

IC HAPTER XXX: THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY

Elena didn't have time to ponder Vincent's words. After the initial blast that knocked Vincent over, the attack came fast and furious. Their opponents flew straight for the ridge Elena and the others stood on, whether because they were hoping to quickly overwhelm resistance, or had just not expected much. They certainly didn't seem to expect the withering fire from Vincent's gun and the two Chadara weapons that greeted them. Half a dozen Chadara had fallen from the sky before they realized the error of that tactic. But they adjusted quickly, deciding instead to wear the defenders down with almost continuous fire. The Chadara had seen where the fire was coming from, and now sent a constant barrage in the direction of Vincent, Elena and Reno.

Elena found herself cringing back in the crevice of rock where she had stationed herself. The sound of the electrical charges hitting the rocks around her filled her ears. The stone reverberated beneath her from the force of it, and the air was tinged with the smell of burnt out wiring. Any moment she expected to feel the numbing blast as one of the shots hit just right, but she had positioned herself well, and though they hit all around her hiding place, none struck her.

Three times a Chadara flew into view, and three times she fired before they could draw a bead on her, sending them spinning downward. Each time she fired, she immediately afterward flattened herself as far back in the crevice as she could, knowing she was completely vulnerable at that time while the weapon recharged.

Another one hove into view. She fired, but it had obviously been ready, for it quickly dodged back out of the way. Even as she ducked back into her crevice it suddenly flew out in full view, right in front of her hiding place. She realized it had deliberately shown itself to draw her fire, and was coming after her in the delay time it took for her weapon to recharge.

Even as it was about to discharge its own weapon at her it was hit with a flash of light. It fell to the ground, and Elena could see Reno on the other side of the ledge, grinning at her.

She didn't have time to thank him as more Chadara came into view. She could hear the blast of Vincent's gun, but he couldn't get them all. A few actually landed on the ledge below her, only to be met by the fists of the massive Mog and the claws of Red. One went down almost immediately, and the other two turned and flew off, rattled by the sudden attack.

The firing died down, and Elena risked a peek out. There were only one or two Chadara in view.

"Have they given up?" she called out.

"Stay where you are," Vincent warned. "They're just reformulating their strategy. They'll attack again any minute."

"How many of them are there?" Altim wanted to know.

"Can't say," Vincent replied. "A lot more than there are of us."

He was interrupted by another barrage of fire. Elena ducked back in her hiding spot, weapon ready. She didn't have to wait long. Another Chadara appeared, making no attempt at evasive action. It was heading toward the others on the ledge, not looking at her. She made sure she had him well in her sight and fired. The Chadara dropped to the ground.

The firing intensified, and a moment later the air seemed to be filled with wings as more than a dozen of the Chadara all came at the ledge at once. Elena's weapon had not had time to recharge, and she could see that Reno probably had the same problem, for he did not fire either. Only the blasts of Vincent's gun could be heard, but he couldn't possibly get all of them. Most of them landed on the ledge and charged forward, falling upon Red and Cait down at the bottom. Elena cursed the weapon she held as the seconds dragged by. The delay while it recharged probably only took about fifteen seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime in the heat of battle. Cait and Red were being pushed back. In spite of their fighting prowess the Chadara's numbers were starting to tell. The others had obviously noticed as well, for she suddenly saw Nipala and Altim spring up and join the fray.

But even as they did even more Chadara landed, almost right in front of her. She aimed the weapon and pressed the trigger repeatedly, and on the third press an arc of light shot out and dropped one of the Chadara. She wished she knew more about the weapon she was holding. There had to be a way to tell when it was charged, but she had no idea what that might be. But she didn't have time to figure it out now, her shot had attracted some attention, and two of the Chadara were charging at her.

The weapon had no time to recharge, but that didn't mean it was useless. As a Turk she had some training in almost every type of weapon available, including rods and staves.

She lunged forward, just as the Chadara was reaching for her, driving the weapon into his stomach and sending him tumbling backwards. Crossing her hands, she jerked the weapon to the side, slashing it across the face of the second Chadara. It cried out and stepped back. She pressed the attack, landing quick blows to its head and shoulders until it fell to the ground.

A blast of light right beside her threw her off balance. She fell to her knees, the weapon slipping from her numb hands. For a moment she thought she would fall to the ground. The blast had not hit her, but had been close enough for her to feel some of the effects. She could barely feel the entire left side of her body. She struggled over to her weapon, dragging her left foot along. She picked it up and swung it around, firing at another Chadara that had landed nearby. She looked around. It seemed as if the Chadara were everywhere. She could see Reno slumped in the crevice on the other side of the ledge. Not far away, both Red and Altim were down. Even as she looked, she saw a blast hit Cait, who had been holding off three of the Chadara in front of him all by himself. She heard the crackling of overloaded circuits, then his body jerked spasmodically and he fell forward.

Vincent was still standing, though backed up at the rear of the concave ledge, near the entrance to the tunnel. She could see him firing rapidly, with Nipala not far away, the only other standing and fighting four Chadara. Elena didn't have time to observe any more, as things closer to home became more pressing. Two more Chadara were swooping down on her.

She pulled the weapon up, awkwardly with one hand, discharging it. But her aim was poor, and the one she was firing at dropped down underneath the shot. With both of them coming at her she swung the weapon desperately like a baseball bat. It struck one, sending it spinning to the ground. She had an instant to glance at the second Chadara. Both of them had weapons, but neither had fired at her. She could only assume that they had shot the weapons before she had come at her. Still, she wasn't the only one who could use it as a hand to hand combat weapon. The Chadara lunged forward, striking her on the forehead with the butt end of it. Sparks flew in her head as she spun backwards and fell to the ground.

Her head spinning, she felt another blow across the small of her back. She curled up into a ball, instinctively covering her head with her arms, no longer able to put up any defense, much less attack. She couldn't even muster the strength to cry out. Not that she thought it would help, the others still standing were not much better off.

Suddenly she heard a scream of pain. She lifted her head and saw the Chadara writhing in agony, its body enveloped in flames. It danced around for a few moments before collapsing to the ground not far away.

Still dazed from the beating, she could not understand exactly what was going on. She looked around and saw the ledge filled with Chadara, but something seemed odd about them. She felt a hand suddenly fall on her shoulder. She put up her arms defensively.

"It's all right! It's me, Rude."

She looked at the dark suited man for a moment before her head cleared enough for it to sink in.

"Rude!" she exclaimed, feeling a rush of relief. "You're here. You made it! But how?"

"No time to explain now," he replied. Even as he spoke he lifted his gun and fired. "We're all here, with Chadara reinforcements. Just get yourself undercover. We'll take it from here."

Elena nodded slowly, her head still throbbing.

"Was that your materia?" she questioned.

"No, it was Yuffie," he replied. "I told you, we're all here."

"Oh yeah," she responded, lifting her hand to her head. "I guess I'm kind of out of it. But I don't want to hide, you're going to need help."

Rude shook his head forcefully.

"You're hurt. You can't fight in that condition."

A blast from one of the Chadara weapons struck nearby, causing them both to flinch.

"We don't have time to argue!" he said.

He grabbed hold of her arm, dragging her along beside him and depositing her down in a secluded spot behind a pile of jagged rocks.

"Stay there!" he said.

She was too tired and bruised to protest. A moment later he was gone, running toward the others. Elena sat there blinking for a moment. Her head still throbbed, but she was beginning to think clearly. In spite of Rude's warning, she managed to get to her feet and looked out at the battle before her. He was right, she was too weak to fight anymore, but he couldn't expect her to not at least look.

The battle still raged, but the dynamics had changed dramatically. The situation was now reversed, with the Jenova guards finding themselves outnumbered. Nor did they have a convenient defensive position to retreat to. Not that the idea of retreat seemed to have occurred to them. Whether because of some Jenova influence, or because of their own strong will, they fought on even more fiercely.

And even with the reinforcements, the outcome was still in doubt. The Jenova guards still had their weapons, while most of the newcomers were empty handed. True, the weapons seemed to be non fatal in themselves, but shocking a Chadara into unconsciousness while flying sent them plummeting toward the very unforgiving ground below. She saw half a dozen fall just that way in the opening moments of the attack, and she hoped that none of the one's that went down were carrying any of her friends.

But Rude and most of those with him were armed. None of the Jenova guards could stand up for long against the withering fire from Vincent, Rude and Barret, the blasts of materia from Yuffie, and the sword and spear of Zack and Cid. As more and more of the Jenova guards dropped, the odds became even more tipped against them. They had been staying together in a tight knot, but eventually the firepower against them was just too much, and they had to break and scatter. Yet even so they did not retreat completely. A few brave ones drove in to attack, making one last attempt to do some damage before they were brought down. Most of the others flew to the mountain, trying to find refuge among the rocks in a place that still gave them the opportunity to lay down some harassing fire. Vincent dropped one then turned as Zack and Cid came up beside him.

"You have impeccable timing," he commented.

"Yeah, looks like we saved your ass," Cid stated more bluntly. "Should have known you'd be at the center of all this trouble. Care to fill us in on how you managed it?"

Vincent opened his mouth then stopped and stared at something behind them. Zack turned to see Roshnialu looking at Vincent with much the same expression. She muttered something they didn't understand.

"This woman is..." Vincent began.

"She's half Cetra," Zack filled him in. "It's a long story, but we could never have made it here without her help."

"I see I'm not the only one who has an interesting tale to tell," Vincent mused. "But never mind that now. Cloud and Ellengio are already inside with some of the others," he said, pointing to the cave entrance. "They are fighting a Jenova and they'll probably need our help."

Cid's eyebrows went up.

"A Jenova?" he said. "On top of all these Chadara? Boy, when you guys get in trouble you don't kid around. Should have known though, with Cloud here. The guy's a trouble magnet."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Zack questioned, holding his sword in readiness.

Vincent looked around. He could see Elena not far away, standing with Reno and Rude, her mouth going a mile a minute. Though she looked bruised it was obvious that she was in good spirits. Lai Li had come over to stand beside Roshnialu. He could also see Yuffie not far away, walking among the wounded, which included Red, Altim and Cait, a green cure materia in her hand. The others had scattered, chasing after the last of the Jenova guards.

"Yuffie! We're going after Cloud," he called out, indicating the entrance to the cave. "Let the others know."

Yuffie looked over at them and nodded distractedly. The battle was not quite over, but already they were gathering the wounded together as best they could. Although Yuffie was anxious to go help mop up, once she had seen the battle was no longer in doubt she had realized her materia would be better put to use healing the wounded. Of her friends, only Red and Altim had suffered more than a few bruises, and with the help of her materia they would be fine. Some of the Chadara were badly hurt, and it was these she was concentrating on at the moment. But Zack's words made her look around, wondering where the others had disappeared to. She hadn't seen Amanda since the battle started, and that brought a frown to her face. She hoped nothing had happened to the young girl. She made a promise to go look for her as soon as she was done here.

Amanda was not far away, farther up the slope, not far behind Barret, who had just dropped one of the guards he had flushed from behind a small group of rocks. He stepped over to the fallen body, gun ready as he probed behind the rocks for any others for a few moments. Then, satisfied that there were no others there, he turned toward her.

"See any others?" he questioned.

Amanda hesitated. As she had followed behind Barret she had seen a narrow crevice in the rock. She had looked in on what appeared to be a narrow cave as she had passed. It had not been very deep, and had dead ended perhaps ten meters inside, close enough that she could see the end of it when she stuck her head in. Now she stood near it.

Barret began to walk back toward her.

"Well?" he questioned.

Amanda hesitated just a moment more. She looked around, but no one else was in sight. A plan was forming in her mind. She looked back at the cave entrance.

"Amanda?" Barret said. He stood right beside her now.

"Uh, yeah," she said. "I mean yes. I think I did see one. Going in that crevice back there." She pointed to the cave.

"Oh yeah?" Barret said, eyeing it critically. "Well, I'll just have to flush him out."

He walked toward the cave. Amanda remained where she was. She looked around again. She could hear fighting off in the distance, farther down the mountain, but still no one was in sight. This was the moment she had been waiting for, she said to herself. She finally had Barret alone, she had to do it now. She might never get this chance again.

Barret had reached the cave. He stopped for a moment, gun ready, eyeing the dark entrance.

Amanda watched him nervously, waiting for him to go in. She would have to be fast. It would only take him a moment to realize the cave was a dead end. She felt her throat suddenly going dry, looking at Barret. He seemed to be acting awfully cautiously all of a sudden. She had known him long enough to know that he wasn't much at waiting patiently for the enemy to make the first move. She had expected him to just plunge in, regardless of the consequences, but he seemed to be taking forever. If he looked in first, if he was careful, he might realize the cave was a dead end without even going in. Her plan would be ruined, and then what would she do? She looked down and saw that she was trembling. Had he noticed that? Had he become suspicious? Was that why he seemed so reluctant to proceed?

But even as she felt her nerve failing her, he suddenly lunged forward, disappearing into the cave. Now was the time! There was no turning back. She had to do it. She had to do it now or she never would!

She tried to concentrate, waiting for the familiar rush of energy inside her. But for some reason this time it seemed especially difficult. She felt confused, distracted, her concentration unfocused. Nothing Barret had ever done indicated he could be the man Calin told her he was. He had treated her with nothing but kindness and respect. Had welcomed her into his house, had treated her like his own daughter. And again she wondered if this was all a mistake, if Calin could somehow have been wrong, that she was about to do this to an innocent man.

She felt sweat beading on her brow. Each second she hesitated was one more second lost, each passing second she expected to see Barret reemerge, and the opportunity lost. No matter what he was like now, no matter how she felt about him, she had a job to do, a job people were depending on her to finish. She had to do this, if not for herself, then for Calin.

She remembered Ice's last words to her, that her father would be ruined if she did not succeed, and felt resolve building up inside her. Calin was depending on her. That was the bottom line. After all he had done for her, she could never face him again if she did not carry out this mission, if she failed him. Whether Barret had done what he was accused of or not was moot. She had to do it for Calin, to pay back all he had done for her.

Suddenly she felt the quick surge of energy that always preceded the release of her power. A green glow appeared in her eyes. She raised her arms, and lightning flared outward.

It struck the mouth of the cave, sending a shock through the ground. She couldn't tell for sure, but she thought she heard Barret cry out. It was lost, however, in the cascade of rock as the entire entrance to the cave collapsed suddenly, causing a loud rumble and throwing up a cloud of dust. Moments later it was over, and for a second she stood there, staring at the rocks that now totally blocked the entrance to the cave, burying it as if it had never been. There was no sign of Barret.

She lowered her head. Her arms still trembled, and the dryness had not left her mouth. She had done it, she had avenged her parents, but she felt no triumph, no sense of victory. All her life she had wanted revenge for her parents' death, but

never once had she imagined it would be like this. She had done what she had come to do, yet she felt empty, almost sick to her stomach.

She felt something on her cheek. She brushed her hand across her face and found to her surprise that it was wet. She shook her head, then looked up again, staring blankly at the pile of rocks in front of her. She would go back to Calin, tell him that she had accomplished her mission. She would leave these people, these people who she had never meant to befriend. She would go back, back to her old routine. But somehow, she knew that things would never be the same again.

Finally she took a deep breath, then turned and walked slowly back down the mountain toward the others.

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Sephiroth slowly looked around, an unreadable expression on his face, eyeing them all with his icy green eyes.

"Who summoned me?" he questioned.

"I have," Jinn said.

Sephiroth turned slowly to face the young boy.

"I have called you using my power, the power of Jenova, your mother," Jinn said. He waved his hand at the others. "I give you an opportunity for revenge against those that have wronged you."

Sephiroth said nothing. He looked at Jinn for a moment, then his eyes roamed once more around the room, looking at each of them in turn. A smirk crossed his face when he saw Cloud.

"Ah yes, I remember some of you," he said. "How long has it been?"

"Almost three years," Aeris spoke.

Sephiroth turned toward her, looking at her sharply.

"The Ancient I killed," he mused. "How is it you live? Did this Jenova bring you back as well?"

"Not at all," Cloud spoke up boldly. "We brought her back. In fact, you had something to do with it, though you might not remember."

Sephiroth remained silent, slowly nodding his head.

"Enough of this!" Jinn said. "Destroy them!"

Sephiroth turned back toward Jinn, his movement unhurried. His eyes narrowed.

"Who are you to command me?" he questioned.

Jinn stared at him for a moment, obviously not expecting that question.

"I am Jenova," he said, recovering quickly. "You are one with us. You must obey me!"

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. He cocked his head and brought one hand up to his chin.

"You are Jenova," he agreed. "But you are not MY Jenova."

Jinn was silent for a moment, staring at Sephiroth, obviously at a loss for words. Cloud saw Tifa looking at him. He leaned over and whispered to her.

"Looks like this isn't turning out quite the way Jinn expected."

Jinn's face grew stern.

"We are all one!" he said. "Our species gave you true life. Gave you power. I have given it to you again. I have brought you back from the lifestream. I have given you a chance to return to your planet and finish what you started. You can be a god, just as you wanted to be!"

Sephiroth stared at Jinn thoughtfully.

"Tempting," he said finally. He turned and his gaze fell once more upon Cloud.

"Yes. I admit there might be some satisfaction in that, but I've got more important things to do."

Jinn frowned.

"What are you talking about?"

Sephiroth laughed. The sound sent shills down Cloud's spine.

"I've learned a lot after all this time. Things that even you might not know," he said. "When someone is returned to the lifestream, their essence, all that which they are, is merged with all the others. When this happens, consciousness is lost. The new entity formed that is born again has no knowledge of the entities it existed as in the past. But you," he said, staring at Jenova, "know it is different for your species. Jenova entity cannot mix with any others, only with other Jenova. That is why you are all one, that is why you are born with the knowledge of those that came before you. This is what should have happened to me, but my human side prevented that. Because of Jenova, my consciousness remained intact, but because I was part human, I could not reemerge with the Jenova consciousness. I was trapped, neither alive nor dead."

"But gradually, I discovered I could tap into the flow of consciousness that was the lifestream. Even though I could not be a part of it. Suddenly I had access to not just one world, but thousands. Not just human and Jenova, but innumerable species, all passing by on their journey through the lifestream. And I found out that I could communicate with them, that I could influence them."

Sephiroth waved his arm in front of himself, his eyes blazing with passion.

"Think of it!" he exclaimed. "Influence over a thousand worlds! The ability to shape events to my liking across the entire universe. What does being the god of a single planet amount to compared to that?"

Jinn just stared at him blankly.

"The answer is, it doesn't," Sephiroth continued. "But influencing beings across the galaxy is not an easy task. Events move slowly. It is often difficult to find the proper way to bend others to your way of thinking. It takes patience and time. But time was something I had an eternity of. Still, my plans were very delicate. Everything had to happen on schedule. One small ripple, one tiny disturbance, could ruin everything I had worked so hard to accomplish. All this time, and nothing had disturbed that delicate balance."

He stepped toward Jinn and looked down at him.

"Until you wrenched me from the lifestream!" he accused coldly.

Jinn just stared at him.

"Who knows what damage you have done to my plans? Who knows how far you have set me back. And for what? Revenge? The chance to rule one puny world?"

Sephiroth paused and looked at Jinn expectantly. The Jenova suddenly seemed younger than ever, a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar, while Sephiroth stood before him, the aggrieved parent, waiting for an explanation.

With a fluid motion Sephiroth pulled out his Masamune. He swung it a few times experimentally. Then his eyes fixed on Jinn once again.

"Those others over there," he jerked a thumb in Cloud's direction. "They stopped me from taking over one world. You may have destroyed my plans for taking over many. What do you think is a suitable punishment for such a transgression?"

Jinn slowly took a step back.

"I can still help you," he stammered. "I can help you with your plans. You still owe much to Jenova. I have instilled in you all my power. With that you will be even stronger. There is no reason for us to fight when we can be partners."

Sephiroth laughed coldly.

"But I have no need of a partner," he replied. "I'm perfectly capable of carrying out my plans without you or anyone else's help. You have already given me your power, free of charge. In hindsight, it might have been wiser to hold on to that commodity a bit longer. As it is, there is nothing that you can offer me."

Sephiroth held his Masamune in front of him, staring down at it. Suddenly the blade began to glow redly. The glow quickly brightened, and then the sword suddenly burst into flame. The fire glowed brightly, running up and down the sword edge. Sephiroth took a step toward Jinn.

"Wait!" the Jenova pleaded. "I gave you my power freely. It is Jenova cells that made you what you are. I helped you!"

Sephiroth barely paused.

"So?" he questioned. "Are you expecting me to be grateful? Gratitude and mercy are for the weak. I take what I want, and destroy all those who thwart me. I must return to the lifestream to save those of my plans that I can, but before I do, I shall make you pay!"

Sephiroth lifted the Masamune above his head. The flames flared brighter still, leaping up toward the ceiling. But though the blade seemed to be engulfed, it appeared to be causing Sephiroth no discomfort.

Jinn cringed back, bringing his arms up to shield himself as the sword flashed downward.

"Nooo!" he cried out.

Then he screamed as the sword clove into him. Instantly he was enveloped in flames, roaring like an inferno around him and over him. The light from it flared outward, filling the entire room with flickering shadows, so brightly that the others could barely stand to look. Jinn screamed again and gyrated wildly, the flames consuming him eagerly, almost like a living thing. He stumbled forward, but seconds later fell to the ground, his limbs twitching feebly, the fire swirling around him with voracious fury. A few moments later he was still.

Sephiroth just stood there unmoving, looking at his handiwork, and as quickly as the flame had appeared it suddenly began to fade away, leaving behind just a charred and smoldering body.

Sephiroth turned toward the others, his Masamune still in his hand, the cold look still in his eyes. Cloud felt himself tense.

And then Sephiroth laughed. That mocking laughter that had so tormented Cloud for what seemed like a lifetime to him. Cloud felt his hands tighten on the Chadara weapon he was holding, but even as they did, he could see that Sephiroth had begun to give off a green glow. Quickly it built up, and as the same time Sephiroth himself seemed to become insubstantial, as if he were fading slowly into the light, a ghost returning to his own realm, to the lifestream.

A moment later he was gone. The green light faded away, and last of all, even the echo of his laughter.

For a long time they all stood there silently.

"Did I just imagine that," Reeve finally broke the silence. "Or did Sephiroth actually help us?"

"He didn't help us," Cloud responded. "He helped himself. Even bitter enemies can find common cause, I suppose, in the face of a bigger threat."

"I take it that you have everything under control?"

They turned to see Ellengio standing by the entrance to the room.

"Ellengio!" Aeris cried out happily. "You're here!"

Ellengio nodded. "Elena told me you were facing a Jenova. I thought you might need my help, but it appears I was mistaken."

"We did get help, actually," Tifa said. "And from a most unexpected source."

Ellengio looked at them thoughtfully. "And a most interesting tale I'm sure it will be," he commented.

"Yes," Aeris said. "But we'll have plenty of time later to relay it. But now, here is the generator," she said, pointing to the device at the other end of the room. "Let us finish what we came here to do!"

"Indeed," Ellengio agreed.

He walked over to the instrument, and stood in front of it for a few moments, studying it silently. Eventually he reached down, his hand playing across one of the panels. The others felt the hum in the air suddenly change in pitch.

"Don't you need the crystal materia?" Aeris questioned.

Ellengio held up his hand. "In a moment," he said.

His hand touched more of the panels, moving rapidly now. To Cloud it didn't seem like much was happening, but then again, it seemed difficult to believe that what Ellengio was fiddling with was actually a machine at all.

Just then one of the rods that protruded from the top of the instrument slowly slid down and disappeared. The hum changed pitch again, getting distinctly louder. The others stood there waiting patiently for something else to happen.

Ellengio made a few more adjustments, then stepped back. The instrument hummed for a few more seconds, then the hum slowly faded out. Beneath them the slight vibration they had felt since they had entered the room vanished as well.

Cloud frowned. If he didn't know better, he would think that Ellengio had turned it off.

Aeris was frowning as well, looking at Ellengio.

"What did you do?" she questioned.

Ellengio did not reply, just stood there staring at the instrument in front of them.

"What did you do?" Cloud repeated, an edge suddenly appearing in his voice. Aeris unease had lent credence to his own. Now he was convinced that this was not what was supposed to happen.

Ellengio finally looked up at them.

"I have freed my people," he said quietly.

The others looked at him in shock.

"What?" Cloud snapped in disbelief, bringing the Chadara weapon up. "Are you some kind of Jenova too?"

Ellengio merely looked at him.

"Of course not," he said dismissively. "You're letting your imagination get the better of you. Do I have to remind you that Jenova is not the only species on Shinialyn?"

He looked at them all sharply.

"The Cetra," Aeris said slowly.

"The Cetra," Ellengio repeated. "For two thousand years they have been trapped on Shinialyn, trapped with their own worst enemy. They have been stagnant all these years, but no longer. Finally they will be free!"

Cloud could hardly believe what he was hearing.

"But Jinn told me the Cetra had been exterminated on Shinialyn," Aeris said.

"Impossible," Ellengio said with a snort. "There is no way Jenova could have done that. The Cetra would have found a way to survive. They are too advanced, too smart..."

"Too superior?" Aeris finished.

Ellengio gave her a sharp look.

"Perhaps," he replied. "Think what you will, but I know they are still there."

"Sounds to me like you suffer from the same arrogance that got the Cetra in trouble in the first place," Aeris said.

Ellengio did not reply to that, but the look he gave her made it obvious what he thought about it.

"But you've let Jenova free too!" Reeve pointed out.

"I realize that," Ellengio said. "It's a calculated risk. But the Cetra are no longer alone. They have both the Chadara and you humans to help them. Together I believe we can defeat Jenova."

Cloud shook his head slowly. Of all the things to happen, even the return of Sephiroth, this was the least expected.

"You planned this right from the beginning, didn't you?" he accused. "You never had any intention of using the crystal materia. You brought us here for the sole purpose of taking down the generator."

Ellengio looked at him for a moment, then nodded.

"Why didn't you just let Jenova do that job?" Reeve questioned bitterly.

"Believe it or not, I am still on your side," Ellengio explained. "Jenova is our enemy. It will be difficult, and sacrifices will have to be made, but this course of action offers both our species the best hope of survival."

"Does it?" Aeris questioned. "You're talking about an interplanetary war. Two thousand years ago, that's just what the Cetra on Shinaiyynn scarified themselves to prevent! By doing this you're repudiating everything they did."

"Nonsense," Ellengio replied. "They sacrificed themselves for the future, not just the future of others, but the future of the Cetra as well. They stopped the Jenova from expanding, giving those of us who escaped time, time to build up alliances, time to strengthen ourselves, until the time came when we were strong enough to return and take back what is rightfully ours, to take back Shinialyn!"

"How do you know we are strong enough?" Cloud questioned. "How do you know that Jenova is not too strong, that, now that you have released them, they will travel across the galaxy, conquering every species in their path. How do you know you didn't just doom my race as well?"

"I said it was a risk," Ellengio replied, apparently unfazed by Cloud's argument. "But I believe this is our best hope. I may never have gotten the chance to come here again, to do this. I had to take the opportunity when it presented itself. The fact that you had a rocket ship available I took as a sign, a sign that it was time to return."

Cloud stepped forward, his face flushed with anger.

"And who gave you the right to make such a decision?" he demanded. "What gives you the right to play with the fate of all humanity? As Aeris said, you're talking about an interplanetary war. Even if we win, who knows how many casualties there might be, thousands, millions? Will there be anyone left to enjoy the fruits of victory, even if they are obtainable? Your species made a choice two thousand years ago, a choice to save others. And it was the right choice. You have no right to change that now!"

Ellengio slowly shook his head.

"I don't ask your permission," he replied. "Although I would have wished for your blessing. But I am willing to go on without it. I am willing to accept the consequences of what I have done"

The others just stared at him.

"So that's it?" Cloud snapped. "You're giving us no choice in the matter?"

Ellengio lowered his head. "The decision has been made. There's no turning back now. There's nothing you can do about it."

Cloud grabbed hold of Ellengio's arm.

"You arrogant son of a bitch!" he shouted. "What's to prevent me from taking the crystal materia from you and starting this thing up myself?"

Ellengio looked at him calmly. Then he suddenly pulled away, moving faster than Cloud anticipated he could. He stopped out of reach, right beside the machine.

"Do not underestimate me," he said, his voice still calm in the face of Cloud's anger. "As I said, we are not enemies. I will not fight you. Yet still there is nothing you can do."

He reached down and the crystal materia suddenly appeared in his hand. He held it out, as if offering it to them, but then his arm came up.

"Ellengio, no!" Aeris cried out in horror.

Before anyone could move he brought his arm down. The crystal materia flew from his hand, hitting the floor and shattering into a million tiny shards.

The others just stood there in shocked silence. Cloud face was red, his hands clenched in anger. He felt as if the whole world had shattered along with that crystal. But he did not move. Ellengio had played it right, he had out-thought all of them. They had played right into his hands, and he shuddered to think what the consequences would be.