

## CHAPTER VIII: BABY IT'S COLD OUTSIDE

Late the next morning Elena was sitting in the common room when Reno and Rude walked in.

"Where have you two been lately," she questioned as they sat down beside her. "I haven't seen either one of you around much. What are you up to?"

"We've been doing a little exploring," Reno replied. "Trying to find out how much of this place we can consider 'home', as Zangan put it, and more to the point, just what areas are off limits."

"So what did you find out?"

"The entire lower level of the fortress is out of bounds," he replied. "That includes anything below ground level. I'm assuming it's one level but I haven't been down there so there really is no saying. I know Quays' lab is down there, so that's not really surprising."

Elena nodded.

"The rest of the building is ours to wander through as we wish except for one place," he continued.

"And where would that be?" she questioned.

"The top of the tower," he replied.

Elena looked thoughtful.

"Maybe some of the equipment for the experiment has to be above the ground," she suggested.

"Maybe," Reno replied. "But Quays never goes up there. At least, I haven't seen him, and Rude and I have been watching. None of the scientists go up there, only Zangan and his men."

Elena shrugged.

"I don't know. Maybe what's up there is already set up and doesn't need looking after."

Reno looked at her skeptically.

"I admit it seems unlikely," she said. "I'm just trying to cover all bases."

"Well, think about this then," Reno said. "I was watching the guard yesterday near dinnertime and one of Zangan's men went up there with a covered plate. He came down a minute later without it. What does that tell you?"

Elena raised an eyebrow.

"That's very interesting," she said.

"Indeed it is," Reno responded. "I think it's high time we took a little peek up there to see just what is going on."

"But how are you going to get past the guard?" she asked.

Reno put his arm around her.

"That's where you come in," he said with a sly grin.

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Cloud gathered everyone in his bedroom. They were all there except Tifa and the Turks. He had seen the Turks earlier, but they were nowhere to be found now. He hadn't seen Tifa all day.

He told them what had happened to Aeris the night before and his determination to get to the bottom of it.

"So what are you proposing? That we just barge into the lab demanding to know what's going on?" Barret asked, looking as if the idea would suit him.

"Nothing quite that bold," Cloud replied. "Zangan has too many men for us to openly challenge them. We're going to have to find a way to get down in the lab without Quays' knowledge."

"That's a tall order," Cid observed. "Zangan's men are watching the lab like hawks."

"I know," Cloud replied. "That's why I called you all together. Does anybody have any suggestions?"

"There's only one or two guards at the entrance to the lab at any given time," Barret said, obviously still spoiling for a fight. "Together we could easily overpower them. Then we could get down into the lab, find out what's going on, and get out of here before Zangan has time to gather his forces."

Cloud looked at him dubiously.

"If nothing else Zangan's men are well trained. I don't think we could get out before they overpowered us. Besides, what if we fight our way into the lab and find nothing out of the ordinary? Even if we know something is going on down there, that doesn't mean we'll recognize it if we see it. Then we've started a war for nothing."

Barret didn't seem too thrilled with Cloud's reply. He looked at the others, but none of them came to the defense of his idea. He grumbled under his breath but said nothing more.

"So I take it you think sneaking in would be a better choice?" Red asked.

"At this point, yes," Cloud replied.

"But how?" Vincent said.

"Maybe some kind of diversion," Cait mused.

"It would have to be something big," Cloud answered. "Zangan trained these men well. It won't be easy to fool them."

"Vincent has a knack for getting around unnoticed," Cid suggested, looking at his friend. "Maybe he can get in the lab."

Vincent shrugged.

"It only seems that way because people are normally not very attentive to what's going on around them. It would be more difficult to get past someone who is actively on guard. Nevertheless, I will attempt it if you wish."

"We'll certainly take that into consideration," Cloud said.

"Where are the Turks?" Aeris questioned. "It seems to me this would be something more in their line of expertise."

"I don't know," Cloud said. He hadn't thought about that, but he realized she was probably right. They should at least have some input.

"I haven't seen them in a while," he finished.

"Another possibility would be to get someone else to go down in the lab to look around for us," Red said.

Cloud looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"What do you mean, someone else? Who else is there?"

"Zangan's men are free to go into the lab whenever they want," Red said.

"You want to get one of Zangan's men to look around the lab for us?" Barret questioned in surprise. "How would you do that?"

"Or Zangan himself," Red continued. "We all know that Zangan and Tifa are close, and have been worried about his influence on her, but what about her influence on him? If they are that close, is it unreasonable for her to ask him to take her down there to have a look around? Surely he trusts her, and wouldn't think she's going to steal any of Quays' secrets. And if he balks, wouldn't that suggest to her that he's hiding something?"

Everyone was silent for a moment. Cloud quickly realized that this was the best idea yet.

"Good idea, Red. We'll just have to..."

The door opened and Tifa walked in.

They all turned to look at her.

Cloud's mouth dropped open. The others all looked on in shocked surprise.

She was dressed all in black, with the emblem of a red fist on her shirt just above her left breast.

"What the hell is this?" Barret was the first to speak.

She looked at them for a moment without speaking.

"I've joined Zangan's men," she said unemotionally.

"What?" Cloud said.

"No way," Cid exclaimed at the same time.

"What are you talking about?" Cait said a moment later.

"Zangan asked to join him," she stated. "I told him I would. I just thought you all should know."

Her voice hesitated just briefly on the last sentence.

"Tifa, have you lost your mind?" Cloud blurted out.

"No I haven't lost my mind," she retorted with a touch of anger. "I know exactly what I am doing. I finally realized that it was a mistake to have left Zangan in the first place. I was young and foolish then, but I've grown up. I know what I want to do."

"Tifa, you can't," was all Cloud could think of to say.

"Why not?" she said. "All this time wandering around with you, I've been chasing something that doesn't exist. I don't want to do that anymore. I've made my choice."

"But you can't stay here," Cloud argued. "It's dangerous. They're up to something, I know it. They've endangered the planet somehow. Aeris felt it."

"Aeris," Tifa said harshly. "Aeris and her feelings. It all comes back to that, doesn't it? We're supposed to trust her feelings over Zangan's word."

She opened her mouth again, but then shut it. She looked over at Aeris, who did not speak, but stood there looking sadly at her.

"It doesn't matter," she said softly. "I've made my choice."

With that she turned and walked out of the room.

The others sat in silence for a long time, looking uncomfortably at one another.

Barret slammed his fist on a nearby table.

"Damn!" he said bitterly.

Cloud looked at the others, speechless. Of all the things to happen to them this was something he never would have expected. Even with Zangan's influence, Tifa was the one person he would have thought would remain loyal to him no matter what. He just couldn't believe what was happening, and kept trying to think of some other explanation. What could have happened to do this to her? No matter how he thought about it, he just couldn't bring himself to believe that she would do this to them, or more specifically, he suddenly thought, to him.

"Well, I guess that pretty much kills Red's plan to have her talk to Zangan for us," Cid said.

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"Do I have to wear this?" Elena said petulantly.

"Of course," Reno replied. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you how much a woman in a short skirt catches a man's eye."

"I know, but this is damned uncomfortable," she said, tugging at the bottom of the mini skirt.

"Leave it alone," Reno admonished. "You look just perfect."

Elena shook her head. She would have been much more comfortable in her blue suit.

"Where did you get this outfit anyway?" she questioned. "It looks like something Tifa would wear."

"It is," Reno replied. "I got it out of her room."

"What!" Elena exclaimed. "She'll kill you."

"Believe me, she's already threatened to do that," Reno replied matter-of-factly. "Don't worry, we'll get it back to her before she even realizes it's missing."

Elena shook her head.

"I don't know how she can wear this, I feel practically naked."

Reno glanced at her slyly.

"Now that you mention it, that would really attract a man's eye."

"Don't even think it," she said menacingly, "or Tifa might have to wait in line."

"I suppose that would be a little too over the top," Reno agreed reluctantly.

They reached the end of the hallway and stopped.

"Okay," Reno whispered. "He's right around the corner. Wait a few minutes for us to get in position. And remember, the more he sees, the better the chance of our succeeding."

"I know what I'm supposed to do," she responded testily. "You just better hope he's not gay."

Reno shook his head and walked back down the hallway, Rude close behind.

"What if he is gay?" Rude asked.

Reno turned to look at him.

"Then I guess you'll have to put on that outfit," he replied.

Rude looked at Reno for a moment.

"Very funny," he replied. He tried to get a look at Reno's face to see if he was smiling. He was kidding, wasn't he?

It took them a few minutes to circle around until they reached the entrance to the tower again, this time from a different direction. Reno took a quick peek around the corner and saw the guard standing at the bottom of the steps. From where he stood he could see the hallway from which Elena would emerge. He motioned for Rude to be silent and waited.

For a long time nothing happened, or at least it seemed like a long time to Reno. He was just about to turn to ask Rude if he thought something had gone wrong when she appeared.

She looked toward the guard and smiled for a moment, then walked slowly across the room. Reno watched her carefully. He thought she could have put a little more sway in her step, but maybe that would have been overdoing it. He had to admit she was a fine looking woman when she wanted to be.

Elena had only made it a short way across the room when the strap holding her pocketbook somehow suddenly unhooked. Her pocketbook fell to the floor, its contents spilling out.

"Oh dear," she said, stooping down to gather everything back together.

Reno saw her glance over at the guard.

"I can't believe the strap broke," she said, sounding upset. "I just bought this last week."

Suddenly Reno saw the guard coming over to her, his back to them.

"Here, I'll help you with that," he said.

A gentleman, Reno thought. He had hoped just to catch the guard's eye, this was even better. He nodded to Rude and they both walked swiftly but silently out into the room and toward the steps. As they reached them Reno couldn't resist pausing for a moment to cast an admiring glance over at Elena.

Rude grabbed hold of his arm and pulled him up the steps.

The tower was four stories, so it didn't take them long to reach the top. They found themselves in a narrow hallway with four rooms off it, two on each side.

Reno was about to suggest each one of them search a side when he noticed that one of the doors was barred closed. He walked over to it, lifted off the bar, and opened the door. A fist shot out and stuck him in the face. A diminutive figure burst

past him. She swung a fist at Rude as well and he nearly fell over avoiding it.

"Yuffie!" Rude cried out as he stumbled backwards.

She was already past them and half a dozen steps down the hall when she turned to look at them.

"Huh!" she said in surprise. "You're involved in this too?"

Reno was leaning against the wall holding his nose.

"We're here to rescue you, you little idiot!" he exclaimed.

Yuffie looked at them skeptically.

"Yeah right," she said.

"It's true," Rude said calmly. "We were hired by your father to find you. Cloud and his friends are here too."

Yuffie paused, obviously undecided whether to trust them or not.

"You think we would let you out if we weren't on your side?" Reno said. "Oh God, that hurt."

She looked around, as if expecting others to suddenly appear. When no one did she slowly walked back over to them. She looked at Reno.

"Sorry," she said. "It's not like you're walking around wearing name tags that say good guy or bad guy on them."

Reno grumbled an unintelligible response.

"Can we discuss this later?" Rude asked, motioning for them to get a move on.

Reno nodded and started down the hall, Rude following. Yuffie hesitated.

Reno turned toward her.

"Well, do you want to get out of here or not?" he asked.

Yuffie didn't trust them, but she didn't see much else in the way of options save to go along with them for the moment. With a shrug, she followed.

Reno led them back through the hall and down the stairs. When they neared the bottom he told them to wait and walked ahead cautiously. Getting in had proven to be easy, but he suspected getting out would be a little more difficult. He readied his nightstick. Now that they knew Zangan was holding Yuffie he wasn't too worried about having to resort to violence. If worst came to worst, he would have to take the guard out.

He could see the bottom of the stair now and partially into the room below, but he saw no sign of the guard. Puzzled he slowly walked down until he could see the entire room. It was empty.

He stood there for a moment, uncertain. He had never seen the room unoccupied, and he didn't like it. What had become of Elena?

He walked back to the others and told them the situation.

"Well, what are we waiting for then?" Yuffie asked when he said the room below was empty. "Let's get out of here."

She started down the stairs

Rude looked at Reno, who shrugged. There wasn't much else they could do but follow.

They caught up with Yuffie as she reached the bottom of the stairway. They all looked into the room, but it was still unoccupied.

Yuffie walked into the room immediately. Although Reno's instincts were telling him to be cautious he really couldn't see any reason to hesitate. If the guard had been called away by some fluke chance they had to get out of here as fast as possible. Who knew when he might suddenly reappear.

They walked quickly through the room, heading for the hallway to their right, but before they reached it five of Zangan's men stepped into the room in front of them.

Reno turned toward the other exit, the hallway on the opposite side of the room. Four more people were coming from that direction. One of them was Zangan holding Elena firmly by her arm.

They looked back and forth between the two groups.

"Busted," Yuffie sighed.

She turned to look at her companions.

"Some rescuers you turned out to be."

Reno gave her a look but said nothing.

Zangan handed Elena to Greco and walked over to them.

"I really wish you had been able to contain your curiosity," he stated. "You've made things complicated."

"We have a tendency to do that," Reno replied.

Zangan looked at Yuffie.

"And as for you, I'm afraid you've become more trouble than you're worth."

Yuffie gave him a 'who me?' look, but he was turning toward Greco.

"You know what to do," he said, and walked out of the room.

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Cloud had just entered his room when Barret barged in behind him.

"I can't believe you didn't say anything!" he exclaimed.

Cloud looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"What do you mean?"

"Why didn't you say anything to her to make her change her mind?" he said.

"What was I supposed to say?"

"What do you mean, what were you supposed to say? Tell her you don't want her to do it, you dumb ass," Barret continued, waving his arms in the air. "Tell her you want her to stay with us. Tell her you need her to stay with us. Tell her..."

His whole body shook with rage and he stared expectantly at Cloud.

"Uugh!" he finished incomprehensibly.

"I did tell her I didn't want her to do it," Cloud protested.

"You told her she'd lost her mind!" Barret retorted. "That wouldn't even convince me to stay with you. And then you had to bring up Aeris! What an idiot!"

"If you are so concerned, why didn't you say something?" Cloud asked somewhat defensively.

"She doesn't want to hear it from me, fool. Don't you know anything?"

Barret stepped closer and waved his gun arm in Cloud's face.

"Barret, calm down," Cloud said, reaching out and carefully pushing his arm aside. "I'm sure she'll come to her senses if we just give her a little time."

"Time," Barret snorted dismissively. "You don't got no more time. She's stood by you all this time and what has it gotten her? Nothing! When we all thought you were a nut case with all that was happening with Sephiroth, who was the one who supported you? When you were almost dead in Mideel who was the one who sat by your bed and didn't leave your side for more than a minute? Who was the one who helped pull you back together in the lifestream? She's done all that for you and did you ever even thank her for it?"

Barret glared at him.

"She's joining Zangan because I didn't thank her for sitting by my bed?" Cloud said.

Barret threw his arms in the air.

"You are as dumb as a post," he exclaimed. "I give up. I don't know what she sees in you. I guess I'll just have to talk her out of it myself!"

He strode over to the door, then turned and glared at Cloud once more. He started to speak, then changed his mind and just shook his head. He turned and stalked out, slamming the door behind him.

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Barret went to Tifa's room after he left Cloud, but she was not there. He was still fuming about Cloud's apparent indifference to Tifa's decision, but as he walked through the halls he started to calm down a little.

She was probably with Zangan, he thought. He knew Zangan's office was in the west wing of the fortress, so he headed in that direction.

He walked through the lounge and saw Cait sitting on the couch.

"Hey Cait," he said, "have you seen Tifa?"

Cait shook his head.

"Not since she gave us the news," he replied.

Barret nodded.

He continued on his way, but hadn't gotten very far when one of Zangan's men hurried up to him.

"I couldn't help overhear," he said. "Tifa's in Zangan's office. I'll take you there."

Barret looked at the man and nodded curtly.

"This way," the man said.

Barret followed him down the hallway. They passed two other of Zangan's men going in the opposite direction. One was holding something familiar.

Barret turned to get a better look as they walked by. It looked like Reno's nightstick!

"Hey, hold on a..."

Barret felt something strike him in the back of the head, then he slumped to the floor.

Cait was shuffling his tarot cards when two of Zangan's men came into the room and approached him. He looked up and saw that one of them was pointing what looked like Reno's nightstick at him.

Back in Kalm, Reeve saw a flash of light on his computer screen, and then it went blank.

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Cid, Vincent and Red sat around a table in the common room, having just polished off lunch.

"If I keep this up I'm going to be big as a house before we leave here," Cid said, sitting back contently in his chair.

"The way you've been packing it in, I'd think you had never eaten before in your life," Red commented. "What's the matter, hasn't Shera been feeding you properly?"

"Not lately," Vincent said quickly.

Cid looked at him with murder in his eyes, but said nothing.

Red looked from one to the other.

"Did I miss something here?" he asked.

Vincent just looked at Cid, who glared back at him for a long moment.

"All right," he finally blurted out. "Shera took off."

Red looked at him in surprise.

"What?"

"It's no big deal," Cid continued. "Just a little misunderstanding. I'm sure we'll straighten it all out when I get back to Rocket Town."

"How long ago?" Red questioned.

"About two weeks. What difference does it make? I don't want to talk about it," he said in rapid succession. Then he stopped and looked around suddenly.

"Why is the room spinning?" he asked.

Vincent looked at him knowingly.

"How much have you had to drink?" he asked.

Cid shrugged.

"Who's counting?" he said.

"Cid, you really should take it easy on the liquor," Red cut in. "Especially after all that's happened."

Cid looked at Red, but his focus seemed to be a little off, and he ended up looking at a plant in a pot by the wall just behind Red.

"I really haven't had that much," he defended himself. He looked around groggily for a moment, then slumped forward, his face landing in his plate.

Vincent started to get up, but sat back down abruptly and brought his hands up to his head.

"I feel a little woozy myself," he stated.

Red turned to look at him and the room seemed to spin around him.

"Me too," he said, with sudden concern. "And all I had to drink was water."

Vincent stumbled to his feet. He pulled out the Death Penalty and started toward the door, but only made it a few steps before he collapsed.

Red sniffed carefully at his glass, but he could detect nothing out of the ordinary. Not that he would notice at this point. He could barely see straight. He knew he was moments from unconsciousness, and without some clue as to what kind of drug had been used there wasn't much he could do about it.

He slowly eased himself to the ground and waited patiently until blackness took him.

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A knock on her bedroom door made Aeris look up.

"Come in," she said.

The door opened and she saw two of Zangan's men standing in the hallway.

"Cloud wants you to come to Zangan's office," one of the men said. "C'mon, we'll take you there."

Aeris glanced at them in surprise.

"In Zangan's office?" she repeated.

She looked at them for a moment without moving.

"Why didn't he come get me himself?" she asked.

The man shrugged.

"Beats me lady, I'm just the messenger. He did say it was urgent."

Aeris looked at them for a moment more, then nodded. Almost as an afterthought, she grabbed the Princess Guard as she followed them out the door.

They led her down the hallway and through the common room. She looked around, but she saw no sign of any of her friends. As they entered the hallway on the opposite side of the room one of the men slowed down until he fell behind her.

Suddenly Aeris heard a voice inside her head. It was the voice of her mother, Ifalna.

"Run."

Without hesitation she turned and swung the Princess Guard all in one motion. The rod hit the man behind her solidly just below the knee. He bellowed in pain and crumpled to the ground, clutching his leg.

The other man turned around just as she deftly pivoted her weapon and caught him in the face with the other end of it.

He went down as well.

She stepped over him and was about to run down the hallway when two more men appeared at the end of it.

"Stop her!" the man she had hit on the leg shouted.

She turned and ran back the other way. The man who had shouted lunged for her as she ran past him, but she swung her rod again as she went by and he jerked back to avoid it.

She ran back toward the bedrooms. She glanced back to see that the men were gaining on her. She increased her speed, but she didn't think she could outrun them. If she could stay ahead of them long enough, she thought, she might have a chance to warn the others.

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Cloud sat in his room for a long time after Barret left, lost in thought. He felt he had somehow lost control of the situation, but he wasn't quite sure how it had happened, or what he could do about it. It seemed to him that the whole team was unraveling. He had thought the bad blood between Barret, Tifa and the Turks would be the most probable cause of contention, but he hadn't expected any of this. Tifa joining Zangan, Barret furious about it. The Turks missing in action. What else could go wrong?

He stood up and slowly started to pace back and forth.

Barret's words nagged at him. The more he thought about it the more he realized that Barret had been right about at least one thing. He had taken Tifa's loyalty for granted. It wouldn't hurt to talk to her again. Whatever else happened, he decided, he wasn't going to leave here without her.

There was a knock on the door.

Cloud walked over and opened it to see Zangan outside.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

Cloud motioned for him to come in.

"I haven't been completely honest," Zangan continued. He walked into the room as he spoke. As he stepped past Cloud he suddenly wheeled and struck Cloud in the chest with an open palm.

Cloud was taken completely by surprise. His entire body suddenly went numb and he fell helplessly to the floor.

Zangan reached down and slipped Cloud's sword out of its sheath. He took it over to the table and laid it down. He looked at Cloud.

"Sorry about that," he said, "but I couldn't take the chance you would use this thing. I saw how you fought against us."

Cloud tried to get up but his muscles wouldn't listen. He tried to speak but no sound came out.

"Don't worry," Zangan said. "The effect will wear off shortly, and you'll be as good as new. There's nothing you can do about it, so just try to relax."

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Aeris turned the corner that led to their bedrooms. The hall was empty, but she saw that Cloud's door was open.

She looked back to see that the men following her were right on her heels.

"Cloud!" she shouted.

She swung the Princess Guard blindly behind her and with a burst of speed reached Cloud's door. She turned into the room and stopped dead when she saw Cloud on the floor with Zangan standing over him.

Her eyes widened in surprise.

Zangan stepped toward her. She swung her rod, but he easily sidestepped it, then reached out and grabbed hold of it, wrenching it out of her hands.

The two men who were following ran in and nearly tackled her.

"Easy," Zangan said when he saw how roughly they grabbed her. He looked at her casually.

"It seems you are all full of surprises. How is it that you evaded four of my men?"

Aeris looked at him calmly.

"What have you done to Cloud?" she questioned.

"He'll be fine," Zangan replied.

The two men that had originally knocked on Aeris door appeared. The one she had hit in the face glared at her angrily. He looked like he was going to say something to her but glanced at Zangan and remained silent.

Zangan had the two of them haul Cloud up and seat him in his chair. Cloud could feel the numbness beginning to wear off. He looked at them both.

"We've had the girl, Yuffie, all along. I didn't want to deceive you, but I knew you wouldn't understand if I told you. Unfortunately your friends, the Turks, were a little too nosy and found her. So we had to take care of them. It would have been just a matter of time before you realized that of course, so now we have to get rid of all of you. I was hoping to avoid this situation."

"So you are in on it," Aeris exclaimed. "Did you kill Staniv?"

"It was my men, and I'm in charge of them, so I guess you could say I was responsible."

Cloud mumbled something.

Zangan looked at him.

"Coming back to your senses I see. What did you say?"

Cloud took a deep breath.

"How..." he said slowly. He swallowed and shook his head. "How could you do this?"

"My reasons are my own," Zangan replied. "I do not owe you an explanation."

"How can you do this to Tifa?" Cloud said, more strongly now. "She admires you so much. You were the one person who always stood by his principles. What is she going to think when she finds out about this?"

Zangan was silent for a long time.

"We all make choices in life, and have to live with the consequences, no matter how hard that may be. What's done is done and I can't change it now, now matter how much I may regret it. I don't ask for forgiveness, it's too late for that. I just hope she will understand that someday."

"She'll never understand if you kill us," Aeris said.

Zangan turned toward her.

"Oh, I have no intention of killing you," he replied. "Banishment is what I had in mind, actually. How you fare after that, however, is up to you."

He turned and walked toward the door.

"Bring them," he said, motioning to his men.

Two of the men helped Cloud to his feet. He wobbled for a moment as he got up, but then steadied himself. He felt almost normal again.

Zangan led them out of the room and down the hallway. Cloud looked around, but he saw no sign of the others. He could only assume that they already had been captured.

They walked through the building until they reached the entrance to the lab. Zangan led them down a flight of stairs. When they reached the lower level Cloud looked around. They had never been down here before. In front of them the corridor ran a short distance to an open door. Inside he could see a couple of people in lab coats working on some instruments.

Zangan turned and led them down another flight of steps. This led into a large room what looked like a storage area. It was filled with wooden boxes and barrels. There was a solid metal trapdoor in the floor at the far end of the room. They walked over to it and Greco opened it. Cloud saw a ladder leading down into darkness.

"I'm afraid this is where we are going to have to part ways," Zangan said. "This shaft leads to ice caves that run below the fortress. They lead out onto the frozen plains near the Gaea Cliffs. With determination and a great deal of luck, you may be able to make it. Of course, by then it will be too late for you to interfere."

Zangan motioned for them to go down the ladder. Cloud stepped onto it and looked at Zangan. It was pretty obvious there was nothing he could say that would influence the man, but he felt he had to say something.

"This isn't the end of it."

Zangan returned his gaze steadily.

"You better hope for your sake that it is," he replied. "I've spared your lives because you are Tifa's friends. If we meet again, I will not be so lenient."

Cloud shook his head and started down the ladder. Aeris followed behind. As soon as they were both in the tunnel Cloud heard the trapdoor slam shut above them. He had to stop for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darkness, but it wasn't completely black. He looked down and saw that the tunnel below him was lit by a faint blue luminescence.

"Are you okay, Aeris?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

He started down the ladder once more. The shaft led down to a tunnel whose walls were encased in gleaming blue ice. As he reached the bottom he heard someone call his name. He turned to see Cid, Cait, Vincent, Red and Barret coming over.

"So they got you too, huh?" Cid said.

"Fraid so," Cloud replied.

"Where's Tifa?" Barret asked.

Cloud shrugged.

"Still with him, I guess. I wonder what he's going to tell her?"

"I don't know," Barret replied. "But when I get hold of him again I'm gonna tear him apart with my bare hands, no matter how she feels about him!"

Cloud nodded.

"Looks like Reno was right all along," he said ruefully.

"Whatever happened to him anyway?" Vincent said. "Do you think they've escaped capture?"

"No," Cloud said. "Zangan told me he had to take care of them when they found Yuffie, but he didn't say what that meant. I'm afraid we're on our own."

"They found Yuffie?" Cait said in surprise.

"That's what Zangan said. I don't think he would lie about that," Cloud responded. "Apparently she was here all the time."

They stood there for a moment in silence.

"So what do we do now?" Cid asked.

"I suggest we find a way out of here as quickly as possible," Red said. "With no weapons, food or winter clothing it's not likely we'll survive for very long. The sooner we get started the better."

"Gee, you're such an optimist," Cid stated.

"Optimist or not, he's right," Cloud said. "I don't think we can go back up the way we came. That trapdoor looked too solid to break through, and I'm sure they'll have posted a guard."

He looked down the tunnel.

"Let's get going," he said.

They followed him down the tunnel. The cavern led slowly uphill, the ice on the walls thickening as they passed. The soft light that seemed to emanate from the ice bathed them in a blue glow.

"It's beautiful," Aeris commented.

"Yeah, it'll make a real attractive tomb," Barret growled.

They walked a little further and the tunnel suddenly opened up into a large cavern. One wall of the cave was encased in a frozen waterfall of ice. They looked at it in wonder. Even Barret seemed impressed.

Suddenly Cloud spotted movement across the cavern at the base of the waterfall. He recognized the figures.

"Hey, it's the Turks, and Yuffie!" he said.

The others looked and saw he was right. Aeris called out to them. Elena waved in return and the two groups made their way toward each other.

They met near the middle of the cavern. Everyone with Cloud stared at Elena.

"That's kind of a new look for you, isn't it?" Vincent observed, taking a long look at her legs.

Elena turned red and glared at Reno.

"It's all his fault," she said angrily. "He made me wear this and now I'm freezing to death!"

"So why didn't you just say no?" Cid said.

"It was all part of a plan to spring her," Elena answered, pointing at Yuffie.

"And now I'm oh so much better off," Yuffie replied sarcastically.

Reno looked at her.

"Remind me never to rescue you again."

"You call this rescuing me?" she shot back.

"How long have you been down here?" Red cut in.

Reno shrugged.

"Hard to say, maybe an hour or two."

"Have you found anything of interest?" Cait asked.

"Just a lot of ice," Reno replied. "We found the way out, but it just leads onto an enormous ice field. We were hoping to maybe find another way."

"From what Zangan said, I don't think there is another way," Cloud said. "Let's go take a look."

They set off once again, this time with Reno and the Turks in the lead. They entered a narrow crevice at the far side of the cavern that forced them to walk in single file. They turned a corner and the path led steeply upward. Up ahead the blue light of the ice faded away into real sunlight.

The cave mouth was a narrow gap at the base of the Gaea Cliffs. They looked out upon a barren ice field that ran as far as the eye could see in all directions, save for the jagged upthrust peaks behind them. As Cloud stepped out of the cave a fierce blast of cold air hit him. He hastily retreated back into the tunnel.

"It's freezing out there," he said.

"That's why we were looking for another way," Reno said.

"How far to you think it is to Holzoff's cabin?" Vincent asked.

"Who knows," Cloud replied. "I've never seen this area before. It could be five miles or fifty. Either way, we're not going to get very far out there without warmer clothing."

"In other words, we're not going to get very far out there at all," Yuffie clarified.

Cloud stood looking out across the ice.

"We've got to do something!" Barret exclaimed.

"Well, I'm sure as hell not going out there," Elena stated flatly.

"No, it would be foolish for us all to go," Cloud said. "It will only take one person to get us help."

"So who gets to go?" Cid questioned.

"Who's best equipped to deal with the cold?" Elena asked.

"Red over here already has a built in fur coat," Reno pointed out.

"I will attempt it if you wish," Red replied. "However, my species is adapted to the desert, and my coat is not long enough to provide much more warmth than the ordinary clothing you wear. I'm afraid I would be a poor choice."

"Cait, what about you?" Cid asked suddenly. "You're a robot. You don't feel cold, do you?"

"No I don't," Cait replied. "But my circuits were not designed to function in excessively cold weather. I would freeze up before I got very far."

"Great," Barret mumbled.

"Reno, you should go," Yuffie said suddenly. "You're the one who got us into this in the first place."

Reno turned toward her angrily.

"Why you ungrateful..." he sputtered. "Why don't you go? You can use your vaunted ninja spirit to protect you from the cold. It certainly wasn't much good at getting you out of a locked room."

"I think Barret should go," Rude weighed in. "He's got the most body mass. He can resist the cold longest."

"Are you trying to say I'm fat?" Barret exclaimed.

"Or how bout Vincent?" Reno said. "I've heard vampires are very resistant to cold."

"I'm not a vampire," Vincent said defensively.

"Rude, you go," Cid said. "The sun reflecting off that bald head of yours would be like sending up a flare. People will be able to see you from miles away."

"Or how about you," Elena said, turning to Cid. "You can leave a trail of cigarette butts for us all to follow."

"And what about..." Reno started to say.

"Shut up!" Aeris shouted suddenly.

They all looked at her in surprise.

"Thank you," Cloud said. He looked at the others.

"I'll go. It'll be worth it to not have to listen to you all bickering anymore."

They all fell silent. Reno looked disappointed. He had been starting to enjoy himself.

Cloud walked to the cave entrance and looked out over the bleak landscape once more.

Aeris came up beside him.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" she said.

"Doesn't seem like there's much choice," he replied. "We can't stay here forever. The cold will get us even in these caves eventually, or hunger. We'd just last a little bit longer."

She put her hand on his shoulder, then reached up and kissed him on the cheek.

"Be careful," she said.

"I will," he replied. He turned to the others.

"Later."

He walked out of the cave, but he hadn't gone more than a few steps when Reno called out to him.

"Wait."

Cloud turned around impatiently.

"What now?"

"I'll come with you," he said, walking up to the cave entrance beside Aeris.

"What?" Cloud said, and heard it echoed by some of the others inside.

"It'd be tough out there on someone all alone," he continued. "It would be better if two of us go."

Cloud just looked at him. He seemed to be perfectly serious.

"Why Reno, I'm surprised at you," Aeris said.

"Well, anything would be better than sitting around here just waiting. Besides, if we sent him out there all alone, he's just going to get hopelessly lost on us."

Cloud frowned but did not respond.

"Well, let's get going then," was all he said.

Reno turned to Aeris.

"Hey, don't I get a kiss too?"

Aeris looked at him for a moment.

"That depends," she replied. "Is this just a ploy to steal a kiss from me?"

Reno looked at her indigently.

"I'm shocked you would think I would be so devious," he said. "I give you my word as a Turk that this is no trick."

She hesitated a moment more, then reached up and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

He touched his cheek and looked at her lovingly.

"I'm never going to wash that spot again," he said.

"That something new?" he heard Elena call out.

He glanced back at the cave.

"Anybody notice that the sarcasm level has gone way up around here lately," he said.

"Let's go," Cloud said.

They walked out onto the barren plain. They headed east, following the line of the mountains. Mr. Holzoff's cabin had to be somewhere in that direction, but they had no idea how far. The wind whistled around them, blowing down from the hills, and making it viciously cold. It wasn't long before they were both shivering uncontrollably.

The ice was broken and jagged, making the going tremendously difficult. Because of the uneven landscape they could not see far ahead, and so had to guess at the best route. As a result they often came up suddenly on deep uncrossable crevices barring their path and forcing them to double back or turn out of their way to find their way around.

Cloud paused for a moment to take a look around. He wasn't sure how long they had been out here, but it seemed like hours. Looking back he shook his head at how little progress they had made. At this rate it would take them all day to go just a few miles. They wouldn't get very far before they froze to death at this rate.

Hours passed slowly, but after a while the minutes just seemed to run together. It was so bitterly cold it took all their strength just to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. Cloud found his focus shrinking from finding Holzoff's cabin to reaching landmarks he picked out in the landscape ahead, until finally he didn't lift his head at all, for it took all his concentration just to take the next step.

Reno stumbled and fell. Cloud came over to help him, but he got up on his own. His red hair was covered with frost and he had a faraway look in his eye. He mumbled something unintelligible but continued walking.

Cloud felt his own strength ebbing as well. He felt a strong urge to lie down and rest. It was obviously hopeless to continue. Why not at least rest and be comfortable?

Somehow he managed to resist the urge. Some part of him still knew that stopping now would mean their deaths. Their only chance was to keep moving.

They plodded on in what was beginning to feel like some kind of endless torture. After a while he wasn't even sure what direction they were going in, or even what direction they should be going in. All he thought about was just to force his feet forward. If he could only do that, he thought, he would be all right.

Reno dropped to the ground beside him once more. He stopped to help him up, but found himself sinking to the ground as well. He told himself that he should get up, that he would die if he stayed here, but his body didn't seem to be listening. He felt himself slowly overcome by an overwhelming desire to sleep.

His head sank down slowly onto the ice. He thought he saw some white figures looming up around him, but he didn't pay much attention. Calmly he closed his eyes and dropped off into oblivion.

~\*~

Tifa stepped into Zangan's office. He was sitting behind his desk, looking at some papers. When he saw her he pushed them aside. He looked at her carefully.

"Have you seen any of my friends?" she asked. "I've been looking all over, but I haven't been able to find any of them."

He looked at her for a long time without speaking, and it seemed to her he was trying to think of just what to say. From the way he looked at her she sensed something was wrong.

"Has something happened?" she asked.

"Sit down," he said kindly.

She looked at him without moving.

"Please."

She stepped over to the chair in front of his desk and sat down slowly.

He looked at her for a moment.

"I guess there's no easy way to break this to you, so I'll just say it. Your friends have left."

"What?" she said.

"They've gone looking for Renada," he continued. "They left a couple of hours ago."

"Did they say when they were coming back?" she questioned disconcertingly.

Zangan sighed.

"Tifa," he said slowly, "I don't think they are coming back."

"But... but why would they do that?" she said, now visibly upset. "They wouldn't just leave me, not without even saying goodbye. Cloud wouldn't..."

She felt silent and looked away from him. He could see she was struggling to remain in control of herself.

"I'm sorry Tifa, I truly am," he said. "It's obvious that you had very strong feelings for this young man. But you have seen for yourself that the feeling was not mutual, and he is enamored with this other young lady. I know that is a hard thing to take, but it is something almost all of us go through at least once in our lives. I know it won't help now for me to say that things will get better, but they will. Perhaps a clean break is the best thing for you both."

Tifa said nothing, embarrassed by her actions and the fact that her feelings were so transparent to Zangan.

"Besides," he continued. "Just because they left doesn't mean you'll never see them again. I'm sure you'll all meet up again somewhere down the road, and probably all have a good laugh over this."

Tifa looked up at him again. She sincerely doubted that was true, but she was thankful for his kind words.

"Maybe you're right," she said finally. "I'm sorry I've made such a fool of myself."

"Forget it," Zangan said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand. "I understand. I was young once myself," he finished slowly.

Tifa got up and walked slowly to the door. When she reached it she turned to him once more.

"Thank you," she said. "For everything. You've always looked out for me, even when I didn't want it. I don't know what I would do without you."

He looked at her with the trace of a smile, but it vanished in an instant.

"Go get some rest," was all he said.

She left the room, closing the door behind her. For a long time Zangan sat unmoving, staring at the desk in front of him, his face expressionless. Then he suddenly swept his arm angrily across his desk, knocking most of the papers on it to the floor. He placed his elbows on the desk and rested his head wearily in his hands.

"Damn," he said softly.

~\*~

Elena sat in a narrow crevice at the back of the tunnel, shivering uncontrollably. Darkness had fallen outside, and it was colder than ever, even inside the cave.

Vincent came over and looked at her.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm fr..freezing," she responded through chattering teeth.

He sat down beside her. She huddled up next to him for warmth. He put his arm around her and looked over at the others.

"She can't take much more of this," he said.

"I know," Barret said sympathetically. "But there's not much we can do about it, is there?"

"Do you think Cloud and Reno have reached Mr. Holzoff's cabin yet?" Cait asked.

"Who knows?" Cid replied. "For all we know they could still be wandering around on that plain."

"If they're still out there now," Red said, glancing out the cavern entrance, "they don't stand much of a chance."

"I still can't believe Reno went," Cid muttered.

Elena looked at Vincent.

"You know, you're nothing like they said you were," she said softly.

"What did they say I was like?" Vincent asked.

"You know," she replied. "Cold and detached. But you don't seem that way to me at all. You seem like a warm and caring person. Especially warm," she finished, cuddling up closer to him.

He looked up at the others, but they were engaged in their own conversation and seemed to be paying no attention.

"Don't let it get around," he answered. "And who are they, by the way?"

Elena shrugged.

"Everyone, I guess."

"Everyone?" he said, eyeing her skeptically. Then the trace of a smile appeared on his lips. "Good."

"You're terrible," she said.

With nightfall the blue glow of the ice had once more become apparent, even this close to the entrance to the cave. Elena reached out and ran her hand along the wall lightly.

"I wonder what makes the ice glow?"

"I don't know," Vincent replied. "But Aeris was right, it's very beautiful."

"I know," she said. "But I would appreciate it more if it was a little warmer. Do you think we're going to get out of here?"

Vincent resisted the urge to tell her it was unlikely. That probably wasn't what she wanted to hear, even though he thought it the truth.

"I hope so," he replied.

He glanced down at her. She was still looking at the wall, her face so close that her hair brushed against his cheek. In the glow of the ice surrounding them she looked...lovely.

He turned his head away. After all this time and all he had been through he thought himself immune to such feelings. After the resurrection of Aeris he had spent some time with Lucrecia, but they soon realized that the scars that separated them were just too great to overcome. Now his love for her seemed just to have been a dream of his lost youth, not anything based in reality. They had parted soon after, and he had resigned himself to fact that, along with everything else Hojo had taken from him, he had also taken his capacity to care for another.

But how he felt now was making him begin to question that assumption. Could it be there was still a spark of human emotion left inside him? That Hojo hadn't removed the last trace of humanity from him with his brutal experiments? He had been living for so long without hope...

Elena rested her head on his chest.

"I'm so tired," she said softly.

He did not reply but laid his hand on the back of her head, almost in a caress. She was not shivering now.

No, he thought. It would be foolish of him to get his hopes up. They had been dashed too many times in the past. Everyone was striving to find their own personal happiness, to live happily ever after. But it was not possible for everyone to achieve that. There were always some who fell short, and Vincent had realized even before Hojo's experiments that he was among that group.

Though Elena's body was warm beside him he suddenly felt colder than he had all day. It seemed more likely to him than ever that they would never get out of here alive.

Cid walked up to the mouth of the cave to have a smoke. He saw Aeris standing in the entrance, looking out into the darkness.

"Why don't you go back inside," he suggested. "It's cold out here."

She shrugged.

"It's cold everywhere," she replied.

She turned and looked back into the tunnel. Then she smiled for a moment.

"What?" Cid questioned.

"They make a cute couple."

"Who?"

She pointed. Cid saw Vincent and Elena sitting together at the far end of the cavern.

"Them, a couple? Nah, she was just cold in that skimpy outfit," he said.

Aeris gave him a quizzical look.

"What are you blind," she said. "They've been making eyes at each other since Icicle Inn."

"Vincent and Elena?" Cid exclaimed. "No way."

Aeris shook her head.

"You really should pay a little more attention to what is going on around you," she said.

"I do so pay atten..." he started to protest. "Gah!"

Suddenly a white furred creature loomed out of the darkness behind her.

She turned around at his cry. The beast was almost upon her, and she could see others behind it. She swung up the Princess Guard.

The creature ducked back.

"Hey, watch it with that thing," said a familiar voice.

"Cloud!" Aeris exclaimed.

The white beasts resolved themselves into fur clad humans. Cloud pulled his hood down as Aeris rushed into his arms.

"You made it!" Cid exclaimed.

Reno came up beside Cloud as the others, hearing the commotion, made their way to the cave entrance as well.

Another figure in white walked up beside Cloud and Reno. They could see three others behind.

The third figure dropped her hood to reveal a young woman with long blonde hair and steely blue eyes. The others came up behind her.

"Everyone," Cloud said, turning to face her. "Meet Renada's Raiders."