

CHAPTER XI: DIGGING DEEP FOR ANSWERS

Reeve flopped on his back on the ground.

"I need to rest," he sighed.

The others sank down wearily beside him, none of them in any mood to argue. Cloud leaned back against the trunk of a huge oak tree. He dropped his sword beside him and wiped the sweat from his brow. The Slipstream couldn't land in the middle of the woods. It had taken them two hours of hiking through dense forest just to get back to this area. And for the next two hours they had been in almost constant battle. The surrounding woods were literally crawling with monsters, much more than they had met anywhere else. It seemed beyond a doubt now that they were close to the source, yet, in spite of their searching, it stubbornly refused to reveal itself.

"How much longer can this go on?" Cid grumbled.

"There seems to be an endless supply," Red commented. "I suppose we should be grateful for this respite."

Cid just gave him a look, obviously wanting an answer that was a bit less pessimistic.

Cloud rubbed his hands across his face. He was exhausted. He looked around slowly at the others. If anything, they were in even worse shape. Reeve was lying flat on his back, staring up at the sky. Red and Nipala were curled up on the grass nearby, their fur matted and splotched with the blood of their foes. Cid looked like he was going to keel over at any moment. They were all exhausted and dirty. Only Cait seemed unperturbed, standing quietly nearby. Sometimes being a robot had its advantages, Cloud thought.

They would have to go back soon. He didn't want to, but there wasn't any choice. He knew they were close. He could feel it. He was surprised and a little worried that they hadn't found what they were looking for yet. In spite of him telling himself not to get his hopes up, he realized he had. It would be a serious blow to morale if they returned to Corel today unsuccessful. But they wouldn't be able to fight for much longer. There was no getting around that. They were too tired. He could tell they were pushing the envelope even now, and they were lucky that no one had been seriously hurt already. If they kept it up it was only a matter of time.

Cloud leaned his head back and looked up at the broad branches above him. The sun filtered through the leaves, casting a dappled shadow around him. In front of him the ground sloped up to the top of a hill. The branches of the trees up there swayed in a gentle breeze, but down here the hills sheltered them from the wind. It was stiflingly hot, and he suddenly had a strong desire to feel that breeze on his face.

In spite of his exhaustion he pulled himself to his feet with a grunt. The others looked at him.

"Where ya goin'?" Cid questioned.

Cloud nodded toward the top of the hill.

"To get some air," he replied.

The others nodded, but none seemed inclined to join him. He walked wearily up the slope. He kept his eyes open, alert for any monsters that might be lurking in the bush nearby, but all was quiet. Even before he reached the top of the ridge he felt cool air blowing softly across his face. When he reached the top he took a deep breath. Though he was still tired the breeze was surprisingly invigorating. He looked back down at the others below, thinking he should call them up, but decided against it. They seemed comfortable enough. Better to let them rest while they could.

He sat down again on a rocky outcrop at the very top of the ledge. Another valley fell away below in front of him. And past that another ridge rose up, and then another, and another. This whole area seemed to be made up entirely of huge furrows, as if a giant fork had been raked across the land, over and over. The up and down nature of travel had made the trip in here take twice as long as it should have and seem twice as hard. It was no wonder this area was so uninhabited. With almost no flat land and the soil so rocky, it wasn't suited for farming or building.

A cry made Cloud look up. A hawk glided through the air along the opposite ridge, its wings motionless, upheld by its own speed and the drifting air currents, its eyes keenly surveying the land below for any sign of prey.

But its eyes did not spot the dark shadow swooping down from above.

Cloud saw it. A flying lizard-like creature. It was hard to pick out details from this distance. Cloud wasn't sure where it came from. He supposed it must have come from over the ridge, but it almost seemed to have appeared out of thin air. It flapped its wings strongly, moving in quickly above and behind the hawk. Then it suddenly folded its wings and dove.

A moment before impact the hawk must have detected something, for it suddenly dipped to the side. But it was too late. Before it could dodge the claws of the other creature snapped it up, and the predator had suddenly become prey.

The creature reversed itself, turning round and dipping low, suddenly heading straight for Cloud. The young warrior stood up, lifting his sword. But the creature, picking up even more speed as it descended, shot ten feet over his head and down into the valley below. Cloud watched as it turned again, heading for a rocky area on the far slope. And for a moment Cloud was sure it was going to slam right into the ground. But as quickly as it had appeared it suddenly vanished into a narrow crevice in the rock.

Cloud stood there for a long time looking down at the opposite ridge. He didn't think the creature was attempting to commit suicide. From the speed it was going, the crevice would have to be very deep in order for it to land safely. Very deep indeed. It appeared he had found the entrance to a cave.

And that got him thinking. They hadn't seen anything from the air. They had searched the entire area with the Slipstream and found nothing. If a mako reactor had been built here, it was impossible to hide all sign of it. They would have had to have seen *something*. They would have had to, that is, unless the reactor was underground.

He turned and looked back down at the others.

"Hey, come up here," he called out. "I think I've found something."

The others looked up at him, obviously not anxious to comply. But after a moment, and with more than a few grumbles, they got to their feet and trudged up the slope.

When they reached him Cloud pointed to the crevice below.

"There's a cave down there," he said. "I saw a monster go in it. Perhaps that might be where they're coming from. Perhaps the mako reactor is underground, and that's why we can't find any sign of it."

Cid looked down skeptically.

"I don't see anything," he said.

"It's right there," he pointed. "I told you, I saw a monster go in it."

Cid looked again, then shook his head and shrugged.

"It may be there," he replied. "But I can't see it."

"You will soon enough," Cloud snapped. "All we have to do is go down there."

Reeve sighed.

"Even if there is a cave, that doesn't necessarily mean anything," Red pointed out. "There may be plenty of natural caves in this area. It might have nothing to do with the mako. And even if it does, if it really is underground, then it's a good possibility that it could be some natural source, and not a mako reactor at all."

Cloud hesitated a moment, a little annoyed at everyone's negative attitude.

"Maybe it is, maybe it isn't," he said brusquely. "Maybe it's a natural source, maybe it's a mako reactor. Either way, we're not going to find out anything by standing around here discussing it. I don't care what anyone thinks. I'm going to check it out."

Not caring whether anyone followed, he started to scramble down the slope. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, the others followed.

The bottom of the furrow was thickly wooded, making passage difficult. Cloud nearly had to hack his way through the underbrush. By the time he started up the opposite slope, he was covered with scratches and sweating once again.

The crevice was bigger than it had looked from the far side. A jagged opening, about fifteen feet wide but only about five feet high. He stopped for a minute at the entrance to look inside. All he could see was bare rock, although he couldn't see very far. He kept his blade ready. If this really led to the source of the mako, artificial or not, it seemed likely they'd run into more monsters before they reached it.

"See anything?" Nipala asked.

"Nope," he replied.

He stepped inside, walking slowly, crouching down uncomfortably to fit. The ground was covered with a fine gray sand. There were no tracks. It was noticeably cooler in the cave. It felt refreshing, but he wasn't really paying much attention to that.

The cave expanded a few feet in, and he could stand up straight. The light from outside did not penetrate very far, and he could only see a few feet in front of him before it faded into darkness.

"Damn," he muttered.

"What's wrong?" Cid said from right behind him, his voice sounding overly loud and echoing in the cave around them.

"It's pitch black," he replied. "We're not going to be able to go very far without a light."

He was about to curse himself for not thinking to bring one when he heard a click and a beam of light illuminated the far wall. He turned to see Reeve holding a flashlight in his hand.

"Where'd you get that from?" Cid questioned.

"I had it in my backpack, just in case," Reeve replied.

"All right Reeve," Cloud said, relieved.

Nipala padded forward and peered into the darkness in front of them.

"It looks like this passage might go on for quite a ways," she said. "This whole area could be riddled with caves. For all we know, this could go on for miles. If something is down here, it might be as hard to find as something on the surface. And down here we have the added concern of trying to keep track of where we're going. I'd hate to get lost down here."

"Ummm," Cloud said slowly. This was getting more complicated than he had thought.

"Maybe if we left a trail of some kind," Cid said slowly, looking around. "Hey Reeve, got any string in that backpack of yours?"

Reeve shook his head.

"Nope, just some rope," he replied. "But I'm afraid it's much too short to be used for that purpose."

"Well, if we keep turning in the same direction, say, we only make lefts, it shouldn't be difficult to retrace our steps," Red suggested.

"Would that work?" Cid asked.

"Sure," Red replied. "It's a standard tactic used to get through simple mazes. It should work."

"Should work?" Nipala said dubiously.

"Yes," Red replied. "The basic principle is sound."

Cid shook his head.

"I'm not too keen on 'should work' myself," he stated. "Things always seem to have a habit of going wrong if it's at all possible."

"Murphy's Law," Red commented.

"Murphy's what?"

"Murphy's Law," Red repeated. "Whatever can go wrong, will."

Cid scratched his head.

"If that means this ain't a good idea, then I agree," he said.

"What about Cait, can he keep track of where we're going?" Nipala suggested.

They turned to look at Reeve.

"No problem," Cait spoke up. "It shouldn't be hard to keep track of the turns we make."

The others did not reply, just continued to look at Reeve.

"What, you don't believe me?" Cait questioned.

"He should be able to do it," Reeve stated.

"Great, there's that 'should' word again," Cid muttered.

"I can do it!" Cait said.

"He can store any turns we make in his memory," Reeve continued. "It's not like he will forget. He should be able to retrace our steps no matter what we do."

"I'm still rather fond of the string idea," Cid cut in.

"Cid, we don't *have* any string," Cloud reminded him.

"We could go back and get some," Cid pointed out.

"Is anyone listening to me?" Cait exclaimed.

"That would take hours," Cloud responded. "We'd have to come back tomorrow."

"So? We were planning on being here as long as it took. One day's not going to make much of a difference."

"I want to get it over with!" Cloud said petulantly. He knew he was being impatient, he knew he was letting his emotions get the better of him, but he didn't care. Some people had to plan things out carefully, and some people got by winging it. He fell into the latter class.

"Can't blame you there, but still," Cid said.

"Perhaps Cid is right," Red weighed in. "It would be best to be prepared."

"I am?" Cid said, looking at Red in surprise.

Red gave him a look.

"Yes, you are," he repeated.

"But Reeve says Cait can do it, and I trust his judgment," Cloud stated.

"What about *my judgment*?" Cait demanded.

They looked at Reeve again, who nodded.

"He can."

"All right, then we don't have to go back," Cloud said firmly, looking at the others.

Cid shrugged.

"Never thought we'd have to depend on Cait, but you're the boss," he said.

"Helloooo?" Cait said.

Cloud looked at Red.

"It may not be prudent, but you've proven that careful planning doesn't count for everything," Red said. "Sometimes you have to trust your instincts, and yours always seem to manage to lead us down the right path eventually. We can only have one leader. If you say we go, then we go."

Cloud nodded, grateful for the vote of confidence.

"Then let's go," he said.

Without anymore discussion he started off. Reeve came up behind him, shining the light deeper into the cavern. The others all followed, until Cait was standing there by himself.

"If I just stood here, you probably wouldn't even notice I was missing," he grumbled. "I've got a good mind to purposely lead you purposely astray. It would serve you right."

Cid, who was last in line, turned back to look at him.

"Would you quit your mumbling and get a move on!" he growled. "You're gonna get left behind."

At the front of the group Cloud picked his way forward. The ground sloped down slightly. Stalactites hung from the ceiling, some of them reaching almost to the floor, and some just at head height, making walking treacherous. Reeve was right behind Cloud, shining the light ahead.

It soon became obvious that Nipala was right about at least one thing, the cave went on for quite a ways. In the darkness they couldn't move particularly quickly. The rush of adrenaline that Cloud had felt at the discovery of the cave quickly faded away as they proceeded. He had hoped that now that they had finally found something the end of this was in sight, but now he wasn't so sure. If these really did go on for miles, they might have to wander around down here for days. And that prospect seemed even worse than searching the forest above. They couldn't see what was ahead of them. They couldn't tell if hundreds of creatures weren't waiting around the next turn. If they did run into anything, their lines of retreat were limited and could easily be cut off. Add to that the fact that it was going to be a nightmare to figure out where they were going, how to get back, and where exactly they had already covered, and suddenly the idea of searching through miles of forest began to seem like a piece of cake.

"Cait, can you tell which direction we're headed?" he called behind him.

There was no answer. Cloud turned around as Cait pushed his way up from the back.

"We're headed northwest right now," he replied.

Cloud nodded.

"Try to keep track," he said. "We don't want to end up going in circles. I'd like to keep us heading in a northerly direction."

"Whatever you say," Cait replied.

"Why north?" Red questioned.

Cloud shrugged.

"Intuition."

Cloud led them on, stopping to consult with Cait at each turn to decide which one kept them on the right track. And he did a lot of consulting. The tunnel was constantly branching, sometimes into three or four separate tunnels at once. The farther along they went, the more pessimistic Cloud became. It looked like his worst fears were being realized. Searching through all these tunnels was going to be a nightmare.

The colors of the rock walls of the cavern varied from light yellow to a deep russet red to brown to almost black. One could clearly see the layers of the rock as it had been laid down over the course of countless years. The overall effect was quite eye catching, even though they all had other things to think about.

The ground continued to slope gently downward, and as they progressed they began to notice the presence of water. At first it only dampened the wall, a few drops of condensation appearing on some of the rocks. But the farther along they progressed, the more evident it became. Soon the walls were thick with moisture, and they could feel the dampness in the air, filling their lungs and clinging to their clothes uncomfortably. Eventually they began to see open pools of water in depressions on the floor. Cloud wondered what lay ahead. He didn't relish the idea of doing any swimming on top of what they'd had to put up with already.

A glint of white stood out in the cone of light ahead of them. Reeve's flashlight had flickered across it quickly, but immediately moved back. It took them only a moment to recognize the distinctive shape of bones on the cavern floor ahead.

No one said a word. They walked over to the bones. It was a single person. The bones were lying by the side of the tunnel, his (or her) head resting on the wall. The skeleton was still almost intact, and fully clothed. The clothing in fact, seemed in remarkably good condition. A hard hat, dark blue pants and lighter shirt made of a thick material, and workman's boots.

Cloud bent down to examine the body.

"This looks like a construction worker," he said with a tinge of excitement.

"What makes you say that?" Nipala questioned.

"The hard hat, the boots, it all looks like something a construction worker would wear," Cloud replied.

"Perhaps," Red stated. "But not necessarily. I would think any spelunker would wear similar gear. Don't jump to conclusions"

"Splunk-what?" Cid cut in.

"Spelunker," Red replied. "Someone who explores caves."

"Oh," Cid said. "So why didn't you say so?"

"I thought I did," Red replied seriously.

"So you think it might just be someone who was exploring the cave and got lost?" Reeve questioned.

"I don't think we can rule that out," Red replied. "Or maybe he wasn't an explorer, maybe he just wandered in here accidentally."

"Who would do something like that?" Cid questioned skeptically.

"We're here, aren't we?" Red responded.

Reluctantly, Cloud fished through the corpse's pockets. He wasn't anxious to disturb the remains, but he needed information. Unfortunately, the man's pockets were empty. That in itself seemed kind of unusual. Most people carried some form of ID with them no matter where they went. Had the man deliberately left it behind because he didn't want to be recognized, or had someone been here before them and removed it. To what purpose? Was there some evil design here, or had this been some kind of accident?

He shook his head. Someone was here, but without some form of identification, without some way of knowing the man's purpose, it really didn't prove anything. He wanted to believe this was a construction worker. He wanted to believe the man had been working on the reactor and had somehow gotten lost in the caves. He wanted to believe this was the clue they were looking for. But did he want to believe that so strongly he was reading more into this than was there? Was he trying to convince himself?

There was nothing more on the body. No other clues. He was about to stand up again when he noticed a rectangular shaped card lying in the dirt beside the body with a clip on it. It was almost completely covered with dirt, which was why he hadn't noticed it earlier. He picked it up and brushed the dirt off it. The others leaned closer. They could all see writing on the card.

"It's an ID badge," Cloud said slowly. "It must have fallen off his shirt. His name was Darmon Sandlow, and it looks like we're on the right track after all."

He turned and held the badge up so they could all see it more clearly. The man's name was written across the top, and underneath it they could all plainly see the words Vanguard Inc. and the company logo.

"I'll be dammed," Cid muttered.

"I'd say this proves this wasn't just a cave explorer with bad luck."

Red nodded.

"Although not definitive, for the first time we have evidence to back up your assertion that this is not a natural phenomena. After all we know about Vanguard, it seems too much of a coincidence that someone from that company would be wandering around here by chance."

"All right then," Cloud said, standing up. "Let's keep going."

He started forward again, walking quickly, more determined than ever to get to the bottom of this. The passage curved sharply to the left, and when they came around the turn the tunnel branched into three separate passageways.

Cloud stopped.

"Cait, which way is most north?" he asked.

Cait hesitated a moment, then pointed to the left one.

"That one," he said.

Cloud nodded and started forward.

"Wait," Nipala said.

Cloud turned to face her. She walked past him, up to the entrance of each tunnel, her nose to the ground. After a moment she looked back at him.

"He came from this one," she said, indicating the middle one.

"You can follow his scent?" Cid said, unnecessarily.

Nipala nodded.

"It's still fresh enough," she said. "It's faint, but detectable."

"Excellent," Cloud said with a grin. It seemed things were suddenly starting to look up. Perhaps their dead friend could lead them right to where they wanted to go.

"Lead on," he said.

Nipala nodded and took the lead, Reeve falling in behind her, shining the light ahead. They made good progress. When there were no turn offs, it was obvious which way the man had taken. They only had to stop and use Nipala or Red's nose at any branches, and it usually only took them a few moments to detect the correct path.

The ground continued to slope downward, as it had since almost the moment they had entered the cave. Cloud wondered how far below ground they were. Miles, probably. He glanced up, wondering how many tons of rocks lay above their heads. More than enough to bury them without a trace should it come down on them. But that really wasn't a good topic to dwell on.

Nipala stopped for a moment, and they could see in the light that the cavern floor in front of her was covered with water.

"Can you follow his scent through that?" Cid asked.

Nipala shook her head.

"No, I can't," she replied. "Let's just hope it doesn't go very far."

"And that it's not too deep," Reeve added.

Nipala nodded but did not reply. She stepped into the water, the others following. It was not deep, at least, not yet, but it was icy cold. Still, that certainly wasn't going to stop them.

"Well, if that guy came this way, we have to assume that we can through as well," Cid stated logically.

"Unless the water had gotten deeper since he passed this way," Red suggested pessimistically.

"Nipala, you said the scent was fresh, which means he couldn't have been there that long," Cid reminded them. "So it's likely the water level hasn't changed."

"True, but that's a relative term," Red responded. "We don't know what the water level is like down here. For all we know it could fluctuate daily, or even hourly."

"Damn you're being pessimistic today," Cid growled. "That's not likely, is it?"

"No, it's not," Red agreed.

If they had anymore to say on the subject it was rendered moot. After traveling about thirty meters they looked ahead and saw the trail slope up slightly, out of the water.

They picked up their pace, gratefully stepping on to dry land once more. As focused as they had been on the water, they hadn't noticed the walls of the cavern slowly receding on each side of them. Now they suddenly noticed that the cavern had widened considerably. Reeve flashed the light around them and saw the walls and ceiling were barely discernable in the distance. The cavern had become huge.

Not that that was particularly significant. Cloud was more concerned with Nipala, who circled around for a minute, then, much to his relief, announced she had picked up the scent again.

She led them forward once more. The cavern floor here was level and covered with fine sand. To their left they saw another pool of water, the largest one yet. Nipala led them straight ahead, and soon the far wall hove into view. As they got closer to it, Cloud noticed that there seemed to be no tunnel in the wall ahead.

Eventually Nipala led them right up to the wall and stopped. She looked around, puzzled.

"The scent ends here," she said.

"But it's a dead end," Cait enlightened them.

"No shit," Cid grumbled.

Reeve shone the light along the wall, first to the left, and then right, but they could see no opening.

"You must have lost it somehow," Cloud said. "It's got to be around here somewhere."

Nipala nodded and padded off to the left, while Red went right, traveling along the base of the wall. They both went to the limit of visibility, but found nothing.

"Well, he couldn't just have appeared out of thin air," Cloud said, frustrated.

"Maybe there's a secret passage?" Cait suggested.

Cid scoffed, but even so stepped forward and examined the wall.

Red looked thoughtful.

"Perhaps we are thinking too two dimensionally," he said.

"Huh?" Cid questioned.

Red nodded upward.

Reeve lifted the light up the wall. About fifteen feet up a dark hole could be seen.

"There you go," Cloud said with satisfaction. "Good thinking Red."

"Yeah," Cid agreed. "But how are we going to get up there?"

"Reeve has a rope," Nipala reminded them.

"Yeah, but that doesn't do us much good unless there's someone up there to throw it down to us," Reeve said. "How do we get the rope up there?"

Cloud looked up, running his hand along the wall.

"Someone will have to climb," he said. "It's not that far. Cid, if you boost me up, I'll practically be able to reach it. I think I'd be able to climb the rest of the way."

"Sounds good to me," Cid agreed.

The task proved surprisingly easy. The wall of the cavern was rough, providing ready handholds. A few moments after Cid boosted him up, he was hauling himself onto the ledge above.

"Throw up the light," he called down.

Reeve tossed it up to him. He caught it and turned around, shining it down a comfortably large passage.

"Looks good," he announced. "Now throw up the rope."

A few minutes later they had all climbed up to the ledge. Cloud turned and led them into the new tunnel. For the first time, the ground in front of them sloped upward. Cloud supposed that was a good thing, but now that they had a trail to follow, he really didn't care one way or the other. As they progressed, however, the angle became sharper, the slope steeper, more difficult to travel. Soon they found themselves huffing and puffing, working their up the steep slope, and slipping and falling began to become a concern.

Finally the ground leveled off, and they found themselves entering another huge cavern. This one might even have been bigger than the last. Cloud flashed the light around the room, and could see no sign of the ceiling or the far wall. But for the first time he detected something else, the feel of moving air on his face.

"There's a breeze here," he commented, wondering if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

The ground here was uneven, and was solid rock. Cloud swept the light ahead of them, and suddenly he saw a dark pit on the floor in front of them.

Cloud approached it cautiously. As they got closer he realized it wasn't a pit, it was an abyss. The ground just dropped off right in front of them. He reached the edge and shone the light down, but he could not see the bottom. Lifting the light up, they could just make out the other side.

"Great," Cid muttered "How are we supposed to get across this? Fly?"

"The man whose trail we are following had to have crossed it," Cloud said. "There must be a way."

Again Nipala and Red's sense of smell were called into play. It took them only a moment.

"This way," Red called out and led them to the right.

They walked along the pit, being careful to stay well away from the edge. They only had to travel a short distance when they came upon a narrow spur of rock that spanned the dark hole beside them. They stopped once more. The bridge of rock was only a foot or two wide, and didn't look all that sturdy. Cid looked at it dubiously.

"Don't tell me we have to cross that,"

Nipala walked up to the edge of it.

"I'm afraid so," she said. "He definitely came this way."

Cid groaned.

"Maybe there's another way," Reeve suggested.

Cloud just gave them all a look.

"He crossed it. If he can, we can too."

"Cloud.." Red began, but Cloud wasn't listening. Instead he started across the span.

"Be careful," Nipala called out.

Cloud nodded but said nothing. The span was actually wide enough to walk over without too much trouble. If it hadn't been over a seemingly bottomless abyss, he knew none of them would have any trouble crossing it. But the fact that one slip could send you plunging to your doom made it a bit more nerve wracking. He tried to concentrate on the rock in front of him, and not the blackness surrounding it. The good thing was, because of the darkness he couldn't see just how far he would fall if he slipped.

At any rate, he made it across without incident. He turned and shined the light on the bridge for the others.

"C'mon," he said. "It's not too bad."

None of them took him at his word.

Nevertheless they followed, some more reluctantly than others. Nipala and Cait walked across quickly, almost casually. Red, much more cautiously. Cid stood at the edge for a long time without moving.

"You're a pilot," Reeve reminded him. "Don't tell me you're afraid of heights."

"It's not the same thing!" Cid snapped. "Just give me a minute, will ya?"

After working up his courage Cid inched his way across, by far the slowest of them all, but he still managed to make it without incident.

Reeve was last. The bridge looked a lot narrower once you were standing on it, and Reeve became a lot more sympathetic to Cid. Nevertheless, Cloud was right, it was wide enough to cross comfortably, if one didn't think too much about the consequences of falling.

He was nearly across when he noticed the dark shadow sweeping down on the others from above.

Nipala saw it at almost the same time.

"Watch out!" she cried.

Cloud threw himself out of the way, but not quickly enough to escape the claw that raked across his head. At the same time he swung his sword. He heard a cry, and the beast turned and dropped down, disappearing into the void beside them. From the glimpse he got, Cloud thought it was the same creature he had seen fly into the cave earlier.

But this time it wasn't alone. At least three more of the creatures appeared out of the darkness.

While the others fought, Reeve moved as quickly as he dared across the bridge, trying to get on solid ground. So far none of the creatures had targeted him. But that could change at any second, and he didn't care for his chances of staying on the bridge while trying to hold off one of their attacks.

But it was hard. Not only did he have to watch his footing, but he had to stop every few seconds to look around to see if any of the creatures were coming after him. He didn't want them to catch him unprepared.

Which was a lucky thing, for when one finally did turn toward him, he managed to duck out of the way as its claws slashed past him.

He teetered on the edge for a moment before finding his footing once more. He was almost across now, and with a sudden desperate lung, he was back on solid ground. Even as he made it, more of the creatures appeared from the darkness above.

"There's too many of them!" Red called, slashing with his own claws. "We have to find some shelter."

"Don't lose the trail!" Cloud shouted.

But that was easier said than done. They were in the middle of the cavern. There was no place to hide nearby, no obvious place where the man they were tracking could have come from. It was impossible for either Red or Nipala to try to follow the scent and defend themselves at the same time.

"We can't follow it," Red shouted.

To make matters worse, a lumbering wolf-like beast, perhaps attracted by the commotion, suddenly appeared out of the darkness and lunged at Cait. After getting a mouthful of fur, Cait slammed it on the head, knocking it to the ground, but two more appeared at almost the same instant.

Cloud stepped forward and slashed at them with his sword, causing a momentary retreat. But even as he did so, another of the flying beasts slammed into his back, nearly knocking him over. With a curse he turned and lashed out at the shadows above him. After all this time in the caves undisturbed, he had been beginning to think they wouldn't have too much trouble in that regard, but now it seemed like all hell was breaking loose.

"Just keep moving," he shouted, realizing trying to follow the trail now was futile. "We can pick up the trail again later."

They hacked their way across the chamber. More monsters seemed to be joining the attack with each passing moment. Dozens of them could be seen now, flitting in and out of the shadows, lunging to attack whenever the opportunity presented itself. After having been quiet so long, Cloud couldn't understand where they had all come from all of a sudden. It almost seemed like they had been lying in wait, to ambush them at just the right moment.

And yet, he knew that couldn't be the case. This was no organized attack. If there had been, there was more than enough of the creatures to overwhelm them. The only reason they were still standing at all in face of these superior numbers was the fact that the creature's attacks were uncoordinated, attacking at random.

"I think I see something over that way!" Nipala called out.

Cloud swung the light in the direction she was looking. He could see the far wall now, and a dark opening at the base of it.

"This way, hurry!" Cloud called to the others.

Cloud ran for the entrance, slashing viciously at anything that got in his way. None of the beast could stand before that onslaught, and they gave way. Cloud raced into the tunnel, but he didn't expect the ground to slope steeply downward inside. He overbalanced, and found himself sliding down the slope uncontrollably, all his efforts spent on just trying to stay on his feet. Eventually even that failed him, for the ground itself seemed to be moving beneath him. He fell down, rolling and tumbling down the slope, not even trying to stop himself, just trying to protect his head. The flashlight was no longer in his hand, though he could not be sure exactly when they had parted ways. He slid down the slope in the darkness, completely out of control, not sure how far he had fallen, or how much farther he had to go. He just hoped that the slope didn't end with him plummeting off a cliff.

Or rather them. He couldn't see anything, but he could hear the others tumbling down the slope as well. At least if he went off a cliff, he wouldn't be alone.

Small comfort.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours, the ground leveled off a bit and his hands found purchase on solid ground instead of dirt that pulled away at his touch. He ground to a halt. For a moment he just lay there, then slowly lifted himself to his knees, looking around. He could see nothing. His head throbbed. He put his hand to it and it felt wet. His entire body ached, in fact, but he could function.

"Everyone else here?" he called out.

"Most of me is," he heard Cid groan.

"I am only slightly damaged," Red stated.

"I'm all right," Nipala announced.

"Wow, what a trip," Cait stated.

Silence.

"Reeve?" Cloud said, looking around foolishly. "Where's Reeve?"

No one answered.

"Shit," Cid muttered.

"Reeve!" Cloud shouted.

No response.

"Feel around," Cloud said. "Maybe he's here but unconscious."

"Where's the damn flashlight?" Cid questioned.

"I don't know," Cloud replied. "I dropped it. Try to find that too."

He started to move slowly along the ground, feeling with his hands in front of him. A moment later a spark of light appeared in the darkness. Cid looked at them above the match he has stuck.

He held it up, looking around. It cast very little light, but compared to the pitch-blackness of a moment before, it was like a beacon.

"I don't see him or the flashlight," Red said.

"Damn," Cloud muttered. He peered up the slope. He could barely see more than a few feet. He climbed up a little, but soon found the going impossible. It was almost vertical. They couldn't climb back up without any equipment, and with no light to see any handholds above.

"Reeve!" he shouted again.

The match went out, and they were plunged into darkness. Cid stuck another match.

"I don't have too many more," he stated. "Too bad I didn't bring my lighter."

"We need to find something to burn," Nipala said.

"Or that flashlight," Cid added.

Cloud looked around, angry and frustrated, and more than a little worried about Reeve. It seemed he had somehow avoided falling down the slope, but where was he? If he was still up top, were those monsters still chasing him. None of them would stand a chance against that many by themselves.

"I think I've found the flashlight," Cait suddenly said.

"Good," Cloud stated.

"Not really," Cait replied. "Take a look."

Cloud walked over to where Cait stood. The Mog pointed to a narrow crevice in the floor, a faint light emanating from it. He looked down to see the flashlight wedged deep in the crevice, far beyond their reach.

"You gotta be kidding," he muttered.

The others came over.

Cloud tried to wedge himself down in the crevice, but soon gave up. He stood up again.

"Anyone else want to give it a try?" he questioned, a pessimistic look on his face.

Cid looked down and shook his head.

"None of us are that skinny," he stated.

"Great," Cloud muttered.

"Maybe we can reach down there with something and grab it," Cait suggested.

"Yeah, but what?" Nipala said.

"I can probably reach it with my spear," Cid said slowly.

"Yeah, but you can't grab it with that," Cait stated.

"I know," Cid said slowly. "But maybe I can tease it up here."

He leaned forward and reached down with the spear. Stretching out as far as he could, he could just touch the flashlight. Working very slowly, he hesitantly tried to get the spear underneath.

"I'm afraid I'm going to knock it down farther," he muttered.

Cloud stood beside them, his face a mask of frustration. He couldn't believe this was happening. After all they had been through to get here, after all the obstacles they had overcome, to be stymied by something like this. The stupid flashlight falling in a crack. They didn't know where Reeve was. For all they knew, he could be being torn apart by those creatures even now. They couldn't get back up to him without a light. They couldn't go *anywhere* without a light. They were stuck here, all because he couldn't hold onto the damn thing!

He looked over at the others, but Cid didn't seem to be making any progress. They could spend hours trying to retrieve that light, and they didn't have the time.

"Forget the damn flashlight," he blurted out. "We still have your matches. We can light something on fire."

"But what?" Nipala questioned.

"I don't know. Anything," Cloud replied. "Here, you can use my shirt."

He started to peel it off.

Cid stood up and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"We can try it," he agreed. "Though it would be better if we had some kind of fuel. I don't know how well that material will burn."

"We've still got our materia," Cait reminded them. "We could cast fire spells, or lightning."

"We don't want too big a fire," Nipala cautioned. "We don't know what kind of ventilation there is down here. We don't want to die of smoke inhalation."

"I don't care what we do, but we have to do *something*!" Cloud exclaimed.

"Look at this," Red suddenly called.

They turned to see him standing by the wall a few feet away. They could barely make him out in the darkness.

"What is it?" Cloud said, more angrily than he had planned.

Red just nodded them over.

They all walked over to him, except for Cid, who returned to trying to retrieve the flashlight. Red stood by the wall of the cavern. When they reached him they saw he was standing by a narrow fissure in the wall. Longer than it was tall, it was only a few feet in height.

"Take a look in there," he said, indicated the crevice.

Cloud bent down and peered inside. Immediately he caught the faint glimmer of light. He turned to Red.

"Is that a light?" he questioned.

"It certainly looks like one," Red replied.

Cloud examined the crevice more closely. It looked large enough to squeeze through, but he couldn't be sure in the dark.

"Cid," he called out. "Come take a look at this."

With a grunt Cid stood up again and came over to them.

"We need some light," Cloud said.

Cid stuck another match and bent down beside him. The crevice was narrow, and the rock around it looked wickedly sharp, but he thought they could fit.

"I'm going to take a look," he announced.

He crawled into the crevice. There was enough room, but just barely. It certainly wasn't a place he'd recommend to claustrophobics.

There was a turn ahead of him, and the light grew brighter as he approached. The turn was somewhat difficult, but he managed it. The light was much brighter now. Just a few feet in front of him, the tunnel ended. There was a pool of water on the ground. And above the water, he could clearly make out light shining through the holes in a round grate.

He pulled himself forward, until he was directly under it. Looking up, he could make out a narrow hallway illuminated by ceiling lights. He pulled himself up to his knees, until he was just inches from the grate. He listened, but heard nothing. Finally he reached up and tried to turn the grate. It didn't move at first, but then, with a sudden rasping sound, it began to turn. Once he got it going, it moved rather easily. A moment later he lifted it aside and stood up.

The corridor ran in both directions for a short distance before turning a corner. He could see no one.

He crouched back down and called the others.

He pulled himself up and stood on the floor, sword ready while he waited for the others. Finally he was sure he had found what he was looking for. It wasn't a natural source. It wasn't some accident. He had been right all along. He was sure now. Vanguard was running a mako reactor. He wasn't sure exactly why they were doing it, but one thing was sure. They were going to put a stop to it.

The others arrived a few minutes later. They all somehow managed to squeeze through, though Cait had barely made it. All their eyes widened as they stepped up into the corridor.

"It appears your underground theory has been born out," Red said slowly. "We don't know for sure this is a reactor, but I have little doubt."

"Looks like you were right Cloud," Cid agreed. "About everything."

Cloud nodded but did not reply. Whether he had been right wasn't as important now as what they were going to do next.

"Look around," he said. "We've got to go back to get Reeve, but we need light. Look for something we can use. Anything."

There were doors on both sides of the corridor. Two to the left and three to the right. Cloud walked up to one, hesitated a moment, then opened it. He poked his head in the door and looked around a moment, then turned to the others.

"Just has some sort of machinery in it," he said.

He took a few steps to the next door. He opened it and saw it was a small utility closet.

"This looks more promising," he muttered.

Cid came up beside him and they rummaged through the contents. There were no flashlights, but they found some flammable cleaning fluid and a mop that looked like it would make a perfect torch.

"All right, this should do," Cloud said. "Let's go back and get Reeve, then we can come back here and kick some butt."

They started to turn to return to the grate, but stopped suddenly when they heard a cold voice.

"Hold it right there!"