them pay. It seems that the incident has acted as a catalyst for some long held resentment, and some of the Chadara have decided it's time for a revolt. They seem to have taken our coming as a sign that the time was ripe. Even as Jenova demanded the rebels be turned over, and started a crackdown on the Chadara, they were planning. More Jenova guards were called in, but almost as soon as they arrived they suddenly all disappeared, heading north. Rono, an old Chadara who had spoken with Ellengio, knew he was headed for Meredith valley, and suspected that Jenova had somehow found out and was sending the guard to capture or kill them. These people have come to help prevent that."

"So they're here to help us fight?" Yuffie said.

"Exactly," Lai Li replied. "She pointed to the Chadara next to the one Zack had recognized. "This is Donalis. He's the leader of the group. He says they'll do whatever has to be done. They just want reassurance that we will help their people."

"Of course we'll do whatever we can," Zack replied immediately. "But it's not going to be easy to defeat Jenova. A lot of Chadara could get hurt or killed."

He paused for a moment as Lai Li translated. Zack could guess the meaning of the harsh reply.

"He doesn't care if it takes their lives," Lai Li said finally. "As long as their species can be free from Jenova."

Zack nodded grimly. This was better news than he could ever have wished for.

"Excellent," he said. "The first thing we need to do is get to Meredith valley as quickly as possible. If what they have said is accurate, the Jenova guards are ahead of them, which means they might already be there, and Ellnegio and the people with him could be walking into a trap."

"That's fine and dandy," Yuffie said. "But we've still got a days travel to go. The Chadara can fly, and it would stupid for them to stay with us. They're going to have to go ahead, aren't they?"

Zack turned to look at her.

"Not exactly," he replied. He had seen the Chadara in action before. He knew how strong they were.

"Lai Li, ask the Chadara if they can take us to the valley."

Lai Li quickly translated.

She looked at Zack and nodded.

"What?" Yuffie said. "What are you talking about."

"We're not going to have to walk. The Chadara can carry us there. They flew off with Cloud and the others. They're perfectly capable."

Yuffie just stared at them for a moment, looking back and forth from Zack to the Chadara, then up in the air.

"You've got to be kidding," she said finally.

"What's wrong?" Zack asked. "You should be happy. All you've done this entire trip is complaining about the chendu, how slow they are and how much they stink. I would think you would be glad to be rid of them."

"Up there?" Yuffie said, looking up and ignoring Zack. "In the air, with just one of them holding me up? Not even a seat belt. Not even a seat??"

She slowly began to back away, shaking her head.

"No no, that's alright. I'll be perfectly happy to walk. You guys just go on without me."

"There's no other way to get there in time," Zack said. He turned to Lai Li and nodded. The linguist began talking rapidly to the Chadara.

"I don't care if I'm a week late," Yuffie said adamantly. "You ain't gonna get me off the ground. There's no..."

She was suddenly cut off as a Chadara swooped down behind her and scooped her up. They heard a shrill scream as the Chadara rapidly gained altitude.

"I'll get you all for this!" Yuffie shouted. "Oh GAWD!"

The Chadara rapidly climbed and headed to the north.

Zack turned to the others.

"Let's get going," he said. "With the Chadara's help we should be able to reach the valley in an hour. There's no time to waste!"

More Chadara flew down, picking up each of Zack's companions in turn. None of them protested as much as Yuffie, though some looked obviously unhappy. Amanda seemed to take it in stride, and being so light, her Chadara lifted her quickly into the air. They had to struggle mightily with Barret, and finally a second one had to come along to assist. Roshnialu spread her wings and lifted herself into the air, even as Doanlis picked up Zack, the last of the group to leave the ground. He looked down to see the earth rapidly diminishing below him, then forward toward the mountains. Not far away he could see Lai Li and the Chadara that carried her.

"Tell them to hurry," Zack called out. "And whatever they do, to not fly below Yuffie!"