

CHAPTER VI: EATING WITH THE ENEMY

Yuffie ran over to the small window and looked out. The room she was in was high up in the fortress and overlooked a small courtyard. Nine men were down in the courtyard below, exercising. She stood looking out the window, running vigorously in place, as she had been for the last half hour. Sweat dripped from her forehead and her clothes were soaked.

She ran back into a corner of the room where she could not be seen just in case someone looked through the little window in the door to her chamber. Although it was unlikely anyone would. No one came to her room until shortly after they had finished exercising outside. They were so predictable.

She continued running in place, every once in a while going over to look out the window, until she saw the people below leaving the courtyard. Then she started to count to herself. When she reached five hundred she walked over to the bed, lay down and closed her eyes.

Less than five minutes later she heard someone at the door. It opened and she heard them come into the room. Although she did not open her eyes, she knew from previous experience there would be two of them.

"Hey, you alright?" she heard one man say.

She didn't respond.

"Hey," the man said. It sounded like he was right beside her now.

"Is she okay?" she heard the second man ask.

Someone shook her.

"Are you alright?" he said loudly in her ear.

She turned her head slightly and moaned.

"She's sweating like a pig," said the man.

She felt a hand on her forehead for a moment.

"She's burning up."

"She seemed sick for the last few days," she heard the second man say.

They were silent for a moment.

"You better go get someone to take a look at her. We don't want her to die just yet."

She heard footsteps slowly fading away. She opened her eyes a slit to see the man who was left glancing back toward the door.

Her foot came up and caught him in the back of the head.

"Ugh," he said, and fell to the side. She sprang up and pummeled him with numerous quick blows. He was too surprised to defend himself, and after half a dozen blows fell to the floor and lay still.

She jumped past him and ran out the open door. To the left the hall ended blindly. She turned to the right and saw a man with white hair and beard leaning against the wall, looking at her thoughtfully.

She stopped.

"Damn!" she exclaimed.

He walked slowly over to her.

"Much as you may find it hard to believe, but we are not all idiots. I hope you didn't damage Danz too badly. He's a good man, though a little green."

He indicated her chamber.

"Shall we go back in?"

She looked him over for a moment but did not move.

He smiled.

"Do you wish to challenge me again? I have to admit I admire your spirit. You are very brave, though still young and foolish. If you play your cards right, you may still get out of this with your skin intact. As the daughter of the leader of Wutai you are a valuable prisoner, one I would not wish to see die unnecessarily, but if you keep up these foolish escape attempts, you may leave me with no choice."

He stepped back into ready position.

"So what will it be?" he asked casually.

She looked at him for a moment in silence, then sighed and walked back into her chamber. He followed her in, but she could sense he still had not let down his guard.

Danz was just getting up from the floor, holding his head. He turned and looked at Yuffie darkly.

"You're going to pay for this," he said through clenched teeth.

"Enough," the white haired man said commandingly. "It is not her fault you were stupid enough to fall for her trap. Understand your mistake and learn. Never underestimate your enemy nor let down your guard in their presence. That is what you should take from this, not a witless desire for revenge. Do you understand?"

Danz bowed his head.

"Yes, honored one."

"Good. You will make a fine warrior someday, but you have much to learn. You will continue to guard our prisoner, and she will not escape or be harmed in any way, or you will be held responsible. You have seen her tricks, and have fallen into one of her traps, but that can be forgiven. To have it happen again, however, would disgrace you. Do not let that happen."

"Yes, honored one, thank you" Danz replied again.

"Very good. Now why don't you get our 'guest' some clean clothes. She seems to have rather abused the ones she's wearing, and we wouldn't want her to be uncomfortable."

Danz walked out the door. The older man followed but turned to Yuffie when he reached the entrance.

"My guess is that it would be pointless for me to ask you to stop making these escape attempts. I think you feel duty bound to continue regardless. A point of honor, I would say. At least, that is how I would feel about it. Nevertheless, I am going to ask. You will not escape. I will be watching at all times. Continuing can only lead you to harm, and even though I do not wish that, do not doubt that I will kill you if it becomes necessary. Your stay here can be quite pleasant or otherwise, it is up to you."

He turned away and closed the door. Yuffie did not move for some time, then turned slowly and lay down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Already she was thinking about her next move.

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Cloud awoke refreshed. He thought he had dreamed some, but he couldn't remember what about, only that it left him with a satisfying feeling. He couldn't remember the last time he had had a pleasant dream.

Tifa was in the kitchen, whipping up breakfast for all of them. The others were in the main room, all except Reno and Cid, who were still presumably sleeping. After a while Vincent and Rude went to fetch the two laggards, and finally managed to get them up with threats of missing breakfast. Soon after they gathered their gear and headed up into the hills in the direction Cid and Vincent had seen the mysterious fog the day before.

It was a little warmer than the day before, but not much. The sky was clear and the trail seemed little changed. It didn't take them long to reach the place where the previous days altercation had taken place. They inspected the area where the missiles from the Slipstream had hit but, like yesterday, found nothing of significance. There was a narrow path that led up through the rocks to the west, and Cloud soon led them up it.

The path led over the top of a jagged ridge, and then dropped down into a shallow valley. Or what they took for a shallow valley, for all they could see below them was a sea of fog.

"I guess this must be the place," Cloud commented.

The path narrowed as it dropped down into the mist, and they were forced to walk in single file. Cloud could see but a few feet ahead through the fog, and the walls of the canyon rose up steeply on either side of them. He moved forward slowly. He did not have a good feeling about this. The lack of visibility and narrow confines practically screamed ambush.

He drew his sword and continued on. If they did run into an ambush, he was going to be prepared. He listened intently as he went. With the low visibility he thought he might hear something before he saw it. Even that was unlikely, however. Anyone walking through the soft snow would make little sound, and they wouldn't have an opportunity to hear even that if their enemy was already waiting on the trail ahead. The only way to hear them would be if they slipped up and spoke or made some other sound accidentally, and he didn't think that would happen. Even if they did slip up and make a sound, it was unlikely he would hear it with all the talking that was going on behind him.

He turned to look at the others.

"Quiet," he said, trying to speak loud enough for all of them to hear but not loudly enough to be overheard by others. "With all this talking we might as well be shouting 'here we are.'"

Some of the others gave him a look but they all fell silent.

He turned around and led them down the trail once more. They seemed to have reached the floor of the valley, for the ground leveled out and the steep walls on either side of them fell away. Now they were walking in a sea of snow and fog with no landmarks at all except for trees that materialized out of the mist occasionally around them.

They walked on for some time with no sign that anyone else was in the area. Though he was walking what he hoped was a more or less straight line, with little visibility and few landmarks, Cloud soon became unsure of which direction they were traveling in. He hoped he wasn't just leading them in circles.

Barret, who was directly behind him, seemed to be thinking much the same thing.

"In this fog we could walk within ten yards of someone and not see them," he said softly. "We could wander around in here for months. How are we going to find them? Assuming, of course, that there is in fact someone in here and we're not just walking around on some wild goose chase."

"I feel the same way," Cloud replied. "but I don't see that there is anything we can do about it, unless someone knows some way to make this fog magically disappear. We'll just have to keep trudging along and hope to stumble upon something through blind luck. I don't think we are wasting our time, though. I know they're here somewhere. We're close to them, I can feel it."

Barret did not reply, willing to trust Cloud's instincts, but he was not happy about it. With each passing minute he felt more and more like a rat trapped in a maze.

They moved on, and soon after Cloud did hear a sound ahead of them, the sound of flowing water. A river appeared out of the gloom and they stopped at it's bank. The water was flowing swiftly, preventing it from freezing over. It was not very wide, but it looked too deep to wade through, and he knew none of them would be anxious to swim in freezing water.

"What now?" Elena said.

Cloud looked across the water, but he could not see much past the far bank.

"Well, we can't cross here. Let's head upstream. Maybe we can find somewhere to cross further on."

There wasn't much else for anyone to say, and they followed him once again as he led them beside the river. For a while they saw nothing, but then something dark appeared on the river ahead.

"What's that?" Aeris asked.

Before anyone could answer the mist cleared slightly and they could all see it was a wooden bridge that spanned the river.

"A bridge," Cloud replied unnecessarily.

He led them quickly over to it, heartened to have finally found some sign that they were not traveling through empty wilderness. When they reached the bridge he found something to please him even more. A trail of footprints came from out of the mist and crossed over the bridge.

"Looks like we're not alone out here after all," Cait said.

"It's about time we found something," Barret commented.

Cloud said nothing but led them quickly over the bridge. The tracks led off to what he considered the west, although in the fog that was only a guess. He led them swiftly now, though he still kept his eyes open. He felt much better now that they were no longer wandering around aimlessly, but by the same token he knew the chances of an ambush were greater as well.

The trees closed in around them, but the track went in a more or less straight line and was easy to follow. Soon they saw a dark mass loom up out of the mist in front of them. They stepped forward to find themselves at the base of a large stone building.

The tracks led up to an iron bound wooden door.

"Never thought I'd see anything like this out here," Cid commented.

Even as he spoke dark figures materialized out of the fog around them. There were more than twenty of them. They all wore the same identical black outfits. Not exactly designed to blend in with the snow, but the fog had hidden them well enough. A man Reno recognized as the one he had spoken with yesterday stepped forward.

"I told you it wasn't over," he said, looking at Reno. "I knew you'd be back. Some people are just gluttons for punishment. I see you've brought some friends, for all the good it will do you."

He looked up.

"And I don't think we'll be getting any rude interruptions from above," he added. "It is death to look upon this fortress."

"Yeah, yeah, we know," Reno replied dismissively. "We heard it all yesterday, but surprise, surprise, we're still here."

"Not for long," the man replied. "Yesterday I said I would not enjoy killing you, but after that dirty trick with that airplane it will be a pleasure."

"You're wasting time," said a deep voice from the back. "Finish them."

Their opponents started forward immediately. Cloud did not have time to form a battle plan, and the fight soon became a confusing melee. It was impossible to keep track of everyone, and he quickly decided it was best to tend his own business and not worry about the others. Not waiting for the enemy to reach him, he sprang forward to the attack.

Tifa tried to stay close to Cloud. As she followed him a man came up on her left. He struck at her with his fist. She blocked and kicked at his knee, but he dodged nimbly out of the way and countered with a kick of his own. It got under her guard and hit her in the side. With a grunt she went down. He stepped toward her and she instantly swept her leg around and brought him down too. She sprang to her feet and kicked again before he could get up, hitting him in the side of the face. He fell back and lay still. She turned to follow Cloud, her side aching. Elena had been right, she thought ruefully. They were good.

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Cid had formed a defensive line alongside the Turks, with Vincent to back them up. He saw Reno's nightstick flash once with electricity before the enemy was upon them. He slashed viciously with his spear at anyone who came near him, but it seemed all he could hit was air. Every one of their opponents seemed to be amazingly fast. He swung at another one, who jumped quickly out of the way.

"Stand and fight, you little SOB's," he growled.

Almost immediately he felt his knees buckle as he was struck from behind. He scrambled to dodge a second blow as the man attempted to finish him off. He heard the sound of gunfire and the man cried out in pain and, clutching his leg, stumbled away.

Cid looked over at Vincent, but he was now firing at a group of men who had surrounded Reno and Rude. He was about to go help them as well when he saw another man run up to Vincent. He kind of stood out because he had white hair and looked much older than any of the others. Too old to be fighting this kind of battle, Cid thought. Vincent turned toward the man and fired at point blank range, but somehow the man managed to twist out of the way. His arm came up, and Vincent's gun went flying through the air.

Vincent swung his fist, but the man ducked under it. His arm came up again and Vincent went down hard.

With a cry Cid ran over to them. The man turned toward him but made no move, waiting for Cid to attack. Cid was happy to oblige. He swung angrily with his spear, but the man almost casually stepped out of the way. Cid swung again, and the man stepped inside of the blow and struck Cid on the chest. Pain radiated throughout his body and he fell to the ground, dropping his spear beside him. He tried to get up, but his body would not respond. He could only watch helplessly as the man stooped down beside him. Then everything faded into darkness.

The old man stood up and glanced around. Even as he did so another man appeared out of the mist. He quickly hurried over.

"Honored one," he said with a bow, "we request your assistance. The man with the sword fights with the strength of ten."

The old man looked over to where the Turks were fighting. They were cornered against a rocky slope. Already one of them was on the ground, and the other two were barely holding their own against six opponents. He nodded and quickly followed the man, who swiftly led him away.

Barret fired a long blast from his gun and his opponents scrambled for cover among the rocks.

"Yeah, go ahead and run you little shits," he said with a smile. He turned to his left. Aeris and Red were battling against four others. He started over toward them when another man appeared in front of him. He fired and the man dodged away.

"You wouldn't be so tough without that gun," the man called from behind some rocks.

Barret smiled again.

"Tough luck, bub, it's part of the package," he replied, and fired another blast in the man's general direction.

Suddenly three others sprang out of the rocks nearby and charged at him. With a curse he turned and fired. He thought he got one before he felt a stinging blow to the back of his head. He fell to the ground. He tried to get up again immediately, but when he did his head practically exploded with pain. He fell back down and quickly slipped into unconsciousness.

Red saw Barret go down, but they were too far away for him to do anything about it. Besides, he had enough problems of his own trying to hold off three attackers. He had remembered Cloud's concerns about Aeris and tried to stay with her, but he had been so busy fighting for his own life he hadn't had much time to be worried about her.

She stood not far behind him, holding her own against the lone other attacker. Three of the four that had taken down Barret were now rushing toward them, the other one was on the ground, wounded. Red knew they would stand no chance against seven.

He launched himself at the one man who stood between himself and Aeris. The man jumped out of the way and Red raced over to her. The man she was fighting saw him coming and turned, but as he did so Aeris struck him solidly with her rod. He grunted and then scrambled out of the way.

"There are too many of them," Red said as he came up beside her. "See if you can get us some help, I'll try to hold them off."

Aeris hesitated.

"I don't want to leave you," she said. She couldn't see the others in the fog, although she could hear the sounds of battle nearby. She knew Red wouldn't last very long at seven to one.

"No time to argue," he said curtly. "It's our only chance!"

Aeris looked at him, then turned and ran. However she may feel about it, she knew he was right.

He turned and crouched as the seven men slowly approached, fanning out around him. He watched them carefully. Even if the others were not in the same predicament as he, or worse, he doubted Aeris could get back in time. Whatever happened, he was on his own, and the odds didn't look good. He didn't stand much of a chance at seven to one. But he couldn't help but remember someone else who had fought bravely against even longer odds.

They had him surrounded now, and they cautiously approached. He turned to look from one to the other, trying to look confused so as to conceal his intentions. Perhaps he could catch them off guard, though they seemed too seasoned to fall for that. Still, any little advantage might help. He waited a moment more, crouched down, and then, thinking of his father, suddenly launched himself at the nearest opponent.

Cloud found himself back by the river, although not by intention. He fell upon his enemies with wild abandon, swinging the sword as one possessed, and even his opponent's formidable hand to hand skills were no match for him. They fell back before him, and soon realized they could not challenge him directly, at least not one on one. But Cloud's aggressive style left him open to attack on his flanks, and if he had been alone he soon would have fallen in spite of his considerable skills. But Tifa and Cait remained with him, guarding his flanks. With Cloud thus protected he was nearly unstoppable, and the enemy soon concentrated their attacks on Tifa and Cait, hoping to peel away his protection. But in Tifa they met an opponent with hand to hand skills at least equal to their own, and Cait's huge body could absorb a lot of punishment without much discomfort. For a long time they more than held their own.

Cloud swung his sword one more time as an enemy ran by, then looked up. For a moment their opponents had fallen back, and it was quiet around them. He glanced around warily.

"Where are the others?" he asked.

Tifa shook her head.

"I don't know," she replied. "But I don't like it. I don't hear any more fighting."

Cloud nodded. They could have just moved so far away from the others that they were out of earshot. Or it could mean that the other battles were over. If that were true it did not bode well, for if their friends had won then why hadn't they come to help. On the other hand, if their opponents had won, why hadn't they come to help their side.

Even as he thought this he heard a shout and their opponents attacked again. Cloud was not sure how many there were. He could see three right in front of him, and some others to the sides, but he had no time to stop and count them. He heard a shout from Cait that there were some coming up behind as well.

He attacked. Two of the three in front of him dropped back as he came at them. The third man stood his ground. He was a much older man with white hair, and he looked out of place in the middle of the battle, but Cloud wasn't about to stop and ask questions.

His sword whistled through the air, but that was all it cut. Though Cloud was sure the man could not dodge the blow he somehow managed it. He stepped toward Cloud and struck at his chest.

With catlike reflexes of his own Cloud dodged backward to avoid the blow. But doing so made him lose his balance and he stumbled backward into Tifa. The old man moved in while Cloud was off balance, but before he could strike Tifa turned to face him.

They both stopped and stood staring at one another. Neither one moved.

"Zangan," she said softly.

Zangan looked at her, the raising of one eyebrow the only indication of his surprise. He saw one of his men coming up behind her.

"Stop!" he shouted commandingly. Their opponents immediately broke off their attack and stepped back.

Zangan looked around, making sure he had everyone's attention.

"This battle is over."

~*~

Cloud sat beside his friends in a large common room inside the fortress. They were gathered around a wooden table in the center of the room. A table covered with dishes and plates and food of all varieties. Across from them at the same table sat many of the men they had been battling to the death just a short time ago. He thought it amazing how quickly things had changed.

Zangan sat at the head of the table, with Tifa to his right and Cloud next to her. The two had been talking almost non stop since they had recognized each other. Cloud looked the man over. So this was her famous mentor. They had met once briefly in Nibelheim, but Cloud would never have recognized him after all this time. Except for the fact that his hair was as white as any he had ever seen, the man looked downright ordinary. Walking by him on the street Cloud would never have

guessed that this was the man who taught Tifa practically everything she knew about fighting. If he had not seen the man in action himself he would have thought him long past his prime.

Though Zangan seemed perfectly at ease Cloud could tell that some of the others at the table were not. He could see that more than a few of them, most with wounds inflicted just recently, were eyeing the newcomers darkly. Cloud could hardly blame them. In fact, he could see some people on his side of the table with the same look on their faces.

Zangan noticed as well.

"Let me apologize again for the rudeness of your reception," he said. "Our mission is to guard the fortress against thieves. Important work is going on here, and there are some who would go to great lengths to interfere with it. I assumed you were here for the same purpose. It was foolish of me."

"So you treat anyone who happens by as if they were a thief?" Barret said. His head still ached from the blow they had given him.

"Barret!" Tifa exclaimed.

Zangan held up his hand.

"No, he's right," he said. "Again I apologize. It's just that this place is so secluded I thought anyone who came here would have to be up to no good. I realize now how wrong I was, but I cannot take back anything that was done. I am just thankful that no one was killed. If it makes you feel better, we have just as many, if not more, bruises to show for it. Your fighting skills are admirable."

Barret scowled but said nothing more.

"Exactly what kind of work are you doing here?" Red spoke up.

Zangan looked at him and shook his head slowly.

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"I have heard about the legendary beasts of Cosmo Canyon that talk like a man, but I had only half believed it," he said.

"We can talk business later if you wish," he continued, returning to the point of Red's question. "For now relax and enjoy your meal. Perhaps our hospitality now can make up to some extent for what we put you through."

Cid, who had been eating almost nonstop since the meal was laid before him, looked up.

"Well, it certainly doesn't hurt," he stated. "My compliments to the chef."

Cloud wondered if Zangan was evading the question, but he supposed they would find out soon enough.

"You said your job was to guard this place," he ventured. "Who hired you? Who's running this place?"

"To guard it, and to train the security forces," Zangan replied with a nod. "The man who actually owns it is a scientist named Quays. He should be coming up shortly, but he is kind of an eccentric and doesn't like visitors."

"That's apparent," Elena piped in.

Zangan glanced up briefly at her for a moment and then continued.

"He's working on one of his projects right now. In fact, he spends almost all his time down in the lab. He set this whole thing up in this secluded area just so there would be no one around to disturb him."

"It seems like he's gone through an awful lot of trouble to keep people away," Cloud said. "Is what he is doing really that important?"

Zangan started to reply and then looked past Cloud.

"Here he comes now," he said. "I'll let him answer for himself."

They turned and saw a man approaching. He was wearing ordinary clothes, and was the first person they had seen here who was not dressed in the black outfit. He had short brown hair and looked surprisingly young. He did not fit Cloud's image of a scientist at all.

The man walked around behind them and came up beside Zangan. He looked at them and nodded a greeting.

"I assume you want some sort of explanation of what is going on here," he said. "I will be happy to tell you about it, but it's too noisy in here, and some of the information might not be suitable for all ears. Why don't we retire to the sitting room. It's much quieter there, and more secluded.

Cloud shrugged in agreement. Apparently the man trusted his own people little more than strangers.

They got up and followed him down a short corridor into another large room, although not quite as large as the first. This one contained shelves filled with books along three walls.

Quays paced back and forth for a few moments waiting for the others to get settled. Of all of his men, only Zangan had stayed with them.

"You are probably wondering why we are so worried about security here," Quays said. "The simple answer is that the work we are doing is so revolutionary that it could change the world."

Even while he talked he continued to pace back and forth.

"I am sure you have all used materia at one time or another in the past, and are acquainted with it's properties and usefulness. On a small scale materia can use the elemental powers of the planet to significant effect, and cause a wide range of changes in a limited locale. What we are trying to do here is take that concept and expand it significantly."

"I am creating a process that concentrates the power of materia to an extent never seen before, never imagined before. Instead of the materia affecting a single object or a small area nearby, the concentrated materia will be able to influence a huge area."

He stopped and looked at them.

"How huge, you might ask," he said, supplying his own question. "There's really no telling at the moment. But the difference in effect could be quite staggering. Imagine using barrier to stop a flood, or casting cure on an entire city."

"Or casting fire on an entire city," Barret suggested.

"Exactly," Quays answered. "In the wrong hands this power could cause worldwide devastation. So you see the need for all the security. If we seem paranoid, it may be for good reason."

"So you are the ones sucking the power out of all the materia orbs in the region," Red stated.

"Yes," Quays replied. "An unfortunate side affect. The process draws it's power from ordinary materia and concentrates it. All ordinary materia loses it's energy in the process. But the end result is something much stronger."

"But you're taking materia energy away from other people without their knowledge, without their permission," Aeris said. "Materia energy they might need."

"Temporarily, yes," Quays replied. "But when our process is perfected we will be replacing it with something infinitely better. There is no other way to do it."

"But materia wasn't meant to be concentrated like that," Aeris continued. "That much power would be unstable. It's dangerous."

Quays looked at her skeptically.

"I assure you all precautions are being taken to make sure the process is safe," he replied. "I really must be getting back to my work now. We are at a critical point in our experimentation and I cannot stay away any longer. Zangan will see to your comfort, and if you have any other questions you may address them to him."

"What about Yuffie?" Reno asked.

"Who is Yuffie?" Quays questioned.

"A young girl," Tifa replied. "She is the daughter of Godo of Wutai. She is a friend of ours. Godo sent her up here to investigate what was happening to the materia, but she disappeared. We found another man that was sent with her dead in a cave not far from here. He appeared to have been killed in hand to hand combat. Do you know anything about this?"

Quays shrugged.

"No, I do not," he said. "My only concern has been my experiments. Zangan, has you seen this girl?"

Zangan shook his head.

"No," he replied. "But there are other groups that know of the experiment and have been trying to steal it. The largest is led by someone named Renada. We have already had a couple of pitched battles against some of his people. It could be that this girl ran afoul of them. If she did, and they find out she knows nothing of value, it is not likely she is still alive."

Quays turned and walked quickly out of the room.

Cloud turned to Zangan

"Where can we find this Renada fellow?"

"We know he is somewhere here on the great glacier, but we do not know his exact location," Zangan replied.

"So we have to start searching all over again?" Barret commented, sounding none too pleased with the idea.

"If you wish," Zangan said. "But I have a better idea. I already have people looking for him, and it's just a matter of time before we track him down. Why don't you stay here with us for a few days and let my men do the work? Then when we find him, you can come with us to ask Renada all the questions you like."

"That's very kind of you," Cloud responded slowly. "But we'll have to give it a little thought. You don't need to know right this minute, do you?"

"Of course not," Zangan replied. "Take your time and decide when you wish. In the meantime, I have arranged accommodations for you. I will get Danz to show you to your rooms. Due to the sensitive nature of the work going on here, I am afraid that there are some areas of the building that will be off limits to you, but feel free to consider the rest of the fortress your home."

Zangan got up and walked into the hallway for a moment. He came back followed by another man, who gestured for them to follow. They got up and filed out of the room. As Tifa walked by Zangan took her by the arm.

"Stay a moment," he said.

Cloud glanced at them but walked out without a word. The others followed, and in a moment they were alone. Zangan sat back down and offered her a seat beside him.

"It's good to see you again," he said.

"It's great to see you too," she answered with a smile. "I was wondering if I would ever see you again. When meteor destroyed Midgar I was afraid you might have been killed. I asked around afterward but no one had seen you. You don't know how glad it makes me to see you alive."

Zangan smiled.

"I'm afraid I'm too tough to be killed that easily," he replied, almost sadly, she thought. "I heard about your exploits against Shinra and your battle with Sephiroth. It looks like you were right all along. You've made quite a name for yourself. I'm proud of you."

Tifa blushed and shook her head.

"I'm sure the stories are blown way out of proportion," she replied. "The truth is that you were right. Before we parted ways you told me that fighting Shinra using terrorist tactics was dishonorable, but after Nibelheim was destroyed I was so filled with hatred that I would have done anything to get revenge against them."

She turned away and bowed her head.

"Anything," she repeated. "And I am sure you are aware of the results. We blew up those reactors. Many people lost their lives. Innocent people. The truth is when we killed those people we became no better than the company we were fighting. Those acts can never be repented or made right. You saw that then, but I didn't. I do now."

Zangan came up beside her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Rare is the person who looks back and sees nothing to regret," he said softly. "Your methods may have been questionable but no one can argue with your results. If you hadn't done what you did, how many more people would be suffering even now?"

Tifa shook her head.

"Even the destruction of Shinra doesn't justify what we did," she said. She turned to look at him and managed a wane smile.

"But enough of that. What's done is done and I just have to live with it. How have you been? Were you in Midgar when Meteor struck, and how did you end up here?"

Zangan shrugged.

"Yes I was in Midgar," he replied, and again she heard a tinge of sadness in his voice. "I managed to get out, just barely. After that, well, you know how much of a wanderer I can be. I did a lot of traveling. Mostly in the south. About six months ago I met Quays in Junon. He was working on this project even then and was looking for someone to train a security force. That's really all there is to it."

"And this thing he's doing with the materia, do you think it's a good idea?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "I'm not a scientist. I'm just in charge of security."

He got up.

"I guess I better be getting back to work myself," he said. He extended his hand and helped her out of her seat, then clasped her hand in both of his.

"You don't know how happy I am to see my favorite student again," he said. "From what some of my men, and the bruises they have, tell me, you've been keeping up your training. It's good to see."

"Thanks," she replied. "I know we didn't part on the best of terms, and it was all my fault. I'm sorry."

He held up his hand.

"No need to apologize. You were young and doing what you thought was right. I don't blame you, and it's all over with now."

He let go of her hand.

"Come on," he said. "I'll take you back to the others."

~*~

"So what do we make of all this?" Cloud asked.

They were gathered together in a sitting room just off a row of bedrooms that Danz had told them were theirs to use, before he had left them alone.

"Well, let's see," Reno replied. "We find Staniv dead, in the middle of nowhere, killed by someone skilled in hand to hand combat. Then we run into these people who just happen to be skilled in hand to hand combat, who try their damndest to kill us until they find out that one of them is an old friend of Tifa. Doesn't take a genius to figure there must be some connection."

"So you think they killed Staniv?" Cait said.

"And probably Yuffie too," Reno replied. "Unless there's another group of martial arts experts wandering around in this God forsaken place. How likely do you think that is?"

"I don't believe it," Barret spoke up. "I didn't know Zangan myself, but Tifa talked about him like a father. I can't believe he could have done something like that."

"Maybe not then, but people change," Reno replied. "How long has it been since she's seen him?"

"About two and a half years, I guess," Barret said. "But I still don't believe it. There has to be some other explanation."

"Perhaps some of Zangan's men did it without his knowledge," Red suggested.

Reno looked skeptical.

"He's in charge of security," he countered. "If he doesn't know what his own people are doing, I'd say he's not doing a very good job."

"You're being unfair," Vincent said. "No one can keep track of everyone all the time. You have to place some trust in your friends, or coworkers, even if you are head of security."

Reno shrugged.

"You asked for opinions and I gave mine. If you're too thick headed to see it, that's your problem."

"All right," Cloud cut in. "That's enough of that. Reno, you're entitled to your opinion, and I have to admit it makes a lot of sense. But we can't discount the possibility that there may be some other explanation. Unlikely as it may seem, it could be that everything Zangan told us was the truth, and this Renada fellow is the one we need to find."

"At any rate," he continued, "Zangan has offered to let us stay here for a few days. I'm tempted to take him up on the offer. If his men are searching for this mysterious Renada, we won't really be losing any time, and if something is going on here, it'll give us a chance to look into it. Does anyone have any objections?"

"Actually, I think that might be a good idea," Red agreed.

No one else spoke.

Cloud was about to continue when the door opened and Tifa walked in. Cloud turned toward her.

"Good, you're back," he said. "We've decided to stay for a while."

"Great," she replied.

"Yeah," Reno spoke up. "It'll give us a chance to find out what's really going on here."

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Reno thinks Zangan is behind this whole thing," Barret answered. "He thinks he killed Staniv and probably Yuffie too."

Tifa looked at Reno and frowned.

"That's ridiculous," she said.

Reno folded his arms across his chest and looked at her.

"Great minds are never appreciated in their time," he said sullenly.

"Zangan would never do anything like that," she continued emphatically. "I never met a man with higher standards. He is more honorable than anyone I ever met, but I guess that is something you know nothing about."

Reno looked at her darkly.

"Don't talk to me of honor after what you did in Midgar," he shot back.

"You should talk!" Barret interrupted. "At least we were fighting for a cause. What was in it for you when you destroyed sector seven? What did you get out of it, a raise?"

"He was helping to get rid of some people who were trying to destroy our society," Elena suddenly cut in.

"And a fine job you did," Tifa said disdainfully.

"Terrorists," Reno said accusingly.

"Murderer," Barret replied.

"ENOUGH!" Cloud said angrily. "We've got enough problems without this bickering. I don't expect you to forget what happened in the past, but fighting like this is just a waste of time. Cut the crap and concentrate on the mission."

He glared at the four of them and they fell silent. But from the looks they gave each other he knew this feud might surface again at any moment. He had been afraid something like this would happen, even though he had wanted to avoid it. He just hoped they would all listen to reason and this wouldn't evolve into open warfare.

"There's something else," Aeris spoke up. She had been sitting quietly since they had entered the room, seeming to ignore the entire conversation. Now she had a troubled look on her face.

"What is it, Aeris?" he asked.

"In Icicle Inn I told you the the planet sensed danger, but I couldn't say what that danger was," she said.

Cloud nodded.

"I still can't say what the danger is, but I can tell you that the source of the disturbance is here."

"Here," Cloud repeated. "You mean, in this fortress?"

"Yes," she replied. "I don't know exactly what is going on, but something is very wrong."

No one spoke for a moment as they all digested this newest bit of information. Reno gazed at her with a look of vindication.

"There you go," he said. "I'm not the only one who thinks something funny is going on here."

Cloud shrugged.

"Let's just see what happens, okay. Anyway, I think I've had my fill of this discussion for one day, I'm going to go get some sleep."

"Sounds good to me," Cid agreed quickly.

Cloud started to turn but Tifa came up and grabbed his arm. He looked at her.

"I know Zangan wouldn't do something like that," she said, with a pleading look in her eyes. "You believe me, don't you?"

Cloud realized that any hesitation in his response would answer the question for her.

"Of course I do," he replied.

~*~

"I can't believe you actually invited them into this place," Quays said angrily. He and Zangan were alone in Quays' office just outside of the lab. "Why didn't you just kill them when you had the chance?"

"Don't be a fool," Zangan replied evenly. "To kill them would not only have been senseless, but counterproductive."

Quays paced rapidly back and forth as he spoke. He reminded Zangan of nothing so much as a mouse scrambling back and forth trying to escape the claws of a cat.

"Counterproductive? How can you say that? If they find out we've got that girl it'll ruin everything."

"Leave that to me," Zangan replied. "You don't waste resources in your experiments, and I don't waste human resources. You didn't see them fight, you don't know how good they are. No one here, save perhaps myself, is a match for Tifa in combat, and that young man with the sword. No one has successfully dodged that chest blow I gave him in the ten years since I've learned it, but he managed it. The two of them together are worth twenty of the men you have now. Having all of them work for us would make this place impregnable. Wouldn't that be much more useful to us than just killing them off?"

Quays looked at him and frowned, but his anger seemed to diminish.

"That sounds fine, but how are you going to get them to work with us when we've got their friend locked up in the tower?"

"Again, leave that to me," Zangan replied. "The other girl. Aeris, I believe her name was. Was she right, is concentrating the materia dangerous?"

Quays looked surprised. Zangan had never questioned him about the experiment before.

"Leave that to me," he responded with a smile. "Of course there is some danger, but like I told her, we are taking precautions."

He stopped his pacing for a moment.

"Is this girl really as good as you say?" he asked.

Zangan nodded.

"Of anybody I taught," he replied, "she was the best."

Quays looked at him for a moment.

"Anybody?" he said doubtfully.

"Anybody," Zangan reaffirmed.

There was a long pause as they looked carefully at each other. Finally Quays turned away.

"I'm a scientist, not a fighter," he said slowly.

"Your scientific skills are beyond my ability to judge," Zangan replied. "However, it was obvious from the first lesson that you were no fighter."

Quays looked up again angrily.

"You are not helping your cause by insulting me," he said. "But I see your point. They can stay, but you had better keep a close eye on them. If anything goes wrong, or if they find out something they shouldn't, I expect you to take care of them. Do we understand each other?"

Zangan nodded.

"I understand," he replied. "Probably better than you know."