

Chapter 2

Reeve sat down in front of his office desk. Papers piled up in front of him. An untouched cup of coffee which was once hot lay at the farthest side of his table, threatening to fall over should more paper work arrive. He didn't know he had it in him. To take the responsibility of reviving Midgar. So, far everything was going fine, and he was damn proud of his people. The digital clock on his wall registered as 10:30 a.m. when two figures entered into his office. He didn't hear them knock, but he was too busy with his Development Plans to reprimand them either. The first one who entered was a woman, wearing a navy blue business suit and slacks. Her blonde hair was neatly combed and fell all the way to her shoulders. Her companion, a tall, roughish man wore the same business suit. He was bald yet he wore a stubble of beard across his chin.

"Good morning, Elena, Rude. What can I do for you?" Reeve said, flipping another page of the report then scribbling down something on a piece of paper.

Elena walked forward, and presented the mayor with a brown paper folder. "Sir, there have been three deaths outside Midgar, near the sector 7 gate."

Reeve put down the pile of papers and took the folder from Elena's hands, opening it and took a glance at the reports and the pictures of the mutilated bodies. "It looks like some wild animal did this." He said, closing the folder and laying it down on the desk.

"We want to send out an investigation team to the sight. What ever did this might be a threat to our city." Elena said, reaching back to another brown paper folder that Rude held. She opened it and presented the Order document to Reeve for his signature. Again, the mayor took the paper and scanned it.

"Only one of you may go. Take as much as five soldiers only." Reeve scribbled them down on a space and signed his name over another space. "You two are the head of security in Midgar. You can't both leave for some investigation at the same time."

Elena retrieved the sheet of paper and inserted it in the envelope. "Thank you, sir. Oh, and, there is an interesting article on the Midgar Times magazine about Cloud Strife and Tifa Lockheart." She grinned and handed him the magazine. Reeve smiled back and took it. Elena and Rude both gave him a salute and left the office.

Reeve shook his head and stifled a laugh when he saw himself with Cloud and Tifa waving to the people. He's never gotten used to all this publicity, and he'd usually criticize the way he wore his tie, his suit, how foolish he'd look without a beard et cetera. The article was entitled "Midgar's Heroes Rekindles the Desire for Development and Participation." It was a four page article of what happened last evening. Full of pictures and the details of their meeting.

He continued reading, taking a break from his long morning of paperwork. He then realized how hungry he was, having skipped breakfast and a snack and decided to prepare for himself a new cup of coffee. He set the magazine down on his desk and discarded the contents of his cold coffee mug. As he started pouring the hot water, one of the captions caught his eye. "Flower girl brings stars to Cloud's eyes..."

He slowly picked up the magazine and studied the picture that accompanied the caption. There was Cloud, in his brown trench-coat holding his hand out to a girl. A girl who looked so familiar that Reeve almost dropped the coffee mug. The angle of which the picture was taken was a bit short to see the exact features of the girl. However, from the color of the hair, to what he could make out from three-fourths of her face, she definitely was a spitting image of Aeris.

Reeve shook his head again and quickly poured in a brown coffee-liquid and stirred his cup. He walked to the tall glass windows of his City Hall office and took a long sip. Maybe this was another sign that their guardian angel may still be watching over them from her Promised Land. "I need to switch to decaf."

"Excuse me," The blind man said. He heard two women giggling and the sound of water running from a faucet nearby. "May I have a drink please?" He said holding on to the wooden fence for some support.

"Sure, please, come in." One of the women said. She opened a gate beside him and lead him inside, taking note that he was blind. She offered him a seat and disappeared into her house. A few moments later she reappeared with a jug and a

glass which she placed in the man's hand. She filled the glass with ice cold water, which the man quickly gulped down soothing his parched throat.

"Thank you." He uttered as he forced himself to stand up. "I'd better not trouble you any longer."

"No, you're no trouble at all, mister. Why don't you rest first? You must have been traveling for days now." the same woman said , and offered him more water which he was very grateful for. "Where are you going? Are you all alone?" she asked.

The blind man rested his back against the wooden fence. He felt awkward accepting the kindness from a total stranger, but he felt that she could be trusted. "I am looking for the ShinRa Tower. I have a debt to pay."

"There ain't no more ShinRa towers here. Midgar's not what it used to be." The other woman finally spoke. From the sound of her voice, she was trying to stay as far away from the blind man as possible.

"What do you mean?" he asked, flicking away a strand of black hair from his face.

"The meteor almost destroyed Midgar, sir. Most of the ShinRa officials were killed. Now, there's only mayor Reeve who's taking care of this city." The first woman spoke. "So, whatever debt that is, it probably was destroyed six months ago."

The blind man remained silent, thinking if all his travels were for nothing. "Is that so?" He picked up his walking stick and brought himself to his feet. "I still have to go. Thank you very much for your trouble." He dug into his pouch and brought out his small dragon-like pet. "Please take my little friend as a token of my appreciation."

He heard a gasp from one of the girls, then the other one, who offered him water stepped forward. "Thank you, he's adorable!"

"It's a she.." the blind man answered smiling at the source of the kinder voice. He turned to leave, thanking them one more time before stepping out of the wooden gate.

As soon as she was sure that the blind man was out of earshot, the redhead girl wrung her hands in front of her and sat down. "Eeww.." Janise said looking at the creature in Eila's hands. "What on earth is that? It's not a chocobo, right?"

Eila grinned and stroked the little things head. It cooed happily and licked her fingers. "She's cute! I think I'll call you Nai, how's that?" The creature cooed again, adn Eila giggled with it. "Okay, Leen my little pet."

"Gee, Eila, sometimes you scare me. Anyway, are you ready to go on a date with Mr. Strife tonight?"

Eila gave a disturbed sigh and twisted her lip. "Janise, how many times do we have to go through this. I don't want to see him again. He's only being kind because I look like his old friend." She placed her new pet, Nai on a wooden ledge by the window and tickled its neck with her finger. "Gosh, I forgot to ask the man what she eats... any ideas, Janise?"

"Don't change the subject, Eila! I promised Mr. Strife that you'd see him."

Eila grinned sarcastically with both her eyebrows raised in an I-really-don't-care manner. "Well, it's your promise, Janise, not mine." She turned her attention back to Nai and dropped some crumbled bread. The creature pecked on it happily and soon asked for more.

"Oh, Eila, you're so stubborn! I know you've been hurt once--okay twice, but please...this is different, the guy just wants to see you. Give him a chance."

Eila sighed again, dropping the whole piece of bread in front of Nia. "Not as stubborn as you, Janise." She smiled as a thought crossed her mind. She had a feeling that if she met with Cloud Strife that evening, Janise would be somewhere eavesdropping.

"Okay, I won't force you. Besides, Miss Elmyra doesn't want you going out with any SOLDIER." Janise sighed. "Poor guy. I saw how Miss Elmyra yelled at him last night. I know he would never kill his own friend, I'm sure he loved her very dearly. He's very kind too, and for what it's worth I guess I should go and apologise to him tonight. One for being embarrassed last night after he ran all the way from Midgar City Hall to meet you. Second for wasting his precious time and canceling some of his appointments for a date who won't show up tonight. And third---"

"All right! All right, I'll go!" Eila said raising both her palms up in the air in surrender. She spun around quickly and faced her friend. "You better make sure that mom doesn't find out about this!"

"No problem."

"And you'd better not be eavesdropping on me again." Eila grinned, though she meant business. Janise nodded and held up her right palm as her vow. Eila nodded and took another deep breath.

"Oh, Eila! You're going out with Cloud Strife, the hero of Midgar City and of the world!" Janise cried out raising her fist to the sky triumphantly.

She ran her fingers through her shoulder length hair and looked helplessly at Janise. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"What is it with you and men, Eila? They all like you, but you don't like them. If I were you, I'd say forget about the past hurts and pains and begin anew."

"I suppose, there's not much about my past, is there" Eila sighed and collected the jug, glass and Nia. She waved goodbye to Janise as the other girl stepped out of the gate and into the streets of Midgar.

The doorbell rang twice. Cloud changed it from the monotonous tone that annoyed him to the soft "ding-dong." He groggily got out of bed still in his grey jogging pants. The sun was shining brightly now, but he didn't realize that it was now one in the afternoon.

"Who's there?" He said through the inter-com.

"It's me, Tifa."

Cloud opened the door and let the raven haired woman enter. He offered her a seat on the plush sofa as he plopped himself on the bed.

"Cloud, I was reading the papers this morning and I found something interesting." She said, holding out a magazine and opening it to the page where he and a flower girl were. "She looks so much like Aeris." Tifa said bravely. She heard Cloud react with a grunt, as if saying "is this going to be another one of those long talks about Aeris?"

"It's not her, if that's what's bothering you." Cloud said.

"I'm not worried about that, Cloud. But I was worried about you running away from City Hall. Reeve was worried about you too. Midgar may be starting anew, but there are still dangers that are lurking in the streets." Tifa said transferring from the chair to the bed, sitting beside Cloud.

"I can take care of myself, Tif."

Tifa sighed and gently lay her hand on his shoulder. "I know. But I won't forgive myself if anything happens to my childhood friend."

Cloud smiled. "Thanks." Tifa relaxed her hold on his shoulder as the phone started to ring. She gave an irritated sigh as Cloud reached for the cordless communication device. He muttered a few words of acknowledgment and agreement then hung up. He returned to her with a big smile on his face.

"Who was that?" Tifa asked.

"Just a fan. Say, we don't have any activities going on tonight, right?" Cloud looked at Tifa, who responded by shaking her head. "Nope, your tonight is free, but mine's not. I have an appointment with the marketing manager of some clothing line I forgot. Why, are you going somewhere?"

"I'm going back to Midgar. I'm going to see Eila." He said, standing up and returning the phone on the nearby table.

"Eila? Oh, you mean the girl who looks like Aeris?"

Cloud nodded. Tifa felt a sudden ache in her heart. Maybe it was jealousy, but she scolded herself quickly. Yet, she could not deny that the old feeling of rivalry still existed in her. What hurt her more was the fact that Cloud seemed excited to meet the girl again. "Cloud, what if someone sees you together and starts rumors?"

"It really doesn't matter. I won't stay there for very long." Cloud stood up and headed for the shower, stopping at the door and looking back at Tifa. "She has white materia on her, and she can hear the voices. Just like Aeris. Maybe she's an Ancient, her sister perhaps?" He shrugged and shook his head. "Anyway, please lock the door after you've left. See you later, Tifa."

After Cloud shut the shower door, Tifa sat on the bed a while longer. Thinking about what had just happened. She couldn't help but feel frustrated and angry at herself and at Cloud for continuing to live on turbulent grounds. Their relationship seemed like it was going nowhere. Even after they have been living together in the same town, in the same building for six months, it seemed that they were still no more than childhood friends. Yes, they have been romantically linked by the people. And she knows that there is a mutual love in between her and Cloud, but, for her it was not enough. And, damn, she should have tried harder to make that grow. If only she wasn't too busy with interviews, photo shoots and meetings. Cloud and her could have settled down. If only she'd worked harder in enforcing that bond in between them, she wouldn't feel so threatened now.

Tifa sighed. Why should she feel threatened of a mere fan? Because she looks like Aeris? Or because she knew that Cloud still held their dead friend in his heart. Maybe his bond with Aeris was not as strong as theirs, but that fact that it still existed rather disturbed Tifa. After the battle with Sephiroth and Meteor, Cloud had been giving her signs of settling down...but stardom blinded her. She always thought that Cloud was hers, from childhood till death. Now, she feels she was wrong.

Slowly, the streets of Midgar grew emptier and emptier. The lamp posts emitted a warm yellow glow and couples walked slowly hand in hand through the grassy paths that lead to the park. In the park, couples disappeared into the shadows, into their own private corners. There was a quartet playing a soothing lullaby that tendered the evening after a long day of work. Not far from the quartet was a round fountain. Water gushed out of metal tubes forming smooth domes that were no taller than three feet. Eila sat down on one of the benches facing the fountains and it's "jello-shaped" water. It was dazzling and romantic. She played with a lock of her chestnut hair. She wasn't wearing anything special, just her plain pink and white dress with short sleeves and her thin brown coat that fell to her knees. She even had Nia perched on her shoulder to keep her company.

"Excuse me, Eila?" She heard Cloud's voice call from behind her. She froze for a moment and turned her head slowly whispering to herself: "Please don't let him be in formal wear..." Much to her relief, he was wearing army boots, baggy black sports pants and a black long sleeved shirt underneath his brown trench coat. He was holding his helmet in his hands which indicated that he came in his famous Hardy Daytona motorcycle. "Have you been waiting long? I'm sorry, I had to take the long route, there was a police line outside Midgar."

"Oh, that's quite all right." Eila said, a little startled to find herself stuttering before Cloud. "Um, I heard you wanted to see me?"

"Yeah," Cloud said, scratching the back of his neck. "I wanted to see you again." He found himself having a lot of difficulty finding the right words to say to start up a conversation.

Eila folded her arms across her chest. "Okay, let me get one thing straight." She said in a business like manner, "I'm only doing this because my friend asked me to. And second, I want to make it clear with you that I don't like the idea of you getting into trouble because of me. And I would really appreciate it if you would not go into any emotional scenes because I look like your friend."

"Don't worry about that." Cloud grinned at the honesty and the courage of the girl. "So, you just came here for your friend, is that right?" He continued, digging his hands into his pockets and looking at her face.

Eila covered her mouth. Afraid that she may have offended him. "Sorry. Well, I--I did want to apologise for the way Miss Elmyra treated you last night. She didn't mean it, she's still a little--uh--upset about her daughter." She glanced at Cloud, his mako eyes that glimmered against his shadows sent a warm feeling creep up her spine.

"That's all right too. No harm done." Cloud smiled.

"What was she like anyway? It looks like her death brought great sorrow to everyone."

Cloud bowed down his head and closed his eyes. Eila scolded herself once again for asking such a sensitive question in a rough manner. Before she could apologise again, Cloud opened his eyes and walked closer to the fountain, letting the multi colored lights under the water illuminate his face.

"She was very kind and gentle." He said staring at the water domes that the fountain created. Eila slowly stepped up beside him, holding her hands before her and biting her lower lip. She still felt guilty for bringing up the topic. Cloud continued talking, however, "Always smiling. During those days when we were out traveling, fighting, and practically dying of the pressure, she was always the sunlight in our lives. She made everything seem so happy and worth fighting for. She was strong, I never saw her spirits be dampened by any danger. Not even when it was her life that was in danger." Cloud sighed and bowed his head down.

Eila opened her mouth to speak, but Cloud continued to tell his tale. "I remember one time, she asked me to go on a date. We were at the Golden Saucer at that time. She snuck into my room and asked me if I've never been on a date." Cloud smiled and stifled a laugh. "She was so excited, she was pulling me out the door. But as we left the hotel, we ran into Tifa who wanted to speak with me alone. I told Aeris that we could continue our date next time. She was smiling but I knew that I hurt her somehow. I never had the chance to make it up to her." Cloud fell silent and stared blankly at the flowing water.

Eila stood beside, her eyes cast down on the water too. Not daring to look up at Cloud in embarrassment for the torture she was bringing him with her constant tactless questioning.

"I'm sorry." Cloud said all of a sudden. "I guess, when I saw you, I thought that I could make it up somehow. But you're a different person, and you're right, I shouldn't be searching for her anymore. She's dead and the past is the past. Aeris sacrificed her life, and now I have a present and a future to look forward to." He smiled and looked up to the stars. "I understand now, thank you."

Eila stood speechless at his side. She could have sworn that his eyes were moist when he looked up at the stars. When he suddenly turned his eyes to her, she jumped back, embarrassed that he caught her staring at him. Instead, he moved towards her and before she could move backwards, he took her in a gentle embrace.

"I'm sorry, Eila. I was forcing you to become her. I wanted to be relieved of my pain and I thought that by make-believing you were Aeris I would be forgiven." He held on to her tighter, ignoring the fact that she hasn't moved at all, nor responded to his action. She stood there frozen in place and speechless.

Eila felt her heart pounding crazily in her chest. Her whole body was warmed up and she could not bring herself to move at all. She understood how Cloud felt, she knew from the start what he was up to. She could see that there was a deep sorrow in him that he has kept for so long. And she saw from the way he looked at her, when they first met, he was going to treat her as if he was with Aeris. But he's awoken now, he's begun to let go of the past and forgive himself.

Both their thoughts were cut short by a shrill cry of a woman. Soon others started yelling and running in all directions. Cloud wrapped his arms protectively around Eila as some panicked people ran past them. There was a distinct animal growl nearby and more screams. Probably a monster on the loose, Cloud thought.

"Come on, let's get out of here." He whispered to Eila and squeezed her hand. As he took a step forward, a shadowy figure jumped from the bushes and pounced on his right, causing his rib cage to hit the concrete frame of the fountain. Cloud gave a choked cry as his hand went to the left side of his torso. He crumpled on the ground, trying to fight the pain..

Eila knelt down beside him and tried to comfort him. She was barely able to roll to the side as another beast jumped up and struck the ground in between them. She gasped at the sight of the creature. It's skin was rippled as if it had been burned away. Eyes glowing hot white. Claws and fangs shone against the fountain lights as it snarled at her. The beast turned it's attention to Cloud and stomped at his back before kicking him savagely at the side, making him roll over and gasp for air.

"NO!" Eila yelled as she plunged herself at the creature as it prepared to hit Cloud with a thick club. She was no match for the creature as it pushed her off it with a forceful punch to her stomach. Eila fell on the ground, coughing and dizzy from the sudden lack of oxygen.

"Stay out of this, innocent. The one with JENOVA's cells must die." The creature spoke and walked slowly towards Cloud's prone form. They were surrounded by ten of the same beasts, all of them snarling and grinning at their victory. Eila scarcely understood what was going on, but she knew that they were going to kill Cloud.

"Wait, what has he done to you?" She cried. The beast which appeared to be their superior turned back, making her shiver.

"It does not concern you." It snarled back. Eila, however, jumped up and ran in between the creature and Cloud. "It does now!" She said savagely.

The beast did not move, making a decision whether to eliminate the pesky girl as well as Cloud. "Very well, you die with him." He raised his club to strike, Eila closed her eyes and covered Cloud's body with her own, waiting for the impact. She could feel him struggling to push her away, but in his weakened state he was not successful.

Suddenly, there was a loud explosion, and some of the beasts howled in pain. Eila looked up and saw the beasts in flames, the leader looked around in confusion as he was thrown away by a fire ball. Her rescuer came in the form of a huge creature with dragon-like wings and claws. It had the head of a bird with smoke coming out of its nostrils. It stood in between Eila and the attacking mob, breathing fire on who ever came close.

"N-Nia?" Eila gasped as she recognized the creature to be her little pet. It had grown somehow, it was even bigger than a chocobo. The bird cried happily and lowered her back to let Cloud and Eila ride. Eila had to pull Cloud's limp form on Nia's back and as soon as she secured herself too, the bird flapped it's great wings and they took to the sky.

"They have escaped." The leader growled fiercely.

"You will find them, don't worry." A calm voice said from behind a tree. The leader turned around to face the blind man who approached him with confidence. "But next time, do not harm the girl."