

CHAPTER XIV: AN ENEMY REVEALED

"My feet hurt."

Vincent turned around and looked at Elena. She had an expression on her face that he had learned meant she wasn't happy.

"Perhaps you should have worn more comfortable shoes," he suggested.

The suggestion did not seem to improve Elena's disposition. In fact, if anything, she looked even more unhappy.

"What?" he questioned. It was obvious there was more on her mind than she was saying.

She looked around them for a moment. They were on a narrow dirt road in the woods outside of Costa del Sol. Snaking above them ran the power lines that they had seen emerging from the ocean from their hotel room. They had set out more than two hours ago, leaving the hotel room to follow the power lines, curious as to where it might lead.

Elena hadn't planned on a long trip. Both of them had expected the lines to lead them to someplace in the town itself, but that had not been the case. Instead they had passed right by the town out into the forest beyond. It didn't seem to make a lot of sense.

Now she was hot, and tired, and beginning to think more and more that they were just on a wild goose chase.

"Well, if you had told me we'd be wandering through the woods for hours, I'd have worn my hiking gear," she said sarcastically.

Vincent said nothing. He hadn't known they'd be doing this either, but he had a feeling pointing that out to her wouldn't do much good.

Elena looked up at the power lines over their heads.

"How long can they go on?" she questioned. "There's nothing out here. Where could they lead? Maybe we're just wasting out time."

"They have to go somewhere," Vincent replied.

"No duh," Elena muttered. She wasn't in a good mood at all, and Vincent's unsympathetic attitude only made things worse. "But I thought they'd lead into town, not out here in the middle of nowhere. Maybe we were wrong. Maybe these lines don't send power from here to Junon, maybe they send power from Junon to here."

"To what purpose?" Vincent questioned.

"How should I know?" Elena responded. "All I know is we've been walking for two hours following these lines and there's no end in sight. For all we know they could go clear to Corel, or beyond. Maybe that's what they're doing, sending power to Corel. It's going to take us just as long to get back you know. If we keep going much farther we're not going to be able to get back before dark, and who wants to wander around in this forest after dark? We didn't bring anything to eat. And if I keep walking like this much longer I'm going to get blisters on my feet. We should have rented chocobo's if we were going this far."

Vincent repressed the urge to sigh.

"It doesn't make sense that they'd be sending power to Corel, or anyplace else," Vincent replied. "You said yourself that Junon doesn't have enough power to cover the city itself, much less send some to Corel. The power has to be going to Junon."

"So maybe Corel is sending power to Junon," Elena replied. "Maybe it's nothing more than that."

"It seems unlikely," Vincent replied. "You would think if that was the case, Barret would be aware of it."

"He's just the Mayor," Elena replied. "If a private company was sending power to Junon, it would be none of his business."

Vincent didn't reply for a moment. He didn't think that was it, but he had to admit it was possible.

"Perhaps," he said. "But I don't think that's the case. I find the fact that this leads off into the woods suspicious."

"So we're just going to blindly follow it no matter where it goes?" Elena questioned.

This time the sigh did escape from his lips.

"We've come this far," he said. "It seems senseless to turn back now."

"And it seems senseless to go on," Elena stated.

"So what would you like me to do?" he questioned. "I can't just conjure a chocobo out of nowhere. I don't have a lure, and this isn't an area wild one's are known to inhabit. Would you like to stay here and rest while I go ahead?"

"You're going to leave me here?" Elena exclaimed. "All alone in the middle of nowhere?"

Vincent opened his mouth, then closed it again. Why did she insist on being so exasperating?

He stepped over toward her.

"Would you like me to carry you?"

She hesitated for a moment, looking at him.

"Really?" she said, and the first time since they had left the hotel, she smiled.

"Yes, if it will get you to shut up," he replied.

The smile vanished.

"Just go on," she snapped. "Go ahead. Go follow your stupid power lines. Leave me here. I'll be fine!"

She stomped over to a fallen tree trunk and plopped herself down upon it.

"Elena.."

Not too long ago Vincent would have done exactly as she requested. But he had learned enough about women in general and Elena in particular to know by now that that would be a very bad idea.

Instead he stepped over to her and took her by the hand.

"You're right," he said. "It was a bad idea to come out here on foot. I should have realized that. I guess it would be best if we went back."

Elena sat there looking at him for a moment. He took the fact that she hadn't pulled her hand away as a good sign.

"Do you really think so?" she said slowly.

"Yes."

Elena looked in his eyes. Even after all their time together, it was still difficult to read his expression. She knew that sometimes he said things just because he thought that was what she wanted to hear. She wanted to know that he was being sincere, but it was impossible to tell.

And why was it so important to her anyway? He obviously wasn't tired. He could continue, was in fact anxious to. It probably wouldn't bother him at all to walk clear to Corel. She really wasn't worried about being left behind. She was a big girl and could take care of herself. But she didn't want him to. She didn't want him to *want* to leave her behind, even if it was the reasonable thing to do. After all this time together, after he had told her that he loved her, why was she still so insecure?

She didn't know. She didn't know the answer to that. It was just the way she was, and it didn't seem likely it was going to change soon. But she realized she was being foolish. She was letting her feelings get in the way of what they were trying to accomplish, and how many times had she told herself she wouldn't do that? It was important that they find out what was going on here. At least he had made the offer to go back. Even that was something.

"No, it's all right," she said, standing up again. "It's not that bad. I can go on a little farther. But I can't walk all the way to Corel without stopping. How about if we don't find anything in another half hour we call it a day?"

Vincent pondered this for a moment, then nodded.

"Very well."

Without another word they continued onward, but Elena couldn't help but notice that he did not let go of her hand.

As it was, about ten minutes later they saw a clearing come into view through the trees ahead of them.

"What's that?" Elena said slowly.

Vincent did not reply at first. They walked closer. As the trees fell away they saw that the land had been stripped clear in a huge shallow bowl in front of them.

"Looks like some kind of quarry," Vincent stated.

"Why would they have power lines going to a quarry?" Elena asked.

Vincent shook his head.

"I suppose they need electricity, but they wouldn't need those high tension wires for just that."

They reached the clearing, the tall conifers dropping away behind them. The quarry was surrounded by a chain link fence, topped with barbed wire. There was an opening where the road passed through, however. They walked up and stood in front of the entrance, looking around.

The trees had been stripped away, revealing the dark hues of the earth below. There were four buildings on the floor of the bowl, the wood planks on them a weather beaten gray. The road spiraled down into the bottom of the quarry, then led past the buildings into a large dark tunnel. They could both see that the power lines led into the tunnel as well. There were also a few earth-moving machines scattered about the floor of the quarry.

"Looks deserted," Elena commented.

"Looks can be deceiving," Vincent replied. "Some of the tire tracks on the road are recent."

They passed the fence, and made their way toward the bottom, going in a straight line instead of following the road. The ground was steep, and Elena had to watch her footing. She had no intention of falling and tumbling down the slope like a fool. No one challenged them. When they passed one of the large machines, Elena could see the paint was chipped and rusted.

"Even if it isn't deserted, it doesn't look like they've done any mining lately. At least, not with these machines."

Vincent nodded.

"I'm beginning to suspect that the quarry isn't really a quarry at all, just cover for something else."

"Something else?" Elena said. "Like what?"

"I'm not sure," he replied. "But I have a feeling we may find the answer in that tunnel."

They reached the bottom without incident. Passing by the buildings, Elena couldn't help but notice they looked deserted and forgotten as well.

They had just passed the last of them when Vincent suddenly stopped and looked around sharply.

"What?" Elena questioned.

"Did you feel that?"

"What?" she repeated.

"That trembling," Vincent replied slowly.

"You mean, like an earthquake?"

"Yes," he replied. "Or an explosion."

Elena shook her head,

"I don't feel or hear anything."

They fell silent, just standing there. Elena was well aware that Vincent's senses were keener than hers, nevertheless she strained to pick up any sound, or any sense that the ground was moving. And then, a moment later, she did feel something. Just the barest sensation, but it was there.

"There it is again!" Vincent exclaimed.

"I felt it!" Elena said excitedly.

As they stood there every once in a while they felt it again. They walked forward slowly. There seemed to be no pattern. Sometimes it came in rapid succession, sometimes there was a long pause between.

They were almost at the entrance to the tunnel now. Vincent stopped again when they reached it. Elena didn't need Vincent to warn here, she could hear the sound coming from the tunnel as well as he. It sounded like a vehicle.

A jeep suddenly came screeching out of the darkness. It shot out of the tunnel like a bullet, barely giving them time to leap out of the way. Elena saw three figures and heard a shout, but she couldn't make out what they said. By the time she fumbled to pull out her gun, it was past them.

It sped down the road, being driven recklessly fast. It seemed whoever they were, they were in an awful hurry to get out of there. Elena saw one person looking back at them, but those in the jeep obviously had no intention of stopping to question them.

She was just about to comment on that fact to Vincent, when they heard more noises in the tunnel.

This time it was the sound of voices and running feet. They both stood there staring as a horde of people suddenly appeared running out of the tunnel.

By now Vincent and Elena both had their guns drawn. But they soon realized they weren't needed. The people showed no interest at all in them, just appeared to be fleeing the tunnel as fast as their feet could carry them. Those few who did seem to notice them urged them to flee as well, though they didn't stop to give any explanations as to why.

Which did not sit well with Vincent. His clawed hand flashed out, and a lab coated gentleman with a balding pate suddenly found himself dangling on the end of it like a hooked fish.

"What's going on?" Vincent demanded.

Ordinarily just the sight of Vincent was enough to cause unease in those around him. To be zeroed in on like the man now in Vincent's clutches, like prey being run down by a cheetah, was usually enough to send his quarry into spasms of pure terror. However in this case the man just tried desperately to twist his arm out of the ex-Turks grip, seemingly willing to do anything to continue his rapid retreat, even if it meant leaving the arm in question behind. Whatever was scaring them, it was causing more terror than even Vincent could inspire.

And that was not a good sign.

"Let go of me," the man yelled, his eyes wide with fear. "She's coming. She'll kill us all. We have to get out of here!"

"Who's coming? Who's going to kill you?" Vincent snapped.

But the man appeared so crazed with fear he didn't even seem to hear Vincent's questions.

There was a flash of light, and a loud explosion from farther down the tunnel. Both Vincent and Elena's heads turned in that direction. At the same time the man tore from Vincent's grasp, and though he left behind a long piece of bloodstained cloth from his shirt in the metallic fingers of Vincent's claw, he seemed to consider it a small price to pay.

But Vincent was no longer concerned about the man. Out of the darkness and smoke of the tunnel in front of them a figure emerged, and it seemed likely to Vincent that he and Elena were about to confront the cause of all this consternation.

The man had been accurate about one thing at least, it was a woman who stood before them. She was wearing a business suit rather similar to Elena's. Her head was covered with blonde hair that fell just past her shoulders. Average height. She did not appear to Vincent to be particularly threatening. He wondered for a moment if there was someone else following her.

But she was walking casually down the tunnel. She showed none of the fear that had so gripped the others. She was either made of much stronger stuff than all of them, or she was indeed the source of the alarm.

She stopped about a dozen paces away, regarding them curiously.

"So, there is someone here brave enough not to run like a scared rabbit," she said. "How foolish..."

She stopped, her eyes probing Vincent, settling on his clawed arm, and suddenly a grin appeared on her face.

"Vincent Valentine," she said slowly.

Vincent gave no outward sign that he was surprised she recognized him. As far as he could recall, he had never seen her before.

"And you are?" he questioned.

In reply her eyes suddenly glowed emerald green. Her hand came up and Vincent was thrown violently backwards as shards of ice slammed into him.

It only took a moment for Elena to recover from the surprise of the attack on her companion. With a shout of rage she brought her gun up and fired five shots in rapid succession.

The faint white glow that gave away the materia barrier around the woman as the bullets struck it told Elena that continuing to fire would be pointless.

She reached into her jacket, groping for her own materia, a resource they seemed to have precious little of lately. She suspected that that brat Yuffie's frequent visits to Turk headquarters had more than a little to do with that.

Before she had a chance to pull any out however, she realized that she had caught their adversaries attention.

She threw herself out of the way as a blast of fire tore past her.

The woman advanced slowly. At the same time wave after wave of magic pummeled both Elena and Vincent. Elena had never seen someone cast spells so rapidly. She also hadn't failed to notice, that in spite of the severity of the attacks, their opponent's hands were empty of materia. She also couldn't help hear the woman's deranged laughter.

But the fact that the woman was obviously unbalanced didn't seem to confer any particular advantage at the moment. Instead the opposite seemed to be true. Her insanity only seemed to contribute to the single mindedness of her attack. Vincent was down. They hadn't been prepared, and the woman's attack had been so ferocious and sudden that he hadn't had a chance. He hadn't even had time to get off an attack of his own, or transform into the Chaos beast. Elena could see him now, crumpled against the far wall, and she had a feeling he was seriously hurt. And even though he showed no sign of consciousness, or even life, the magic attacks continued to strike him. Which only served to infuriate Elena.

Somehow her hand had finally managed to grab a hold of one of her own materia. She pulled out three orbs, all her hand could hold. Glancing at them, she quickly tossed aside all but a red one. This enemy was like none she had met before. She knew she'd need the strongest possible attack to have even a slender chance of doing any damage.

The materia glowed in her hand.

Almost instantly the flaming fire beast appear in the air above her and launched it's wall of flame. For a moment Elena opponent was engulfed, but any satisfaction Elena might have felt at the sight was short lived. As both the fire and it's creator faded away, so too did the familiar reddish glow surrounding her opponent, a glow that told Elena that the woman had not only a barrier to physical attacks, but magical as well.

How could one person be so strong, Elena found herself thinking, finding herself beginning to become frantic. Nothing she did seemed to have any affect at all. How could she fight something like this? Too late now, she realized those people they had met earlier had had good reason to run.

Unfortunately, that was no longer an option for her. Even if she had the time, she wasn't about to abandon Vincent.

She cried out in pain as fire suddenly flared about her, her opponent obviously a believer in fighting fire with fire.

Elena dodged to the side, desperately seeking a plan. She couldn't just stand here dodging all day. If she didn't find a way to hit back, it was just a matter of time before she joined Vincent on the ground. Permanently.

She cut to the side, and then suddenly ran straight at her opponent.

Bullets and materia hadn't had any effect. Perhaps it was time to use her fists. It seemed silly, and she knew it was a desperate gamble. The barrier that protected her enemy would prevent her from doing much damage, but she was hoping that what little damage she could do would be enough to distract the woman from casting her spells, or at least slow them down a bit. It might at least buy her a little time to either think of something else, or perhaps give Vincent a chance to recover enough to get back in the fight.

But even as she ran forward a green mist filled the air.

The release of the Ultima tossed Elena backwards like the proverbial leaf in a storm. She found herself flying through the air, hurtling toward the wall behind her like a runaway locomotive. She twisted round, trying to get her arms and legs in front of her so they could absorb at least some of the shock.

She was partially successful. She screamed in pain as her arms hit the wall, followed rapidly by the rest of her. She rebounded and fell heavily to the floor, agonizing pain shooting through her whole body. Barely conscious, she tried to lift

herself up, but cried out again and immediately fell back to the floor as her arm gave out. She looked at it and saw that it was bent in a direction that arms do not usually bend.

"Oh god," she moaned. She managed to lift her head a few inches off the floor, though even that simple act seemed to take a supreme effort. She looked around, dazed. Neither her gun nor any materia was in sight. She couldn't even get up off the floor, much less continue to fight. With an empty feeling rushing up from the pit of her stomach, she realized she was helpless.

Her brain confused by the fog that seemed to fill it, she turned to look for her opponent.

And saw her walking away.

The woman was already past her, already out of the tunnel, walking toward the building and the road beyond, without even a glance back.

A sigh of relief managed to escape Elena's lips. The woman must have thought her dead, or perhaps had lost interest once Elena had ceased to be a threat. Or maybe there was some other reason, or no reason at all for that matter. If she was insane, she wouldn't need a reason, now would she.

But Elena didn't care to speculate right now. She was just glad to still be alive. She turned away from the woman to see Vincent's still form not far away.

"Vincent!" she croaked.

Summoning all her will, she dragged herself over to him. He was lying on his side, in a pile of debris. She could see blood on his leg and face, and it obvious he was seriously injured. With one last effort, she pulled herself up beside him, and to her enormous relief, saw the slow rise and fall of his chest.

He was still alive then. She lifted her head again. There was no one around now. The place seemed deserted once more. They were miles from Costa del Sol, and it didn't seem likely they be getting any help from that direction. Elena forced her hand into her pocket again, but it was empty. Not only her materia, but her cell phone was gone too. She looked across the floor, it was covered with rubble but she couldn't see any sign of her materia. She couldn't even cast cure on him without it. And she certainly couldn't carry him back to Costa del Sol. She couldn't even walk herself, much less carry someone else. There was no way to summon help and she couldn't get them out of here on her own. Vincent was alive, but how long was he going to stay that way?

"I hate this!"

Red looked at Cloud curiously.

"You hate what?"

"This damn waiting," Cloud responded. They were all locked in a room somewhere in the reactor. It must have been some kind of lounge. A vending machine still stood in one corner. Too heavy to bother with, apparently, but other than that the room was vacant of furniture. Cloud had no idea how long they had been in here, but it seemed like hours. He had spent the time pacing by the door, waiting with an eye to perhaps jumping anyone who might enter. But no one had. Cid was sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, puffing on a cigarette. The others were all standing quietly nearby.

"Since it seems likely they're just going to kill us," Nipala responded. "Waiting might be the lesser of two evils."

"I'm kind of curious as to why they haven't already," Red stated.

"Gee, isn't that a happy thought," Cid said.

"Well, perhaps not happy, for us at least, but logical," Red replied. "They're been trying their hardest to keep anyone from finding this site. And we've found it. Knowing that it's here, they can't let us go. The safest thing to do would be to get rid of us."

"Now don't go putting any ideas in their head, okay Red," Cid said. "I say, if they don't want to kill us, I'm not going to argue with them."

"Nor am I," the red beast responded. "But these people aren't stupid. The fact that they haven't killed us yet leads me to believe they have some other use for us."

"And what might that be?" Cid questioned.

"That I do not know," Red replied. "But I suppose it's only a matter of time before we find out."

"I, for one, am perfectly willing to wait," Nipala announced.

Cid crushed out the butt of his cigarette against the wall.

"Damn Spike, you're even more impatient than I am. Can't you stop that incessant pacing for just a..."

He was interrupted by a muffled rumbling explosion.

"What the hell was that?" he said, frowning.

No one answered, just stood there looking at one another. Cloud didn't know much about reactors, but that didn't sound like some kind of normal occurrence.

They heard another one, then three more in rapid succession, the last one sounding much closer.

"Somethings going on," Cloud stated, rather anticlimactically.

He stopped pacing and stood by the door. They heard shouting outside, and running feet.

"Sounds like some kind of attack, which is probably a good sign for us," Red commented.

"Do you think someone's trying to rescue us?" Nipala said hopefully.

"Unlikely," Red responded. "No one knows where we are, and Cait can't transmit a signal this far underground."

"Reeve?" Nipala suggested, obviously anxious to cling to her theory.

Red paused for a moment.

"Not impossible, but again, it seems unlikely. Whatever's going on, it seems to be something big, too big for one person to have caused."

"Maybe he went back and got help," Nipala tried again.

They heard another explosion. This time they felt the vibration in the floor. Some dust dislodged from the ceiling.

"I'm not exactly sure how long we've been in here," Red said. "But if my estimate is accurate, he could not have gone back and returned in the time that has elapsed."

"You're determined that we don't get rescued, aren't you?" Cid snapped.

"Not at all," Red replied. "I'm merely stating the facts."

"Well, my facts say that I don't give a damn what's happening, or who caused it," Cid replied. "All I know is, this might be our chance to get out of here."

"Even so, we can't get out if we can't open the door," Nipala reminded him.

"Yeah," Cloud agreed, stepping over and looking at the door. "But we didn't try to break it down because we knew that would attract attention. But with them distracted, no one might notice."

They all looked at him.

"You're right," Cid exclaimed, getting to his feet. "Let's do it!"

He came over and stood beside Cloud. They were just about to throw themselves at the door, when it opened on its own.

Cloud reacted instantly, lunging forward before it was even fully open. He reached out, feeling his hand grab hold of someone and pulled the man in, bringing his other hand back in a fist.

But his punch was unnecessary.

"Reeve!" Nipala exclaimed.

They all stopped. In Cloud's grip indeed stood the ex-Shinra executive, looking considerably disheveled, but uninjured.

"Reeve!" Cloud repeated. "How did you find us? What's going on? Are you responsible for those explosions?"

"No time now," Reeve spoke for the first time. "We have to get out of here!"

The others didn't need any coaxing. Reeve pulled out of Cloud's grip, swinging the door open the rest of the way. He turned and led them out of their prison. There was no one in the corridor, but they could still hear explosions. They seemed to be fading away now, however.

Reeve stopped in front of the next room.

"Your weapons are in there," he stated. "Hurry up."

The others quickly retrieved their weapons, though there was no sign of their materia. When they were done Reeve ran down the hallway, the others right behind him.

"What's going on?" Cloud said as they ran.

"I'm not sure," Reeve replied. "I did a little bit of sabotage, but not enough to cause this. Something else is going on. I have no idea what, but it's doing a helluva better job than what I did. Everyone was running for their lives. No one paid any attention to me at all."

Cloud wondered just what it was that was going on. Seemed a strange coincidence something like this would happen while they were here. Could it be that the other members of Avalanche, or perhaps the Turks, had somehow found out where they were?

They had been running for a few minutes now. Occasionally they saw someone else as they ran through the maze of corridors, but as Reeve had said, none of them paid any attention to the escapees. They came another turn and Reeve suddenly stopped, looking around slowly.

"What?" Cloud said, setting himself into battle stance.

Reeve didn't answer for a moment.

"This corridor doesn't look familiar," he said finally.

"Doesn't look..." Cid said behind them. "You mean you're lost?"

"No," Reeve said quickly. "Well, maybe. C'mon, back this way. I'm sure we're close."

"Oh great," Cid muttered as they turned back the way they came.

Reeve walked down the corridor, then turned right into a hallway he had passed before. Cloud looked around anxiously. They had passed through dozens of corridors. The place was huge. Who knows how long it would take them to find their way out of here just wandering around at random? He had a feeling they didn't have time for that. Something was going on. Something very bad, obviously, from the way people were fleeing. He had a feeling they needed to get out of here as fast as possible.

Reeve stopped in front of a door and looked in the room. It was filled with machinery, most of it destroyed. They could see three or four bodies in the room.

"You're little sabotage didn't do that, did it?" Nipala questioned.

Reeve shook his head.

They were about to turn away when they heard a groan issue from underneath a mass of machinery. Looking in, they could see a leg protruding from the wreckage.

Nipala immediately padded over to the man.

"Someone's still alive," she announced. "Help me move this."

The others filed into the room, Cloud a bit reluctantly. They had to get out of here. He didn't know why, but he felt time was of the essence. He wasn't sure they had time to help a man who could only be their enemy.

Nevertheless, he only paused for a moment.

The man groaned again as the others pulled the machinery off him. The man was wearing a long white lab coat, speckled with his blood now from a gash in his arm.

"Are you all right?" Nipala questioned.

The man looked at them all for a moment. Cloud wasn't sure whether he hesitated because he was disoriented or because of the peculiar looking group that surrounded him. Nevertheless, when he answered, he seemed coherent enough.

"I think I'll live."

He sat up, then slowly got to his feet. There was a tear in his pants, and his hand came down to rub his leg, but he seemed remarkably well preserved considering the large piece of machinery he had been trapped under.

"Do you know what's going on?" Cid asked.

Calin nodded, making sure to keep his face neutral. He had recognized the members of Avalanche as soon as they had pulled the machinery off him. So they had escaped. Well, that wasn't any concern of his now anyway. He was actually glad in a way. From what he heard, they had treated Amanda well.

He looked down at the floor.

Almost immediately he looked up again, realizing they were waiting for an answer.

"We infused President Gram with mako," he began.

Cloud frowned.

"President Gram?" he blurted out.

Calin looked at him in surprise.

"The President Gram from the southern continent?" Cid said slowly. "I thought he was killed in the explosion that blew up the Presidential Palace. Did he escape somehow?"

Now it was Calin's turn to frown.

"You are mistaken," he said. "President Gram is a woman."

Cloud stood there for a moment, then his eyes slowly widened.

"A woman!" he snapped. "Young? Blonde hair. Purple eyes?"

"Yes," Calin agreed.

Cloud turned to look at the others.

"Wisteria!"

The word came out explosively.

"Wisteria?" Cait said, assessing his data bank. "President Gram's daughter. The girl who tried to seduce Cloud. Who Tifa threw through a..."

"Plate glass window," Cloud finished for him. "Yes, I know! You don't have to remind me."

"Shit," Cid muttered.

Cloud turned to Calin.

"Infused her with Mako, you say. Why?"

His tone of voice left no doubt he was expecting an immediate answer.

"To achieve what Hojo tried to do with Dr. Nathan's wife. To create a being who could use mako energy to cast spells without using materia."

The others fell suddenly silent.

"And we succeeded," he continued. "But she attempted it too soon. I wasn't ready. All the tests hadn't been completed. The infusion was a success, but I'm afraid it cost her her mind. It's left her unbalanced, thinking she's a god, thinking she can do whatever she wants. And it's true, the power she has is indeed godlike."

The others looked at one another.

"But?" Cid said. "I'm hoping there's a 'but' here."

"But she overestimates herself," Calin replied. "The spells she's using have a similar effect on her body that casting spells with normal materia does. Each spell cast saps some of her strength. It may be less than with normal materia, but it happens. At full strength she's probably unstoppable, but if she expends enough energy, if she gets tired, she'll reach a point where she won't be able to cast anymore spells, and then she'll be vulnerable."

Cloud turned away, his face pale.

"We've got to go, we've got to go," Cloud muttered. "She's got to be heading to Ifalna. She's got to be after Tifa. I knew I shouldn't have left them there alone."

"Cloud, calm down," Red said. "We don't even know that she even knows where Tifa is."

"I'm sure she does," he said. "She's not stupid. She set this whole thing up. This whole Vanguard thing. It's all part of her scheme to get back at us, to get back at Avalanche and the northern continents. I should have known!"

"Cloud, snap out of it!" Cid exclaimed.

Suddenly the sound of alarms blared around them.

"Now what?" Cid snapped.

Calin looked up.

"That's the alarm for the reactor," he said. "It's sounds when there's an overload. It means if we don't do something, the reactor will go critical and explode. She must have done something to it."

"Umm," Reeve said slowly. "Could that be caused by a loss of coolant?"

Calin swiveled his way.

"A loss of coolant. Yes, of course, why do you ask?"

Reeve looked contritely at the others.

"You know that sabotage that I mentioned earlier..."

"You didn't!" Cid said.

Reeve nodded.

"That would be it."

For a moment now one spoke.

"So what can we do to stop it?" Cloud questioned practically.

Calin looked around.

"You see the main control panel in front of you," he said, indicating the burnt out hulk of machinery in the center of the room. "I guess it wouldn't surprise anyone for me to say that we can't use it."

"Aren't there any alternate controls?" Cid asked.

Calin shook his head.

"Everything was controlled from here," he replied. "President Gram had a thing about security. She wanted all the controls in one place."

"So what the hell do we do then?" Cid snapped. "Run?"

"We can't outrun it," Calin replied with a shake of his head. "If the reactor explodes, it'll make a hole halfway from Costa del Sol to Corel. We'll have to shut it down manually."

"So how do we do that?" Red asked.

"Someone has to go into the core and remove the mako by hand," Calin said. "But whoever does that will be exposed to massive amounts of mako."

"Enough to kill them?" Reeve asked.

"I don't know, no one's ever been stupid enough to try it," Calin said. "Probably."

"Shit," Cid growled.

Cloud was pacing back and forth, hardly listening. All he knew was he had to get to Ifalna, he had to get back to Tifa.

"So there's a chance they might survive?" Red said.

"A chance," Calin replied, though his voice made it clear he didn't believe it.

"I'll do it."

They all turned to look at Cait.

"I'm not human," he said. "It's not going to kill me."

"That's right!" Nipala said.

"Perhaps not," Red said. "But the heat could destroy your circuits. If it burns out your memory, we'll lose you."

"I'm willing to take the chance," Cait replied. "What other choice is there?"

There was none, and they all knew it. They just needed someone to say that, but no one spoke. They needed someone to make a decision. Now.

"Do it!" Cloud snapped. "Cid, you stay here with them. They might need your mechanical skills. Maybe you can piece this control panel back together. Calin, do you know the way out of here?"

"Left out the corridor. First right, then second left will take you right to the main entrance," he said, while Cid looked dubiously at the control panel.

"All right, the rest of you. Let's go!"

He ran out, hardly noticing the others following him, or the looks they gave him. But no one said anything. If he was being irrational, they could certainly understand it.

Cloud didn't care how they felt. All he was thinking about was Tifa. He had to get to Ifalna. But even if he got out of here, he still had problems. They had no transportation. The Slipstream was back in Corel. Miles away. He couldn't run all the way to Ifalna. He'd have to find something in the nearest town, probably Costa del Sol, but who knew how long that would take.

He didn't know whether Wisteria had any transportation either. But he suspected she did. He didn't see any way that he could beat her to Ifalna, or even get there soon after.

Of course, he thought as he ran, he could be totally wrong. She could have some other motivation, some other plan in mind. But he didn't think so. Either way he couldn't take the chance. He'd only feel better when he had Tifa safely in his arms.

He recognized the light ahead of him as daylight. He must be nearing the entrance.

He came around a turn, doubling his speed when he saw the tunnel end in a wide opening. He ran out into the daylight to see what looked like some kind of quarry in front of him.

"Cloud!"

He turned around and saw the others had stopped.

"It's Vincent and Elena!" Reeve called out. "They're hurt!"

Cloud ran back to them. Vincent and Elena lay on the ground by the side of the tunnel. Cloud could immediately see that both of them were hurt badly. Vincent lay unmoving on the ground, a large gash across his head. Elena was conscious, but he could see right away that her arm was broken, among other things.

"Cloud, you ran right past me," she blurted out as he came up. "Didn't you hear me call you?"

"Sorry, I had other things on my mind," he replied.

"What happened?" Red asked.

Elena quickly explained their confrontation with Wisteria.

"Vincent is hurt bad," she finished. "Do you have any materia?"

"No we don't," Cid replied. "They took it all when they captured us."

Red was examining Vincent as they spoke.

"Even with it, he's still going to need medical attention," was his verdict.

"But how can we get him out of here?" Elena said, distraught.

No one said anything.

"My cell phone. My materia," Elena said. "They're around here somewhere. See if you can find them."

The others fanned out, searching through the debris strewn tunnel. Cloud was almost frantic. Another delay! He could hardly stand it, but it seemed there was nothing he could do. He kept thinking back to when Jenova's riders were after Tifa. They had barely reached her in time that time. Would he be as lucky this time? True, Tifa wasn't alone this time. She had Aeris with her. But how much help could Aeris be? She wasn't the best fighter in the bunch, but then again, she had surprised him in the past. And Tifa certainly couldn't fight, in her condition. From what Calin had told them, even if Tifa was in perfect fighting condition, she and Aeris alone still wouldn't have much of a chance. Wisteria had already taken out Vincent and Elena, apparently without too much trouble.

As if by magic, a sudden beeping alerted them to the presence of the cell phone.

"Here it is!" Reeve said, snatching something off the ground. He put it to his ear.

"Hello? No, it's Reeve. Reeve. It's a long story. Elena and Vincent are hurt. We need to get them to a hospital. I told you, it's a long story. Can you help us? Uh huh. I see. That would be great. We're...it looks like a quarry."

"We're about two hours west of Costa del Sol," Elena said.

"Two hours west of Costa del Sol," Reeve repeated. "Yeah, that's right. Okay. Hurry!"

He shut off the phone then brought it over to Elena.

"That was Reno," he said. "He, Rude, Yuffie and Lai Li are on their way. They've got a helicopter."

"Really," Elena said, visibly relieved. "Great."

"How long until they get here?" Cloud snapped.

"Not sure," Reeve replied. "Since they're not exactly sure where we are. They're just outside Gongaga. Probably couple of hours."

A couple of hours. That wasn't good enough. It gave Wisteria too much time. It would be too late.

"I can't wait," he said.

"What other choice do you have?" Reeve said in surprise.

"I can go to Costa del Sol," Cloud replied. "I can get a gold chocobo. They're usually got one or two there."

"But it took Vincent and Elena two hours to get here," Reeve said. "By the time you reached Costa del Sol, the helicopter will be here."

"Yeah, walking," Cloud pointed out. "If I run I can cover that distance in half that time, maybe less."

"I think it might be better to wait," Red began.

"I don't give a damn what you think," Cloud snapped. "I'm going!"

And with that he turned and started to run off.

"Wait!" Reeve shouted. He ran after Cloud.

Cloud paused for a moment and looked back.

"I don't have time.." he began.

"I'll come with you," Reeve said.

For a moment Cloud just looked at him.

"You're worried about Aeris?"

Reeve nodded.

"Fine."

Without another word he started off again. As Reeve chased after him he looked back one more time.

"But if you fall behind," he called out. "Don't expect me to wait up."