

THE SEARCH FOR AERIS
THE UNOFFICIAL SEQUEL TO FINAL FANTASY VII
By Frank Verderosa

CHAPTER I: THE RELUCTANT MAYOR

The Mayor of Corel sat back in his chair and looked vacantly at the heap of papers that lay on the desk in front of him. He had been working diligently, or as diligently as was possible for him, to make a dent in those papers all day, yet looking now it seemed as if he had made almost no progress. He glanced out a window to his left and saw that the sun now hung low in the sky, just peaking over the mountains of North Corel. He had been working on this paperwork all day, but he hated it, and it was slow going. How he wished he were out in those mountains right now and not stuck behind this desk!

With a shrug he turned back to his papers. He had too much work to do to let his mind wander. He reminded himself (for the millionth time, it seemed) that he had responsibilities now, and couldn't take off and leave everything on some whim like he used to in the old days. No, those days were gone, even though he had come to realize that they had been the most exciting in his life.

Still, a man had to move on. He idly scratched his right arm just above the gun grafted on it. He looked at the gun for a moment, holding it up until the sun glinted off it through the window. For all he had used this lately, Barret mused, he might as well have replaced it with a letter opener.

The door to his office opened. He turned with a frown. He knew he had to get this paperwork done, and he also knew that he would jump at any interruption as a chance to get away from it. To prevent that he had left his secretary with explicit orders that he not be disturbed.

A girl stood in the doorway, but it was not his secretary. He recognized her and his frown immediately turned into a grin.

"Tifa!" he exclaimed, getting up and striding over to her. "It's so good to see you again. I didn't know you were in town."

Barret wrapped her in a bear hug, and though she was by no means a fragile girl, she gasped for breath until he let her go.

"I just got here," she replied after a moment.

"Well, make yourself at home," he said, indicating a seat in front of his desk. He sat down behind the desk, his paperwork forgotten. "How long has it been since I last saw you, about a year I guess, eh? I can't believe it's been that long. How's everything back in Kalm? Are you doing well with your new bar? How's Cloud? Everything well, I hope?"

Tifa sat down slowly in the chair. She did not speak for a moment, and at first he thought she had just been overwhelmed from his barrage of questions, but then he realized this was not so. He and Tifa went back a long way from their days in Avalanche, and even when things had been bad Tifa had always been cheerful and optimistic. But now he saw a troubled look in her eyes.

"Is everything OK? How are things between you and Cloud?" he guessed.

"Ok, I suppose," she said with a shrug.

Obviously not good. He saw that he had guessed correctly.

"What did he do, run off on you?" The pokey haired kid had a good heart but he was so immature. Barret wondered if he was going to have to knock some sense into him.

"No, nothing like that," Tifa said quickly with a smile, as if she understood his thoughts. She sat back in her chair and glanced out the window. Now that it came down to it she was reluctant to speak. She had never been very good about expressing her feelings for Cloud, and did not feel comfortable talking about it, even with her close friend. But after all, that was the whole reason for her being here in the first place. If she couldn't talk to Barret she couldn't talk to anyone, and if she didn't talk to anyone she thought she would go crazy.

"It's just that he's so distant," she said finally. "Sometimes it seems like he's in another world, and it's happening more and more lately. He can sit there for hours just staring into space. And the dreams. He doesn't discuss them, but I can tell he has them almost every night. He's convinced she's trying to contact him."

Barret nodded sympathetically. Tifa didn't have to tell him who 'she' was. Aeris' death had hit them all hard, and no one

really got completely over it. He had seen so many good people lose their lives. He still thought of Jessie, Wedge and Biggs often, and how they had talked about the good times they would have after it was all over. That would never happen now, but what could one do but go on?

"We all lost people we were close to," he said softly.

"But he's convinced she's alive," Tifa said.

Barret looked at her sharply.

"How could he think that?" he questioned. "We were all there. We all saw it. Sephiroth ran her... well, you know. No one could have survived that."

Barret shuddered at the memory.

Tifa bowed her head, obviously remembering also. But then she looked up again.

"No human could have survived it," she responded. "But Aeris was an Ancient, a Cetra. Who knows whether the same rules apply."

Barret looked at her in surprise. He had never thought of that.

"So you think it may be possible?" he asked.

"I don't know!" she answered. "I don't know what to think. I don't see how she could have survived, but what do I know about the Ancients? All I know is that Cloud is convinced she is, and he won't be whole until he finds out for sure, one way or the other."

Barret sat back in his chair. He had never been able to follow all that Ancient Cetra stuff that Aeris had spouted. It had all seemed much too complicated and not worth the effort, not when there was a gun in his hand (or on his hand, as the case may be) and a clear enemy to fight.

"So what do you want to do?" he asked.

She didn't answer at first. She got up and walked over to the window. Dusk had faded into night, and a few brighter stars now twinkled in the sky. When she spoke her back was still toward him.

"I want to find out if it is possible she survived. And if it is, I want to help Cloud find her."

Barret had kind of figured that was coming.

"How would you feel about that," he said slowly. "I mean, if it turned out she was alive?"

Tifa continued looking out the window, and for a moment he thought she wasn't going to respond. But then she turned and looked at him.

"I don't know," she said. "But Cloud can't go on like this. He has to be whole, even if it means..."

She fell silent, but Barret could finish the sentence easily enough. Still, it seemed unlikely to him it would ever come to that.

"Well I can see your dilemma, and I have to say I admire your decision. Of course I'll help you any way I can, but I don't see that there is much I can do. I never paid much attention to all that Ancients talk, and I certainly wouldn't have the slightest idea of how to look for Aeris, even if I thought there was even the slimmest chance that she was still alive."

"I know," she said, nodding. "I didn't come here to have you find me a solution. It may be that there is no solution. I just needed someone to talk to."

"I understand," he said, then stood thinking for a moment. "Is Cloud with you?"

"Yes," she said. "I left him at the Inn. I wanted to come see you first. I was going to make some excuse but he didn't even ask me where I was going."

"It'll be good to see him again," Barret replied. "You know, I have no clue what you should do, but I think I know someone who can tell you, if anyone can. I think it might be time for us to visit another old friend."