

CHAPTER IX: ELLENGIO EXPLAINS IT ALL

Tifa awoke to the warm touch of sunlight on her face. She lifted her head, blinking in the shaft of light from the early morning sun falling on her through a nearby window. They had returned to Zack's house last night, much to his parent's relief. His mother had insisted they stay for the night. No one had told her what had happened up on the hill, in fact, no one had said much of anything. They had engaged in some small talk, but they couldn't hide the look on their faces, and Tifa knew it was obvious even to Zack's parents that something had happened.

She sat up and stretched. The couch was not very comfortable, and she had tossed and turned most of the night, but she wasn't sure whether that was because of the couch or all she had on her mind.

She looked over at Cloud, who was still asleep, propped up on two chairs that had hastily been pushed together, and couldn't help but smile. He looked even less comfortable than she had been, but it didn't seem to have stopped him from sleeping like a log.

She got up, being careful to be quiet so as not to wake him. The sun stood just above the horizon, so it must still be very early, but she felt no more need for sleep. She walked into the kitchen. This room faced west, sheltered from the rising sun, and was much colder. She shivered in the chill. There was frost covering the lower half of the windows.

She filled a teapot with water and put it on the stove to warm. No one else seemed to be up, the house still enveloped in silence. She stood there waiting for the water to boil, letting herself relax in the morning quiet.

When the water had boiled she poured herself a cup of tea, then walked over to the window, sipping experimentally to make sure it wasn't too hot. The house cast a long shadow on the backyard outside, the grass still covered with frost. It wouldn't be long now before the world was firmly caught in winter's grasp.

It took her a moment to notice the figure sitting on the stoop outside the backdoor. It was Reeve.

She poured another cup of tea and opened the door. The chill air hit her like a slap in the face. Reeve looked up as the door opened.

"Reeve, what are you doing out here?" she exclaimed. "You'll catch your death of cold."

Reeve looked at her silently for a minute, then turned away.

"I'm not cold," he replied.

It was a transparent lie.

"Reeve, it's freezing," she countered, watching the white mist from her breath. "C'mon inside."

Reeve shook his head.

"No thank you," he replied, his voice flat.

Tifa just stood there for a moment, looking down at him. It was obvious he wasn't going to listen to reason. She hesitated for a moment, then sat down beside him, shuddering for a second at the feel of the cold stone beneath her.

"At least take this," she said, offering him a cup of tea.

He hesitated a moment, then slowly reached out and accepted the cup. They sat there in silence for a little while, Reeve staring off into the distance and Tifa shivering beside him.

"Reeve," she tried. "I don't think you should read too much into what happened yesterday. We were all suffering from a lot of stress. In a situation like that, people say strange things..."

She stopped, looking at him, but he made no response. She had a feeling no matter what she said, it wasn't going to be of much help. But she felt the need to try, nevertheless.

"I'm sure things will all work out in the end," she said optimistically.

Reeve took a sip from the tea. She looked at him, but he did not return her gaze.

"She said she loved him," he said finally.

"She just said that to try to save his life," Tifa replied immediately. "She admitted it herself."

Reeve shook his head.

"No, it was more than that. I saw they way they were looking at each other. I could tell..."

The words faded.

"Reeve..." Tifa began.

For the first time he turned toward her, a forced smile on his face.

"It's okay, though. You don't have to try to cheer me up. I understand. He was her first love. He's strong, handsome, so many things that I'm not. I guess it was kind of silly of me to think that there could be any other outcome. I feel so stupid..."

"Reeve, don't," she said. "Please don't torture yourself. I think you're reading too much into this. I don't think Aeris herself is sure right now what she wants, or how she feels. But I know she cares for you both very much."

Reeve bowed his head, her words seeming to have little effect. Tifa looked at him helplessly. She wanted to reassure him, but there really wasn't anything else she could say. She knew how he felt. She had felt the same way when she had seen Aeris with Cloud, back before she had found out his true feelings. She knew how devastated she would have been if he had chosen differently.

Reeve took a deep breath.

"Thanks for trying to cheer me up," he said. "But right now I don't feel like doing much besides wallow in self pity. But don't worry, I'm not going to do anything stupid."

"I didn't think you were," Tifa replied.

He allowed himself a rueful smile.

"I'm a big boy, I can take it. It's not like I shouldn't have been expecting it, anyway. I'm sure I'll get over it, eventually. But I'm only human and I think I've got a right to do some wallowing, at least for a day or two. After that, I'll get over it, I promise."

Tifa couldn't help but smile. No, if he wanted to wallow she couldn't blame him at all. She put a hand on his shoulder.

"You're a good guy, Reeve."

He forced a crooked smile.

"Yeah, and you know where they finish."

He noticed that, in spite of her tea, she was shivering uncontrollably.

"Why don't you go inside," he said. "It is cold out here. I'll be fine, really."

She looked at him hesitantly.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," he said reassuringly. "Really, I'm fine."

She gave him a long look, then nodded slowly.

"All right," she said. "But don't stay out here too long. I'll be keeping an eye on you."

"Yes mother," he replied.

Tifa made a sour face, then got up and retreated back into the house. She quickly closed the door behind her and stood there for a moment just letting the warmth of the room seep into her. It was so cold out there!

She downed the last of her tea and walked back into the living room. Cloud opened his eyes and looked at her.

"Good morning," she said, walking over to him.

"Good morning to you," he replied. "How long have you been up?"

"A while," she replied.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"Not all that well," she said.

He nodded and took hold of her hand. He looked up at her in surprise.

"You're so cold."

"I know, warm me up," she replied and plopped down in his lap.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, shuddering and trying to pull away, but of course, he had no place to go. "You're ice cold! What, were you sitting in the freezer?"

"No," she replied, wrapping her arms around him as he tried vainly to push her away. "Reeve was sitting outside and I went out to keep him company."

"Wouldn't it have been easier for him to come in?" Cloud asked rhetorically, as he pulled his blanket around both of them. "How is he doing?" he finished, more seriously.

"I feel so bad for him," she replied. "He's not taking it well at all. He seems to think Aeris has made up her mind."

"Well I can't blame him after that display last night," Cloud replied.

"So you think she loves Zack too?" she questioned. "Even though she said she wasn't sure?"

"I don't know," he replied. "In spite of the denial, she seemed pretty serious to me when she said it."

"I'm not so sure," Tifa replied doubtfully.

"So talk to her," Cloud replied. "Let me know what you find out."

"Me? Why should I do it? Why don't you ask her yourself?"

"What makes you think she would tell me anything?" Cloud said.

"What makes you think she would tell me?" Tifa countered.

"It's girl talk," Cloud replied knowingly. "Isn't that what you always talk about when you get together?"

She looked at him sharply.

"Hey, I resent that! You guys and your ego. You think all we ever do is talk about you?"

Cloud nodded and smiled innocently.

"Why not? I know that when I'm with my friends, all I ever talk about is you."

She looked at him skeptically.

"Smooth. But you're not going to get out of it that easily."

He pulled her closer to him and kissed her slowly.

"And don't think one kiss is going to let you weasel out of it either.." she began, as he kissed her again.

His arms wrapped around her, but suddenly he pulled away as they heard the sound of someone walking into the room.

Tifa turned around to see Reeve standing in the doorway.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but it looks like Cid's coming."

They disentangled themselves from the blanket, and even as they did so Tifa picked up the low rumble of an aircraft. They hurried outside, Tifa muttering a curse under her breath to be out in the cold once again. They looked south and saw the distinctive outline of the Slipstream descending above the houses. Cloud immediately ran down the road towards it, the others following more slowly. The plane came down in a rock strewn field just on the edge of town. Cloud reached it just as the hatch opened up.

"What the hell are you people doing running around in this freezing weather without any damn coats on?" Cid admonished as he stepped out of the plane. He looked quite comfortable himself in his fur lined bomber jacket.

"Hey, can I help it if we can't wait to see your smiling face?" Cloud shot back. "How was the rocket test?"

"Great!" Cid replied somewhat proudly. "Everything went smooth as silk. Should be ready to launch in a few weeks. But I ain't here to talk about that. Ellengio wants you all in Wutai pronto. He and Red have translated the book. So get your gear together and let's haul ass!"

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It took them almost an hour to get everything organized, and nearly as long to fly to Wutai, but soon they found themselves walking down the street toward Lord Godo's house.

They had put on their coats, of course, but Tifa still shivered. It was even colder here than in Gongaga, and she could see clumps of snow along the sidewalks from a recent snowfall. She walked along next to Aeris, but her friend was silent.

Inside Lord Godo's house a fire was burning brightly in the huge fireplace in the living room. Ellengio, Red, Nipala, and Lai Li were gathered around a table with the book open on it. Ellengio looked up and greeted them.

"Glad you could make it. Thank you for coming so promptly."

"You're welcome," Cloud replied. "And we hardly had a choice, since Cid nearly dragged us out of the house to get us here."

Cid just shrugged.

"You said it was important."

"Indeed it is," Ellengio replied. "Indeed it is. Please, have a seat, all. This may take a bit of explaining."

Ellengio waited patiently until they were all comfortable.

"We've translated the book," he said. "As Cid may have told you. It took less time than we thought."

"It was pretty easy, actually," Lai Li interrupted. "We thought it would have no relation to any known language, but we were wrong. It was actually quite similar to an archaic form of the Cetra language. The program picked it up immediately and we had our translation in no time."

Ellengio paused for a moment, seeming slightly perturbed by the interruption. But then he continued.

"Yes, that's true. We were all quite surprised by that."

"So wait a minute," Reeve cut in. "If the language in the book is related to the Cetra language, then doesn't that mean that it might be from this planet after all?"

"Good question," Red replied. "And at first, that was what we thought. But...well, just listen to the rest of the story."

"Yes," Ellengio said slowly, looking around at them. "You'll all get a chance to ask questions later. If I may please continue?"

All of them took the hint.

"As I was saying," Ellengio continued. "The book is written in an ancient Cetra language and appears to be a history of a Cetra clash with Jenova on another planet."

They all looked at him in surprise. Cloud opened his mouth, but did not speak.

"The name of the planet was Shinialyn. For a thousand years, the two species had fought one another there, with neither side gaining an advantage. Those were dark years, the book filled with chapter after chapter of horror and destruction. The Cetra suffered terrible losses, but they did not abandon the planet. They knew that this menace had to be faced, for if it was not stopped on this planet then it would spread, out to other worlds, and to any innocent species that may dwell there. The Cetra could have fled, but if they had done so, they would have left these other planets undefended against this threat."

"But Jenova was an adaptable species, and though the Cetra tried many different tactics against them, nothing was very successful, and eventually, Jenova started to win."

"Slowly the cities of the Cetra around the planet were destroyed or fell to Jenova, until finally only one was left, the greatest city the Cetra had constructed on the planet, the city of Dal Centir. The leader of the Cetra at that time was a great

warrior known as Rostalion. He had led his people in battle for many years, and no single Jenova could stand before him, but he knew even his prowess in battle could not save the city against the onslaught that was now approaching."

"All this time they fought, the Cetra continued to research new ideas, new ways to stop Jenova, and in the last hours a desperate plan was conceived. Though they knew the battle was hopeless and this planet was lost, they still believed that they might be able to stop the spread of Jenova to other worlds. There was another prominent Cetra at the time, a woman named Talisheedra. She was perhaps the greatest scientist in Cetra history. She had developed dozens of weapons to be used in the war against Jenova, and she had also created an electromagnetic force field generator. And it was in this that they placed their last hope."

"Shinialyn had a habitable moon orbiting it, called Grouchoon."

"Gesundheit," Cloud muttered. Tifa and Aeris both giggled.

Ellengio gave them a sharp look and they clammed up.

"Anyway," he continued. "Talisheedra was sent there with the best scientists the Cetra had left with the purpose of creating a force field generator that could envelope an entire planet. They were then supposed to use this generator to create a force field surrounding Shinialyn, thereby trapping Jenova on the planet forever."

"But wouldn't..." Cloud started, but then shook his head and closed his mouth.

"Yes," Ellengio said, anticipating the question. "The force field would also trap any Cetra left on the planet. And there were still thousands, maybe even millions of them there. Many had scattered into the hills when their cities had been destroyed, and many were slaves to Jenova. And there was still the population of Dal Centir. They had considered abandoning the city, but unless they remained to keep Jenova occupied, Jenova would follow them to the moon and possibly destroy the generator, and all would be lost then."

"Meanwhile Jenova had been gathering it's forces, and soon attacked the city. The battle raged on for weeks, and before it was over Talisheedra finished the generator. There was no way to get the people in Dal Centir out, of course, and Rostalion ordered her to turn it on. Reluctantly she did so, and all the Cetra on Shinialyn were left to their fate."

"That might have been the end of the story, but Talisheedra soon discovered a problem. The force field was not perfect. The power source wasn't strong enough to sustain it completely. Occasionally random holes would develop in it. And through these it was possible that a Jenova could slip out. Though it also meant that a Cetra could as well, she knew that for the good of all, these holes had to be closed up."

"Eventually, she came upon a solution. She developed a special type of gem, a gem that held so much power it could sustain the force field at full strength indefinitely. That gem is known to us as the crystal materia."

Once more he saw looks of surprise from those around him.

"Grouchoon had it's own intelligent species on it, called the Chadara. Though not as advanced as the Cetra, they nonetheless agreed to help any way they could. They assisted Talisheedra in the creation of the crystal materia. But again, Jenova had not been idle. At least one had already penetrated the force field. When it reached the moon and learned of Talisheedra's plans, it intercepted her on the way to the generator and killed her, but one of the Chadara escaped with the crystal materia. Knowing that Jenova would hunt him down and also realizing that he didn't have the knowledge to connect the crystal materia to the generator, the Chadara took a Cetra spacecraft and escaped, taking with him the crystal materia and a book."

No one had to say that he was talking about the same book that was on the table before them now.

"This Chadara managed, out of all the millions of stars with dozens of planets surrounding them, to somehow find his way to our planet. He must have died soon after. And it must have been his bones that lay in the cavern where both the crystal materia and the book were found."

Ellengio fell silent, looking around at them, his tale obviously at an end.

"Wow," Zack muttered. Even Cloud had to admit it had been a fascinating story.

"Why didn't the Cetra use the force field to protect Dal Centir?" Reeve questioned.

"That was actually discussed in the book," Ellengio replied. "That might have protected the city, but it would have left Jenova free to expand to other planets, which was what they were trying to prevent. They might have saved themselves, but left all the other worlds open to invasion."

"But maybe with some more time they could have developed a weapon that would work on Jenova," Cloud said.

"Perhaps," Ellengio replied. "But they didn't know for sure, and it was too risky to take the chance. They didn't have a lot of time, and the plan to shield the entire planet seemed the best."

Cloud accepted that answer and they fell silent, each pondering the story Ellengio had told them.

"Now wait a minute," Cid said. "If there were holes in this force field, and some Jenova could escape, then what was to prevent them from going to another planet and starting all over again, building themselves up until they could spread?"

"They could pass through the force field, but that doesn't mean it didn't affect them. Any Jenova that passed through was rendered sterile. They could escape, but only to live out their own lifetime. They couldn't colonize another world," Ellengio replied.

"If the Cetra reached Grou...Grouchoon, then what was to prevent them from destroying the generator?" Aeris asked.

"The generator was hidden, it's location known only to a few," Ellengio replied. "It would have been difficult for them to find it."

"After all these years, I'd say they've had time to do a very thorough search," Cid commented. "Hell, after all these years, it might have broke down on it's own by now."

"Possible, but I don't think so," Ellengio replied. "If the generator was no longer functioning, then Jenova would be free to expand out into the universe. In that case, I doubt that a single one would have arrived here by itself. Instead there would have been thousands of them. No, if the generator was not working, they'd be all over the place by now."

"You can't say that for sure," Nipala stated. "For all we know, some natural disaster or something wiped them all out long ago."

"Well, since one was here recently, there must still be *some* around," Red pointed out. "But it's true, anything could have happened by now. Still, it seems likely to me that the threat is still there. A Jenova arrived here, and I think it's now clear what his purpose was. As long as the crystal materia exists, there's the possibility that it can be used in the generator to permanently close off Jenova's ability to escape from Shinialyn. They must want to destroy it at all costs."

"Exactly," Ellengio concurred. "Which means, if they don't have proof that the crystal materia is destroyed, there's a good possibility we'll be visited again."

No one looked very happy with the thought of that.

"But it took them two thousand years to send another one after the first one failed. How do we know it won't take them two thousand more years to send another?" Tifa asked.

"And besides, if we don't use the crystal materia, I thought we were safe," Reeve added.

"Perhaps," Red replied. "But we don't know that for sure. We don't know how Jenova thinks. Another one could arrive at any time, for all we know. But even if it took two thousand years for another to come, do you want the threat of that hanging over our planets head?"

"You're talking like there's something we can do about it," Zack stated.

Ellengio stood there looking at them all for a moment.

"There is," he said.

The room suddenly went very silent.

"We have the crystal materia," Ellengio stated, slowly turning to look at Cid. "And we now have the capability to leave this planet."

Cid stood there for a moment as the realization of what Ellengio was saying sunk in.

"You want to use my rocket to go to this other planet?" he said, shocked.

Ellengio nodded slowly.

"It may be possible," he said.

The others just sat there, all of them as shocked as Cid appeared. To most of them what Ellengio had said was just a wild story, a fairy tale. Interesting as a bed time story perhaps, but no more. What he was suggesting now seemed so outlandish as to border on the ridiculous.

"I know the idea must be a shock to you," Ellengio stated, looking around at their faces. "And I know what I am proposing is a dangerous thing. I know you've all faced danger before, grave danger, but even so, this is different. What I am proposing is that you leave everything you know behind, to head out into the unknown with no certainty that we will ever return. We all fought hard against Jenova, and were hoping that we had seen the end of this. And I wish that were true but it isn't. For what you've all done already, the people of this planet, and the planet itself, and indebted to you, and it seems almost unfair to ask more of you. But the Cetra of Shinialyn gave at least as much, and I cannot forget the sacrifices they made, for the sake of us all, and not just for themselves. I believe we owe it to them to attempt this. For without the sacrifices they made it is quite likely that Jenova would have overrun this planet long ago. They were my people, and in their name I am willing to take it upon myself, alone if necessary, and if I could, to finish what they started, to make sure that their deaths were not in vain."

He turned to look once more at Cid.

"But I cannot do it alone," he said. "I cannot pilot your ship, so I must burden you at least with accompanying me. I know you have every right to refuse, as do all your companions, but I'm asking you, for the sake of the Cetra that died to protect all of you long before you were even born, will you do this for me?"

Cid hesitated for just a moment.

"Yes," he said. "Hell, how could I refuse after a speech like that?"

The hint of a smile crossed Ellengio's face. He looked at the others.

"I'm with you," Aeris said immediately.

"And me," Reeve stated.

Cloud looked around.

"I think you'll find that we are all willing," he said slowly.

Ellengio nodded and bowed his head.

"Thank you all," he said softly.

"But wait a minute," Lai Li spoke. "Just because you've got a rocket doesn't mean you can go shooting off to whatever planet you like. How far away is this Shinialyn anyway? How do you get there? I don't know what kind of power the Cetra rockets used, but the planet obviously is not in our solar system. It would take us years to reach it, at least, it might even take longer than our lifetimes."

Ellengio glanced over at her.

"Us?" he questioned.

"Of course," she replied. "I want to go too."

"I'm afraid that would be impossible," he stated.

"Why?" he retorted.

"This is going to be very dangerous," he replied. "I wouldn't want to put anyone in danger who didn't have to be."

"So? They're all going," she said, pointing to the others. "You're putting them in danger."

"But they've all trained for it," Ellengio replied. "They've fought Jenova before. They're experienced and they know what they're getting themselves into."

"You're going to another planet," she pointed out. "No one knows what's going to happen. None of you really knows what you're getting yourselves into."

"It's out of the question," he said firmly. "We know we're going to be facing Jenova. You're no fighter. The truth is, you would just be a burden."

"A burden?" she said angrily. "Hah! You think just because I don't know how to fight that I'm useless? Who was it that translated that book for you, anyway? There's more to this than just fighting you know, it might come in handy to have someone who's good with languages. You may run into those Chadara people there, and it's not likely that they're going to be walking around spouting the Kings English. Might be handy to have a translator with you."

Ellengio and Lai Li exchanged glares, neither one of them willing to back down.

"It's all moot if we can't get there," Cloud stepped in. "What about what Lai Li says? How do we find this planet?"

Ellengio took a moment to compose himself.

"We can find it, but we still need one more thing. With that all we would have to do is break out of orbit from the planet. Once in outer space we can travel through a wormhole that will take us right to Shinialyn."

"A wormhole?" Cid exclaimed. "How do you know there's even one nearby?"

"There doesn't have to be," Ellengio replied. "We can call one with the celestial summon materia."

"The what?" Cloud said.

"The celestial summon materia," Ellengio replied. "But I believe it is know by you as the black materia."

"Black materia?" Cloud exclaimed. "The one Sephiroth used to summon Meteor?"

"Yes," Ellengio said. "It's what Jenova uses to navigate through the universe. Sephiroth obviously got his from the first Jenova that came here. I searched Gongaga after we killed the Healer, but I never found the one he brought, and I suspect it was destroyed. So we're going to have to find the one that Sephiroth used. Which means.."

"We have to go back to the northern crater," Cloud finished.

Ellengio nodded.

"Indeed. From what you have told me, it could be quite dangerous. The residual mako energy from your battle with Sephiroth may have created some dangerous creatures. It might be wise to go there in force."

Cloud nodded.

"I think it's time we contacted the other members of Avalanche."