

CHAPTER XXXI: THE END OF THE ROAD

"Where's Barret?"

Cloud looked around for a response. All of the other members of their space traveling group was now gathered in the Cetra generator chamber.

"Probably still helping the Chadara mop up," Yuffie ventured.

Cloud nodded and turned toward Cid, who was lying on the floor beside an open panel on the generator, working on something inside. Aeris was kneeling beside him.

"So what's the verdict?" he asked.

Cid looked at him and shook his head grimly.

"Hard to make heads or tails of what the Cetra call machinery," he answered. "But as far as I can tell, Ellengio overloaded and burned out the motor when he shut it down. We can't start it again without another source of power."

"Great," Cloud muttered. He kicked a shard of the crystal materia and sent it spinning across the floor. "And the only power source we had is in pieces."

He glanced over at Ellengio, who was standing not far away, separated from everyone else. Cloud had told the others what had happened.

"I can't believe we came all this way just to have this happen," Cloud continued bitterly. "Isn't there anything else we can use to start this thing?"

Cid continued to tinker with the wiring inside.

"If we had a generator of our own I might be able to start it up again," Cid stated.

"And where are we supposed to get one of those, pull it out of our hat?" Zack questioned.

"You're not wearing a hat," Yuffie pointed out.

"Isn't there a generator on the ship?" Tifa asked.

Cid removed the cigarette from his mouth and crushed the end against the floor.

"Yeah, sure," he replied. "If we wanted to gut the engines. I hadn't planned on making this a permanent stay. Besides, the thing is huge, how would we get it here? And even if we did, it's still not strong enough to get this thing going full power. The best we could hope for is the partial shield that it was generating earlier."

"That's still better than nothing," Red stated.

"Even if we accepted that, we still have the problem of transport," Cid said.

Lai Li had picked up one of the pieces of the crystal materia and was examining it carefully.

"We have plenty of other materia," she mused. "Can't we use that somehow?"

"None of it is anywhere near strong enough," Cid replied.

"What about the black materia?" Reeve asked.

Cid sat up, apparently done with whatever he was doing.

"I don't know," he said.

"That is the strongest one we have, but would it be strong enough?" Vincent asked.

Cid shook his head.

"It's hard to say," he replied. "But if we hook it up and it doesn't work, there's a chance we might drain the materia. We might not be able to use it again."

"Which means we'd have no way to get back to our planet," Red said.

"I'm not too keen on that idea," Yuffie said.

"None of us are," Cloud replied.

"It may be the only way to save the situation," Red stated.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait just a minute," Reno cut in. "Don't tell me you're even thinking about using our only means of returning home. I didn't come on this trip to commit suicide."

"It's not suicide," Red replied. "There's no reason why we couldn't live on this planet."

"Maybe you could, but not me," Reno said forcefully. "This place is a hell hole, plain and simple. That plan will not work. Don't even think about it."

"Let's not jump the gun here," Cloud cut in. "We're just discussing options. We're not going to do anything yet. Besides, the black materia is back at the ship. Who knows how long it would take us to get there? How long do you think we have?"

He turned toward Cid on the last sentence, but Cid wasn't sure the question was directed at him.

"There's no way to tell," Aeris spoke up. "Jenova will know right away that the shield is down, but it'll take them a while to make preparations. They couldn't have known this was going to happen. I'd say we have at least a couple of days, probably longer. But there's no way to tell for sure."

Cloud nodded.

"So we probably would have time to go back to the ship," he stated.

"I've been translating this to Roshnialu," Lai Li interrupted. "She says it wouldn't take long to fly back to the ship. We had to go around the mountains to get here on foot, but it's only a couple of hours away in a straight line."

"All right then, we can go back if we have to," Cloud said. "That still leaves us with the question of whether the black materia would be strong enough to do the job."

Reno glared at him.

"I already told you that's not an option," he stated firmly.

"I'm not anxious to do it either," Cloud responded, sounding surprisingly conciliatory. "But what other choice do we have? If we do nothing, there's going to be a war. If sacrificing our way home can stop it, we have to consider it."

"It won't work," Ellengio said suddenly.

Cloud just glared at him.

"The black materia is not strong enough," Ellengio continued. "I know you probably don't believe me, but it's true. The crystal materia was the only materia powerful enough to run the generator."

"Why should we believe you?" Cloud questioned sharply.

Ellengio shrugged.

"You don't have to," he replied. "But you'll only be hurting yourselves if you don't. Why would have made a crystal materia at all if the black one would do?"

"Maybe they didn't have access to a black one?" Reeve suggested.

Ellengio sighed.

"I told you we are not enemies. I wouldn't hurt you all if I can help it. So please believe me, the black materia is not the answer."

"So what is the answer?" Zack questioned, looking at Ellengio intently. "Is there a way? Something you're not telling us?"

"No," Ellengio replied. "The crystal materia was the only way. There is nothing you can do now."

"And if there was, you wouldn't tell us anyway, now would you?" Cloud asked.

Ellengio looked at him for a moment, then shook his head.

"No, probably not," he conceded.

"Dammit, if you know something, you better tell us!" Zack said threateningly.

Aeris stood up.

"Leave him alone Zack."

Zack spun toward her in surprise.

"What, are you on his side?"

"No," Aeris said quickly. "But I know he won't tell us anything. Threatening him is useless. There is nothing you can do to him that will make him talk if he doesn't want to. We have to figure a way out of this ourselves."

"But there is no way out!" Yuffie complained.

"There must be something we haven't thought of," Cloud said.

They were silent for a moment.

"Maybe there's another one," Nipala suggested.

"Another what, crystal materia?" Cloud said.

"Yes," Nipala replied. "If they made one, they may have made another. It would seem prudent to have a spare, and the Cetra seemed to be a prudent race."

"Do you think that's possible?" Cloud said, again seeming to ask no one in particularity.

"Unlikely," Lai Li spoke up. "I've been reading Talisheedra's journal. She makes no mention of a second one. They were pressed for time. Jenova arrived here and discovered them before they were completely finished with the first one. I don't see how they could possibly have had time to make another."

"But it's not impossible," Reno said.

"Anything's possible," Red conceded. "But without any knowledge of it, without any clues, where would we look. Even if it exists, it might take months, or even years to find it."

"If worst comes to worst, we end up doing that anyway, or at least until Jenova arrives here," Cloud said. "But I'd prefer something a little more substantial to go on."

"Wouldn't we all," Reno muttered.

"What if we could connect materia together?" Lai Li said.

"Huh?" Cloud said, turning toward her.

"You say no individual materia is powerful enough. Well, we have lots of materia. Is there a way we could connect them together so the generator could tap all their power?"

Cloud frowned for a moment, then turned toward Cid expectantly.

Cid hesitated a moment, then shook his head.

"Something like that has never been done. I wouldn't even know how to attempt it. Besides, the power source has to be small enough to fit in the compartment in the machine, and it's not big enough to hold more than a few materia, certainly not enough to provide the power we're talking about. And even if we could connect materia together, we can't do it with wishes. I'd need tools and supplies, and we don't have any."

Cloud looked around in frustration. Dammit! There had to be something they could do!

"We need something stronger," he muttered.

Suddenly Aeris turned toward him.

"Stronger!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I'm such a fool! What about Quay's super materia?"

Cloud looked at her, for a moment not realizing what she was talking about. Then he remembered.

"The super materia made by Zangan's son," he clarified. "You still have it?"

Aeris nodded vigorously.

"It's back at the ship," she said.

"Wait a minute!" Yuffie interrupted, pinning Aeris with a look. "You told me that was destroyed."

Aeris suddenly looked embarrassed.

"Well, I said it was....that is....," she stammered.

Yuffie's eyes widened.

"You lied to me!" she exclaimed. "I can't believe it!"

"There's no time for this!" Cloud cut her off.

"I thought you were my friend!" Yuffie exclaimed, ignoring Cloud.

"Oh stop it!" Tifa cut in. "She did you a favor. Everyone knows you would never have been satisfied knowing the super materia existed and was not in your possession, and we couldn't let you have it. It would have driven you crazy."

"Aeris, do you think the super materia would be strong enough to do the trick?" Cloud asked, ignoring Yuffie in turn.

Aeris just looked at him.

"I don't know," she said. "I think so. It was certainly stronger than any other materia. I think it will work."

"What are you talking about?" Ellengio questioned.

Cloud turned toward him, and couldn't help but smile at Ellengio's ignorance.

"For all your intelligence, there's some things you don't know. It's something we obtained on a previous adventure. Something you had no knowledge of."

Ellengio did not reply to this.

"I have to get back to the ship," Aeris said.

"Roshnialu can take you," Zack said.

"Is Roshnialu strong enough to carry her?" Cloud questioned, looking at the silver haired woman. She was smaller than most of the Chadara they had met, and even though Aeris was slight of build herself, he wasn't sure she could manage it.

Zack, however, had no qualms about it.

"She's stronger than you think," he replied.

"Roshnialu says she'll do it," Lai Li said.

"All right, then let's get up the the surface," Cloud said. He looked over at Ellengio, then turned to Zack.

"Zack, could you..."

"Keep an eye on him?" Zack finished for him. "Of course."

"All right," Cloud said, then he, Aeris, Roshnialu, Tifa and Reeve left the room and started back up the steps.

"Do you think Ellengio will try anything?" Tifa asked worriedly.

"I don't think so," Aeris said. "I believe him when he said he wouldn't fight us. We are still on the same side. No matter how wrong he is, he's just doing what he thinks is best."

"Best for the Cetra," Cloud muttered.

"Yes," Aeris sighed. "Best for the Cetra."

They made their way quickly up the stairway. It had been a lot easier going down than up.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Tifa said after a while, "but wasn't the super materia deactivated?"

"Yes it was," Aeris agreed.

"And don't you need regular materia to reactivate it?"

Aeris nodded.

"And the only regular materia we have is Yuffie's," Tifa brought the thought to its logical conclusion.

"Right again," Cloud said.

Tifa was silent for a moment, then shook her head.

"Yuffie's REALLY going to be unhappy about that," she commented.

"You're probably right," Cloud said, the smirk on his face giving away how he thought about the idea of telling her.

"You are bad," Tifa said, noticing the grin. "You know she's going to go ballistic."

"And it'll be fun to watch," Cloud said.

They reached the exit and stepped once more outside. Night had fallen by now, but it was not dark. They looked up into the sky to see the huge orb of Shinialyn shining spectacularly above the western horizon. They had thought it was impressive before, but now it was breathtaking. Its silver sheen was gone, and now they could clearly see the swirling white clouds covering it, and beneath that, the blue of its oceans and darker colors of its land masses. They all just stood there staring at it for a moment.

"Wow," Cloud muttered. The others remained silent, finding no words for Shinialyn's beauty. Cloud saw an odd expression on Aeris face. He wondered how she felt about being this close to her home world, a world she had never known. He thought about what it would be like to be this close to Earth, and not be able to get any closer, not be able to experience it, but he knew it wasn't the same. He had been to earth, had lived there. He knew what it was like. Aeris had never known Shinialyn. Perhaps she didn't even consider it her home world.

"You better get going," he said, breaking the silence.

"Be careful," Reeve said.

Aeris nodded, her eyes dropping to look into his.

"Of course," she replied.

She walked over to Roshnialu, who lifted Aeris in her arms as easily as a child. She spread her wings, and then they were gone into the night. The others stood there for a while until she disappeared from view.

"I guess I'll go over and take a look at Cait," Reeve said. "I feel bad neglecting him all this time. I hope he's not too badly damaged."

"You were kind of busy," Cloud reminded him.

"Yeah," Reeve replied, walking away.

Tifa sat down on a nearby rock and gazed up at Shinialyn. Cloud looked at her for a moment, outlined it the silver light. He came up and sat beside her.

"Do you really think this will work?" she said softly.

Cloud felt her hand slipping into his own.

"I hope so," he replied.

"If it doesn't...." she hesitated. "Jenova will come to our planet. We've fought them one at a time, and it hasn't been easy. I can't imagine what it would be like to fight an army of them."

"Tifa, it's okay. This is going to work," he reassured her.

"I know...I know what they can do," she continued as if she hadn't heard him. "I had one inside me. I'll never forget it. We've fought so hard. Could it all be for nothing?"

She turned toward him and looked into his eyes.

"Cloud, I'm scared."

He reached out and took her into his arms. He made a noble attempt at a smile.

"It's all right," he said with a conviction he didn't feel. "Everything is going to be all right. I promise."

She shook her head.

"I'd like to believe it. I really would. But you don't know that. I'm tired, Cloud. I'm tired of fighting, of struggling. When we started this, I thought there would be an end. That's the way it's supposed to work, isn't it? Things have a beginning and an end. I thought there'd come a time when we could put down our weapons and live peacefully. After all, that's what we were fighting for, wasn't it? But it hasn't happened. It's just been one struggle after another. An endless cycle. And each time I've thought it's over it's started up again. How long can we keep this up? We've been fighting for so long now, and we've always won. But it can't go on forever. We can't keep beating the odds. Someday it's bound to catch up with us. Someday we're going to meet a foe we can't overcome..."

She faltered, lowering her eyes and gripping him tightly. He stood there for a minute staring down at her, surprised at this outburst. He had never seen her this upset before about such things. She had always been the rock, always been the one who smiled in the face of adversity, who had kept them going when things got tough. It wasn't like her to give up like this.

"Tifa," he said slowly, stroking her hair. He hesitated, at a loss for words. He really wasn't the best at reassuring others. That was usually her job. But he knew he had to say something now. Who reassured the reassurer? "This isn't like you. What happened to that cheerful girl who always saw the best in every situation?"

"I don't know," she replied, not looking at him. She sounded near tears.

"I know it's hard," he said. "But we can't give up now. It may seem like we're getting nowhere, but that's not true. We know so much more now. Jenova has been a constant threat hanging over our heads, whether we knew it or not. A threat that could strike at any time, without warning and apparently from nowhere. We didn't know when it would happen or where it came from. We beat them, but we never knew when another one would appear. But now we do. We've traced Jenova back to it's source, back to the nest. And once you wipe out the nest, you wipe out the problem, once and for all."

Tifa pressed her head against his chest.

"This nest might be too strong to wipe out," she said softly.

"I don't believe that, and I don't think you do either," he replied. "We're this close. We're this close to finally finishing this thing. There's nothing that's going to stop us now, Tifa, nothing!"

Tifa remained quiet, the barely perceivable nod of her head the only indication that she had heard.

"I just want to go home," she said softly.

This time Cloud didn't reply right away. He kissed top of her head.

"We will soon," he said, just as softly.

~*~

Cloud wasn't sure how long they waited. Reeve rejoined them, with Cait right behind him. The damage to the Mog had only been minor. Tifa soon snapped out of her melancholy, and they all went to look for Barret. It was difficult going in the dark Footing was treacherous, and they could only move at a snail's pace. They hadn't covered much ground when Reeve called out that Aeris had returned.

Cloud and Tifa rejoined them at the entrance to the cave.

"Everything go smoothly?" Cloud asked.

Aeris nodded, her face flushed from the flight through the night air.

"Let's go see if it works," she said excitedly.

They descended back down into the cavern.

"Bout time," Yuffie said when they arrived in the generator room.

Aeris walked over to Cid and held out the super materia.

"Here you go," she said.

"Aeris, are you sure you want to do that?" Ellengio questioned suddenly, stepping toward them.

"Stay out of this, Ellengio," Cloud warned.

Ellengio ignored him.

"This isn't going to work, you know," he said. "You're all just wasting your time. Aeris, the others might be blind, might not understand, but surely you do. Surely you realize that this is the only way."

"No I don't," she said. "I don't understand. I don't understand how you can betray our trust. I don't understand how you can think that everyone else's opinion does not matter. I don't understand how you can betray everything our ancestors did to try to prevent exactly what you have brought about."

"It's not like that," Ellengio said. "I explained this to you. The Cetra sacrificed themselves to give us a chance. You're the one who be betraying them if you try to change what I have done!"

Aeris shook her head.

"No, I don't believe it," she said. "I don't believe the Cetra would be that selfish. You're risking the humans world, and who knows how many others, to save your own species. We have no right to do that."

"We have every right!" Ellengio snapped. "The Cetra made you everything you are! They are your own people, Aeris, your own people. You owe it to them to help them, no matter what the risks for others. You must put your own species first. Can't you see that?"

"You seem to forget that I am half human," Aeris said. "I have been blind all this time. Blind to what you had planned. I, of all of these people, should have realized your true intent. But I was foolish. I trusted you to do what was best for ALL of us. I didn't think a Cetra would put himself before all others. I see clearly now. It is you who are blind now. You are blinded by your own arrogance, by your own desires, noble as you might think they are. What you have done is wrong, Ellengio, plain and simple. Nothing you can say can change that fact, or make me change my own mind."

Aeris handed the super materia to Cid, who took it and knelt down beside the machine.

Ellengio stepped toward her again, but suddenly found himself confronted by both Cloud and Zack.

Ellengio frowned, then looked over at Roshnialu and started speaking rapidly. They went on for some minutes before Cloud interrupted.

"What are you saying?" he questioned.

"He's just trying to convince her too," Aeris stated. "But she's said that Jenova would sometimes take Chadara to Shinialyn. Apparently they needed them for some kind of experiments. Most of them were never heard from again, but a few came back. She said she spoke to one and he said the Cetra had been wiped out on Shinailynn."

"There you go," Cloud said grimly, looking at Ellengio. "There are no more Cetra on Shinailynn. You've risked all our lives for nothing!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Ellengio replied. "You think I'm going to take the word of a single Chadara? A Chadara who had been under Jenova's influence for who knows how long? How could he possibly know? He couldn't have searched the whole planet. He was probably just spouting what Jenova told him to."

Cloud shook his head.

"I see you're going to believe what you want no matter what evidence is presented to the contrary," he said. "Isn't that the mark of a fanatic?"

"Call me what you will," Ellengio replied. "If giving my allegiance to my own people is fanatical, then I'll proudly wear the label."

"Okay, I've got it in place," Cid interrupted them, standing up. "Aeris, do what you have to do to activate it."

Aeris nodded and looked at Yuffie.

"We're going to need your materia."

Yuffie's eyebrows shot up.

"Huh?"

"Don't you remember how the super materia works?" Aeris said. "It takes its power from ordinary materia."

Yuffie stood there for a minute, then a shocked look came over her face as she realized what this meant.

"No way!" she exclaimed. "You can't do that. You can't use my materia. There must be another way!"

"There's no other way," Cloud said firmly. "We have to use your materia. It's our only chance."

Yuffie stood there looking from one to another of them, a look of dismay on her face.

"It's for a good cause," Tifa told her. "You're going to stop a war."

"But..." Yuffie stuttered.

"There's plenty more materia back on earth," Cloud told her.

"But..."

"You'll be a hero," Aeris said.

"But..."

"Enough buts," Cloud cut in. "We need to do this. Now."

Yuffie lifted up her materia pouch. She looked down at it affectionately. Then with a whimper she handed it over.

Cloud took the pouch, not taking his eyes off her.

She looked up at him.

"What?" she exclaimed.

"All of it," he said.

Yuffie's mouth worked but nothing came out for a moment.

"Isn't what you have enough?" she finally blurted out.

Cloud's just looked at her, his hand extended.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out four more materia. Cloud took them as well. He kept his hand out.

"That's all of it," Yuffie said.

Cloud didn't move.

"Oh come on!" she pleaded. "Can't you give a girl a break?"

He said nothing, just waited expectantly.

Yuffie muttered in frustration, then reached into her shirt and pulled out two more materia. She slapped them into Cloud's hand.

"Satisfied?" she snapped.

Cloud didn't move. Yuffie looked at him disbelievingly.

"That's it!" she said. "You cleaned me out. It's all gone."

Cloud tapped his foot on the floor.

"I'm telling you, it's all gone," Yuffie protested. "You got it all."

"Yuffie, can you say, strip search?" Reno called out.

Yuffie's face flushed crimson with anger.

"You wouldn't DARE!"

"I'd consider it my personal duty," Reno replied calmly.

"Yuffie!" Cloud demanded.

"You...I...that's.." Yuffie sputtered. "Oh all right!" she finally conceded. She looked at them for a moment, then turned her back and fiddled around with her shorts. Reno's eyes went up in surprise.

"And here I was just joking!" he stated.

Yuffie spared him a glare. When she turned around she held a red materia in her hand.

"It's Knights of the Round," she said. "And I'm sure you all realize just how valuable that is"

"Yes I do," Cloud said seriously. "And I'm sure you realize how many people might die if an army of Jenova reaches our planet"

Yuffie looked down at the stone, then sighed and handed it over. Satisfied, Cloud dropped the materia beside Aeris.

"Get on with it," he said.

"Hold on," Altim said. Cloud turned to look at him. Altim cast a look at Yuffie, then reached into his pocket and pulled out two materia. He held them out for Cloud to take.

Yuffie stared at him.

"Did you steal those from me?" she accused.

"Umm, I think I'd rather not say," Altim replied.

Cloud shook his head and looked around.

"Anybody else?"

No one spoke. He put down the newly acquired materia as well.

Aeris knelt down beside the compartment that held the super materia. She reached inside.

"Aeris, don't do it!" Ellengio said, his voice half pleading, half demanding. Aeris did not reply.

"Aeris, think about what you're doing. If you go through with this you will be dooming the Cetra," Ellengio continued.

"Aeris, you can't abandon them like this. How can you turn your back on your own race?"

Aeris glanced over at him.

"I'm not," she replied. "I'm helping my race."

She turned away again, and closed her eyes, gathering her thoughts.

"The human race," she finished softly.

In the compartment, the others could see the super materia slowly begin to glow. But Cloud did not notice. He had his eyes and his weapon trained on Ellengio. The Cetra stood there, muscles taut, as if ready to spring. Cloud felt his hands tighten on the Chadara weapon, feeling sure that he would need to use it any moment.

But Ellengio came no nearer. The super materia was glowing brightly now, casting multicolored splashes of light throughout the room. Aeris stood up, her eyes fixed on the materia.

"I've done what I can," she said.

The light got brighter still, and for the first time Cloud risked a glance at the machine. It was bathed in light, the super materia glowing like volcanic fire, but so far looking like no more than a fancy light show.

"Is it going to work?" Elena questioned.

Cid stood by the controls, looking down at the patterns of light that ran across the panels.

"I think we've got enough power to give it a shot!" he exclaimed.

He looked at Aeris.

"I just hope we deciphered these things correctly," he said.

"Fine time to worry about that now!" Yuffie exclaimed.

Cid reached down and pressed a series of panels. A moment later the entire machine glowed with white light, blending but not drowning out the light from the materia. A vibration suddenly filled the room, humming up through their feet and reverberating through the air. It was the same vibration they had felt when they had first entered the room, only much stronger.

The vibration grew until the ground beneath them was trembling. Slowly some of the rods protruding from the machine started to move, rising up slowly.

"We have ignition!" Cid said triumphantly.

Cid quickly ran his hands along a few more panels. The vibration suddenly increased in volume, and now they could hear a high pitched whine filling the air around them. Another rod slowly rose up on top of the machine, then another, until finally all the rods were fully extended.

There was a booming reverberation, shuddering the whole room. The whine was loud now, almost painfully so. They could barely stand due to the shaking of the ground around them. Cloud put his hand against the wall to steady himself. On the ground the shards of crystal materia were dancing across the floor as if manipulated by some unknown will.

"How bad is this going to get?" Yuffie questioned.

Cloud shook his head. The reverberation through the floor had not diminished. He looked around and saw the walls shaking all around them. Suddenly a crack appeared running up the far wall. He could see a green glow from within it.

"Is that...lifestream?" he questioned.

The others looked as well. Even as they did so the crack widened into a crevice, and they could all see the ghostly green glow of lifestream inside it.

"We better get out of here!" Ellengio called out.

No one was in a mood to argue. They ran for the door, barely able to keep their footing. They soon found out that the trembling was not confined only to the generator chamber. They stumbled up the steps as fast as they could.

"What's happening?" Elena shouted.

No one seemed to have the time or the inclination to answer. The ground was shaking so badly now that they could barely make progress up the steps. Cracks ran up the walls all around them, and chunks of rock, some of them big enough to do serious damage, fell all around them. It seemed as if the whole mountain were coming apart.

Small rocks fell around them like rain. Dust flew up, obscuring their vision and making it almost impossible to see ahead. They kept moving as best they could, having no clue how much progress they were making, or how much farther they had to go. Cloud dropped to the rear, trying to make sure they didn't lose anyone.

Apruptly the air cleared around him and he found himself standing in the cool darkness outside the cave entrance. He looked back, into the cave. He could see the glow of lifestream not far below. The tremors had not diminished, in fact, they still seemed to be increasing. He had thought that once they were out of the cave they would be safe, but now he wasn't so sure. If this kept up, the whole mountain could come down.

"I think we better get out of here," he said. "Lai Li, tell Roshnialu to ask the Chadara if they could give us a lift down the mountain."

Lai Li nodded and spoke rapidly to Roshnialu, who replied briefly, then flew up to where a knot of Chadara were hovering. Tifa grabbed hold of Cloud's arm.

"We still haven't found Barret!" she exclaimed.

Cloud nodded, looking around. Loose rocks shook and tumbled all around them. It seemed as if the entire mountainside was moving. Suddenly there was a great roar, and a geyser of lifestream shot into the air not far away from them.

"We've got to get out of here!" Reno shouted.

"We can't leave without Barret!" Yuffie exclaimed.

"We haven't seen him in hours," Reno yelled. "He's probably dead."

"I don't believe that," Tifa said, her face pale.

"Then why hasn't he come back?"

"Maybe he went back down the mountain?" Amanda suggested.

"Maybe he's hurt, maybe he's lying somewhere, waiting for us to find him," Tifa suggested.

"We don't have time to argue, this whole mountain could collapse at any moment. If you don't want to join him, we've got to get out of here," Reno said.

"We can't just leave him, not without trying to find him," Aeris said.

"You looked earlier," Reno said, his voice getting more desperate as the trembling of the mountain worsened. "What makes you think you can find him now?"

"We've got to try!" Yuffie insisted.

"You're out of your minds!" Reno shouted.

"We don't have time for this!" Cloud exclaimed. "Reno's right about one thing, we don't have much time. We can't spend it arguing."

Roshnialu had landed again with a group of Chadara.

"Lai Li, have the Chadara take Amanda and anyone else who wants to get out of here down the mountain. The rest of us are going to search for Barret for as long as we can."

"No, you can't," Amanda said. "We all have to leave. It's too dangerous to stay here."

"We don't have time to argue!" Cloud shouted.

Lai Li spoke rapidly to Roshnialu, who nodded and walked over to Amanda.

"You'll all be killed!" Amanda protested.

"We'll take our chances," Tifa said.

"But why?" Amanda cried out. "He's probably already dead."

"We don't know that," Aeris said. "He's our friend, we can't just leave him behind."

"Go!" Cloud snapped impatiently..

Roshnialu took hold of Amanda's arm, but Amanda pulled away.

"Wait!" she exclaimed.

Cloud stared at her angrily, but she just stood there looking at them all. She seemed about to speak, but said nothing. Yuffie frowned and stepped forward.

"What is it, Amanda?" she said.

The young girl lowered her head, refusing to meet Yuffie's gaze.

"I..." she said.

Cloud stepped forward. He started to speak, but Tifa grabbed hold of his arm.

Amanda finally raised her head, a sudden look of resolve etched on her face.

"I know where he is," she said. "Follow me."

Without another word she was off, running along the ridge. The others all just stood there in surprise for a moment. Recovering, they followed. There really was no other choice.

She climbed up a steep slope, the ground still shaking, doubly treacherous as loose rocks tumbled down all around them. Yuffie cried out as one struck her a glancing blow to the head, but she shrugged it off and kept on going. At the top of the slope ran another ridge. Amanda pointed to a tumbled pile of rocks.

"He's in there!" she called out. "Hurry!"

She ran up to the rocks, grabbing hold of one and tossing it aside. Yuffie immediately sprang to her side, and began pulling rocks off the pile as well. The others hesitated a moment, then joined in. Cloud had no idea what was going on, and somehow he realized this was not the time to ask questions. If Barret really was buried underneath all this, they had to get him out as quickly as possible. They're be plenty of time for questions later.

Quickly they dug into the mountain, tossing rocks haphazardly aside, and joining together to push the larger one's out of the way. The tremors continued to increase, and now the mountain shook so badly they could barely stand. Cloud kept glancing up, expecting any minute to see the peak crumble, sending an avalanche hurtling down on them.

"Oh my god!"

He spun around at Elena's cry.

"I found something!" she called out. "It's Barret!"

The others gathered around her. Covered with dust and dirt, barely distinguishable among the stones, they could see Barret's gun arm protruding from under a pile of rocks.

"Shit!" Cid exclaimed. "Let's get him out of there!"

They frantically started to pull the remaining rocks off their friend. A few moments later they grabbed hold of him and pulled him out from under the last one.

"Is he alive?" Tifa asked, her voice quivering.

Zack bent down to examine him.

"He's breathing!" he said.

"All right, let's get out of here!" Cloud said.

Lai Li called out to Roshnialu, and she and the other Chadara grabbed hold of the non fliers and plucked them off the ground. With a quick beat of wings they were gliding away, spiraling down to the plain below. The mountain continued to tremble, lifestream shooting high into the air from dozens of cracks and fissures. Suddenly the whole mountain gave a tremendous shudder. There was an enormous roar, and the entire top of the mountain collapsed in on itself, throwing up a huge cloud of dust.

The Chadara touched down a safe distance from the mountain, lightly depositing their burdens once more on solid ground. They all turned and looked up at the mountain.

"What the hell happened?" Zack questioned.

Cloud just shook his head.

"What happened to the generator?" Nipala asked. "Was it destroyed?"

That was exactly the thought that was on Cloud's mind. Could the super materia have been too powerful? Had it overloaded the device, caused it to self destruct? Had they, in their ignorance, destroyed their only hope of stopping Jenova?

"No," Aeris said. "Look!"

They turned to see her pointing in the sky. Cloud looked up and saw Shinialyn shining high over their heads, but it had changed once more. The blues of the ocean and whites of the clouds were gone. The silver sheen had returned, but no longer diffuse, no longer swirling and patchy. Now the entire planet was a uniform silver color. It reminded Cloud of nothing so much as a giant ball bearing suspended in the sky.

"That's the shield, isn't it?" Reeve said, his voice hopeful.

Aeris stared up at the planet above them.

"Yes," she nodded. "The generator must still be working, somewhere under the lifestream. Perhaps that was a final defense mechanism, to prevent it from being tampered with after it was fully activated. The shield is in place. We did it."

Her voice sounded almost sad.

"Why the long face?" Cid questioned. "We did it. We won!"

Aeris looked down at the ground.

"I know. But we have also cut off a race from the rest of the universe. Jenova didn't start off evil. They had as much right to Shinialyn as the Cetra. If only we could have gotten through to them, we might have been able to prevent all this."

"Now you're feeling sorry for Jenova?" Cid said, shaking his head.

"It wasn't their fault," she replied.

"There wasn't anything you could do," Reeve said. "Any chance there was to avert this passed long before we came here, before we were born."

She looked over at Ellengio, who was silently staring up at the planet above them. He lowered his eyes and his gaze fell upon her.

"You have doomed our race," he said. There was no anger in his words, only sadness. Cloud looked at him angrily, but Aeris did not seem fazed.

"We doomed ourselves long ago," she said.

"I can't believe it's finally over," Tifa said.

Cloud stepped up beside her and took hold of her hand.

"I told you we'd do it," he said.

She just smiled at him.

Yuffie cast one more glance at the mountain.

"My poor materia," she lamented. She looked over to see Amanda standing apart, looking away from them. Yuffie walked over to her. Amanda turned at her approach, her eyes dropping as she saw the stern look on Yuffie's face.

"I think you've got a little bit of explaining to do," Yuffie said.