

CHAPTER VII: NOR PAR TELLEMAR...

Cloud opened the hatch on the submarine and they all stepped out, looking around. They had surfaced in a large cavern. A pale green glow surrounded them, the unmistakable glow of the lifestream. It filled the air, growing stronger toward the back of the cave, which slowly shrank until it turned into a narrow but brightly lit tunnel.

They had returned to the sub without incident in the Tiny Bronco. Cid quickly diagnosed the problem with the submarine and corrected it. And now here they were, late on the day after they left Rocket Town.

"Looks like your vision from Aeris was correct," Vincent said, looking at Cloud.

Cloud nodded. He had never doubted it.

"So where do we go from here?" Cid asked.

They turned to ask Red and realized for the first time that he had not yet come out of the submarine. But even as they noticed this he appeared. He looked at them soberly.

"I have been attempting to translate the exact procedure we need to follow in order to successfully complete our mission," he said, walking over to them slowly. "And I am afraid I have discovered something extremely disturbing."

They all waited for him to continue. Cloud knew Red had been working hard, and had spent almost all his time the entire trip with his nose buried in that book.

"We can bring Aeris back," he said, "but to do it requires the sacrifice of someone else."

"What?" Barret exclaimed.

"It's not so much a resurrection as an exchange," Red said slowly. "In order for it to work someone else will have to die."

They all looked at him in shocked silence. Standing beside Cloud, Tifa went deathly pale.

"Are you sure?" Yuffie asked.

"As certain as I can be," Red replied. "The translation is difficult, but I have analyzed it over and over, and it seems pretty clear. The procedure itself is relatively simple. We need to be in the lifestream, a step we've already accomplished," he said, glancing around them. "The next step is to find a flux, a place of power, which would manifest itself as something familiar to us."

"What's that supposed to mean," Barret asked.

"We need to enter the lifestream and look for someplace familiar," Red explained. "Someplace we know from the surface of the planet. It could be a town, or any familiar location. In this place will be a focal point, a bright area of intense light. This is the doorway. Standing there and holding the Crystal Materia, all the person has to do is ask for someone's return."

"Just say, hey, bring back Aeris?" Cid asked.

"Not exactly," Red said. "You must ask in the Ancients language. You have to say Nor par tellemar and then the name of the person. Then you are both transferred through the doorway."

"Bringing the other person back and sending you...", Vincent said, "elsewhere."

"Exactly," Red replied.

"What were those words again?" Tifa asked.

Red looked at her.

"Nor par tellemar and then the person," he replied. "Then the exchange takes place. But if we continue with the mission, who would use them? I'm afraid this changes things drastically. I think the question now is, do we continue the mission at all?"

The others were silent for a long time. From the looks they gave him, it was clear to Cloud they were waiting to hear his opinion. All except Tifa, who moved off by herself and did not look at him at all.

So this must have been what Aeris meant when she had spoken of a sacrifice, he thought. She hadn't been kidding. This was a doozy. It seemed a shame to end the mission now, when they had come so far, but he knew he could never ask any of the others to make such a sacrifice. And even if he did so himself, would that be what Aeris wanted? Would she want

someone else to have to die, even to save herself?

There had to be another way.

"Are you sure there's nothing else we can do?" he asked, not because he thought there was, but because he desperately needed another option.

"I don't think so," Red replied. "There is still some more translating that needs to be done, and perhaps another option will reveal itself then, but it's doubtful."

"Well then I think you should continue with your translating as quickly as possible," Cloud replied. "What we have now is unacceptable. We need another alternative."

"I'll do what I can," Red replied. "But I don't know how long this will take, and it may be that there are no other alternatives."

"We'll just have to face that when we come to it," Cloud replied.

Red nodded, then turned and padded back into the submarine.

"So what are we supposed to do in the meantime?" Yuffie questioned.

"Sit down and relax," Cloud replied. "Looks like we're going to be here awhile."

Barret grumbled.

Cait strode over to Cloud.

"I'm afraid we don't have much time," he said.

"What do you mean?" Cloud asked.

"Tarkin is here," Cait responded.

"Who the hell is Tarkin?"

Barret perked up and walked over to join them.

"The man who stopped the Turks from taking the Crystal Materia," Cait answered evenly.

"So you did know him!" Barret exclaimed. "You really are spying!"

"No!" Cait said quickly. "Not exactly. I was just keeping him informed of where we were, and where we were going. But I was really trying to find out what he was doing so I could tell you."

"What?" Barret said angrily.

"I know he wants to use the Crystal Materia to bring back Sephiroth."

"What?" Barret said again.

"But that's the same thing Lucrecia wanted to do," Vincent said. "If that were true, why didn't he just let the Turks take it and give it to her? It seems to me it would have saved him some trouble."

"I'm not sure," Cait replied. "That's what I was trying to find out. He has something else in mind. Something more. I don't know what it is, but I know it involves you, Cloud. He wants to make sure that you are the one who brings the Crystal Materia into the lifestream. But I don't know why. That's why he stopped the Turks, and that's why he's been sending you those dreams."

"What?" This time it was Cloud's turn.

"He has something called Influence Materia," Cait said, looking at Cloud sympathetically. "It works kind of like Manipulate. But with Manipulate you know you're being manipulated, and you fight against it, although you may not be successful. Although it can be used that way as well, Influence is usually more subtle, and can affect you without you even realizing it. With Influence, you think what you are doing is your own idea."

Cloud stared at him for a long time.

"And you're telling me that he's used this to make me think that Aeris is trying to contact me."

Cait nodded.

"I'm afraid so. I know he's been using it on you for a long time. It was given to him by Sephiroth, and I've a feeling Sephiroth used it on you as well, which kinds of puts everything that happened to us in our previous adventure in a new light. But the whole point behind his maneuvering was to get you here with the Crystal Materia. I pretended to spy for him because I wanted to find out exactly what he was up to, but now it's too late."

"You say he's here," Yuffie cut in, "but how did he get here? Does he have a submarine too?"

"No," Cait replied. "There are many entrances to the lifestream, if you know where to look."

"Why didn't you tell us any of this sooner?" Barret questioned.

"Because if he found out I told you, I wouldn't be able to find out what he was up to, now would I?" Cait answered sharply. "I don't know the full extent of his powers, I don't know what other spies he may be employing. I didn't want to show my hand before I found out anything, but now I'm afraid I have no choice. I didn't want you to run into him unprepared."

Cloud looked at him for a long time. He felt anger, disappointment, and disbelief, and he wasn't sure which of these emotions to go with. Was it safe to believe anything Cait told them? Once a spy always a spy, hadn't he said that once before? How were they to believe him now? How were they to know that anything he said held even a shred of truth?

The real truth, he told himself, was that he didn't believe the story, couldn't believe the story, because of what Cait had said about Aeris. Could it be that the whole thing was a lie? Could it be that he had been manipulated again, that this entire mission had been a farce, a charade caused by yet another Sephiroth clone? Could it be that he had not seen Aeris, not talked to her at all, but just some illusion that had been planted in his brain? Could it be that she was really and forever dead?

He could not believe that. No way.

Barret shook his head.

"Looks like you were sort of right, Tifa..." he started to say. He stopped and looked around.

Tifa was no where to be found.

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The ground sloped sharply down in front of her. Tifa moved slowly down the tunnel. The lifestream flowed around her now almost like a living thing. She moved forward slowly, as if unsure of herself, and a few times she hesitated and looked back, but each time she took a deep breath, turned ahead once more, and moved on.

As soon as she had heard Red she had been gripped by a deadly fear. She knew what Cloud would do, no matter how much he delayed, or how long they discussed it. There really wasn't any other choice.

Which gave her no choice. She couldn't let it happen. She had to act before he did or it would be too late. She slowly took out the Crystal Materia and looked at it, thankful that he had never asked for it back. It glowed faintly with reflected green light of the lifestream.

The best thing to do would be to destroy it, she thought once more. It was the simplest solution, and probably the easiest thing to do. But she knew she couldn't do it. She couldn't take away this chance on her own. Though it might be prudent it wouldn't be fair to Cloud or Aeris. She wished she could bring it back to Cloud to let him destroy it, but she knew that would never happen.

The tunnel dipped even more steeply down, and suddenly she lost her footing. She felt herself sliding down rapidly. She grasped desperately for handholds but found none. The air around her grew bright and she found herself falling, much as she had in Mideel the last time she had been in the lifestream. She seemed to fall for a long time.

She stopped falling and the bright green glow faded into blue sky and wooden thatched houses. She looked around and immediately recognized where she was. Nibelheim!

She walked slowly into the center of the town, which appeared to be deserted. She looked around. One building stood out. It's windows were brightly lit with a greenish glow. It was the old Shinra Mansion.

She walked swiftly over to it and entered. She followed the glow, which brightened perceptively to the right. She found herself walking through the secret door that led into the basement.

The stairs down creaked and groaned as she walked down them, but they held, and nothing disturbed her as she walked down the now brightly lit corridor and into the old library.

There she stopped. For in front of her was what appeared to be a circle of light, and she knew she had reached her destination.

She stood there unmoving for a long time, looking down at the Crystal Materia in her hand.

She couldn't let Cloud sacrifice himself. She couldn't live with that. There was no other choice. But still she did not move.

She took a deep breath and with all the resolve she could muster started forward.

"Foolish girl."

She jumped and turned to see Tarkin standing a few feet away.

"Stay away from me," she said, taking a step back.

He laughed.

"Don't worry," he said. "I have no intention of harming you as much as you seem to want to harm yourself. Foolish, and noble too, but your attempted sacrifice would have been useless. Apparently there are still some things you don't know. The Crystal Materia cannot effect a transfer unless both people are of the Ancients race or infused with Jenova's cells. It wouldn't have worked for you."

"What do you want?" she asked, somewhat defiantly. She had gotten over her surprise.

"I want to see the return of Sephiroth," Tarkin replied. "And revenge against the one that destroyed him. And I must say that your little escapade has played right into my hands. I'm sure he'll come running when he finds out you are gone. In the meantime why don't you just give me the Crystal Materia. Don't worry, I'll take good care of it until he gets here. I wouldn't want anything to happen to it."

She stepped back again and felt her back touch the bookcase against the wall.

"I don't think so," she said.

"What, don't you trust me?" he said with a smile. "I assure you I have every intention of seeing that Cloud takes possession of it as soon as he arrives. It'll be the perfect revenge, don't you think?"

"I don't know what you mean," she said suspiciously

"Well, it's just so ironic," Tarkin replied. "Here Cloud has come all this way thinking he's going to bring back Aeris, when the whole time he's just been my puppet. And his one final act will be to sacrifice himself to bring back not Aeris at all, but Sephiroth!"

Tarkin laughed again, and Tifa shrank back. She looked around, but he was blocking the only exit.

"It'll never happen," she said angrily. "He'd never use the Crystal Materia to bring back Sephiroth. You can't make him do it. And even if you could, I'd destroy it first."

She suddenly lifted the materia up above her head, ready to smash it to the floor, but he just laughed again.

"I don't think you'll do that," he said casually. "Cloud will bring back Sephiroth, and you will hand over that Materia. I'm afraid you have no choice."

He took a step toward her, and even as he did, the yellow orb in his hand flared to life.

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"Where the hell did she run off to?" Cid exclaimed.

"I don't know," Barret said slowly, but he had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He looked over at Cloud, who was staring off into space, a peculiar look on his face.

"No, she couldn't have," he said so softly that Barret barely heard him. He turned to look at the others.

"We've got to go after her," he said sharply. "NOW!"

Without waiting he was off, running down the cavern to the tunnel at the far end. The others were left with no choice but to pursue him as best they could.

He reached the tunnel and plunged onward. Things had gone terribly wrong, just as Aeris had predicted they might, if it was indeed Aeris who had contacted him. He still couldn't bring himself to believe it had not been her. But that was unimportant now, he thought, shaking his head. He had bigger problems right now, much bigger. He had to get to Tifa before it was too late. He had to get to her before she did something they would all regret. He wanted Aeris back, but not like that! Didn't she understand that?

And Tarkin, how was he going to figure in this? According to Cait, he was already here, could have been here for some time. Suppose he was lying in wait for them and she ran into him? He clenched his teeth at the thought of her confronting him alone. He could kick himself for not taking the Crystal Materia back from her, but who would have thought something like this would happen? If he couldn't trust Tifa with it, he couldn't trust anyone.

The tunnel sloped down sharply, but he didn't slow. If he could just get there in time. He wasn't sure how much of a lead she had, but it couldn't be that much. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes from the time she left until it was noticed. Still, he knew that he had to reach her as soon as possible. He couldn't help thinking back to another time when Aeris had run off, and what had resulted from that.

The ground dropped out from under him and he found himself falling. The green light grew around him. Looking up he could see some of the others falling as well, but he could not tell if they were all there. Eventually he stopped falling and the familiar background of Nibelheim faded in around him.

It always seems to come back to Nibelheim, he thought.

He looked around. Behind him he saw that the others had joined him, but he only afforded them a glance. He was looking for some hint to where Tifa had gone, and he was shortly rewarded when he saw the green glow of the Shinra Mansion. But even as he started towards it the Turks came around the corner of the Nibelheim Inn to his left, followed closely by Lucrecia.

Cloud was not surprised at all. He had had a feeling they were going to show up somewhere along the line. They were nothing if not determined. He would have liked nothing more than to fight it out once and for all, but right now he just didn't have the time.

Vincent came up beside him, obviously thinking much the same thing.

"You go on," he said. "I'll handle this."

"Not by yourself," Cloud said quickly. "Red and Barret, you're with me. The rest of you help Vincent."

He turned to look at the Turks.

"Sorry I can't stay and play, but I have more important things to do."

He sprinted off towards the Mansion, not waiting to see, nor much interested in, the Turks response. Red and Barret followed closely behind. They entered the Mansion and followed the light down into the cellar. A few moments later they entered the library.

The first thing they noticed was the glowing circle of green light in the center of the room. The second thing was Tifa. She was chained to the wall on the far side of the room. Cloud felt tremendous relief.

At least she's alive!

A man in a black cloak stood next to her. Even though the man's facial features, except for the glowing green eyes, were striking different, the impression that he was looking at Sephiroth was so strong that it was almost overpowering.

Tifa looked up at him with a peculiar expression on her face.

"Let her go, Tarkin," Cloud demanded.

Tarkin raised an eyebrow.

"So you know my name," he said thoughtfully. "It appears my little spy has been indiscreet. But no matter. He did his job and got you here safely."

He pointed to a small table near the glowing light.

"There is the Crystal Materia," he said. "Take it. I will not interfere. Take it and finish what you came here for."

Cloud looked at the table. The Crystal Materia was not five feet away from him, much closer than Tarkin was.

"No," Tifa said, and when she spoke it seemed the words came out with great difficulty. "It's a trap."

Tarkin turned in surprise and glared at her.

"Be silent," he commanded.

"Leave her alone!" Cloud said angrily, and suddenly his sword was balanced in his hands.

"She is unhurt," Tarkin said quickly. "Take the Materia. Finish what you came here for."

Cloud stood unmoving for a moment.

"Let her go first," he said, finally. He pointed the sword menacingly at Tarkin.

Tarkin's face darkened.

"I said, take the Materia," he said sharply.

Yellow light flared up in his hand, and Cloud suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to do just as Tarkin had said.

He fought it, and for a long time he stood perfectly still, the desires balanced. But the power of the materia was much stronger than Cloud had thought. Slowly, and in spite of all he could do, he found himself taking a step forward.

Even as he did so Tifa shook her head and then looked up, the alertness back in her eyes.

"Cloud," she shouted. "Cloud, be strong. He wants to force you to use the materia to bring back Sephiroth. Fight it!"

Cloud stopped again, forcing himself with every fiber of his being to remain still. Tarkin took a moment to glance over at her, but he was too involved with trying to master Cloud to do anything about her. He realized he had made a tactical error. He could not control them both at the same time. He should have killed her when he had the chance.

No time to worry about that now. Summoning every power of concentration he had learned from his SOLDIER training, he bent all his will toward Cloud.

Cloud fought, but again felt himself weakening. Tarkin was just too strong. In slow motion he took yet another step forward and now stood right beside the table.

"No!" Tifa shouted. She pulled desperately on the chains and tried to strike out at Tarkin, but he was beyond her reach. She turned to the others.

"Help him!" she cried.

Red and Barret had been watching the process, not sure of the best course to follow, but Tifa's words galvanized them into action. Barret was not sure whether she had meant to help him mentally or physically, so he chose what came natural. He raised his arm and opened up with his gun.

Tarkin stumbled backwards, dodging desperately out of the way. But he could not avoid the blast of lightening launched from Red's materia.

Cloud felt his mind clear. Instantly he leapt forward and swung his sword.

Tarkin cried out in anguish. He backed away from them, holding his arm as the yellow materia fell to the floor. He stood there for a moment with his back to the wall, looking at them with undisguised hatred.

"Very well," he said grimly. "I tried to make it easy for you, but I see you are going to be less than cooperative. You force me to destroy your friends and drag you myself into the circle. So be it. Jenova rebirth!"

Light flashed around Tarkin. His body changed, shifted, grew larger and monstrous. He towered over them. His arms grew long and developed great gleaming claws. Another set of arms sprouted out below them. His face elongated and formed a muzzle, long sharp teeth protruding from it. Only the eyes remained the same, the green glowing pits still filled with hatred.

The creature let out a roar that rung in their ears and then there was a blast of green light. Cloud and his friends were thrown roughly back against the wall. Cloud immediately sprang up and forward, attacking viciously with his sword. Barret

continued to fire, getting up more slowly. Red quickly cast cure on all of them. They had been caught off guard by the sudden attack, and it put them at a disadvantage.

Tarkin, or the thing that had been Tarkin, seemed to realize this and pressed his attack against them. In quick succession he cast half a dozen strong attacking spells, at the same time attacking ferociously with the claws on all his limbs. Cloud found himself forced backward, and try as he might, Red could not seem to catch up defensively. Tarkin seemed to be one step ahead of him whenever he made a move.

A clawed hand flashed out, and Cloud went down, thrown roughly back. He got up again slowly. Red cast cure on him again, but knew that he could not keep it up much longer. The constant casting of spells was exhausting him.

There was another green flash as Tarkin hit them with Ultima again. They all went down one more time.

Tarkin stepped toward Red, who was closest to him, and raised his claws. But as he did so he came into range of Tifa, who kicked suddenly and sharply at his knee. He stumbled and his blow went awry. Red got up and darted out of the way.

Tarkin turned and swung at Tifa with the back of a huge clawed hand. She had no way to dodge. The hand hit her solidly and she slumped to the ground.

Cloud saw red.

He reached down and pulled out a materia orb. He concentrated fiercely on it until it flashed with red light.

"Ultimate end!" he shouted.

Sudden sparkling light appeared all around Cloud. Multicolored stars flashed in and out of existence around him. Then he faded from sight.

The room darkened. Tarkin looked up suddenly. The ground around him seemed to bow downward. The room faded away into darkness. There was a rushing sound, as if the wind from a hurricane were whistling by him. Then a massive shape appeared out of the darkness. He saw bright glowing eyes, and then the flash of metal from a tremendous sword. He screamed in agony as he felt the sword bite. The world swirled about him.

Eleven more times the massive figure appeared. Each time a different one, each time with a different attack. Each one doing great damage.

Then there was a pause. He heard a rushing sound. Then, out of the darkness another pair of eyes. He could sense a tremendous bulk hurtling toward him, more massive than any of the others. The rushing sound grew until he thought a locomotive were bearing down on him. He saw the form of a huge knight glowering down at him from some great height. Another sword came up, then came crashing down. He felt himself falling, and then only darkness.

The multicolored lights flashed again, and then Cloud stood once more in the library. He looked at the crumpled body of Tarkin on the floor nearby. Tarkin moaned and opened his eyes, looking at him slowly, still shocked from the attack. He no longer looked in the least bit dangerous.

"It's over Tarkin," Cloud said simply.

Tarkin shook his head to clear it. He slowly stood up, though he barely seemed to have the strength. He looked around.

"You think you have won," he said slowly, "but it is not quite over yet."

With his remaining strength he lunged for the table and grabbed the Crystal Materia. Before the others could stop him he scrambled into the center of the circle of light. He turned and looked at them triumphantly.

"Stop!" Cloud cried, but it was too late.

"Nor par tellemar Sephiroth!"

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"It's going to be a pleasure to kick your butts," Cid remarked.

"If you used your fists as much as your mouths you might stand a chance," Rude said.

"And if you weren't for the fact that you have as many brain cells as you have hair, you'd realized that you don't," Yuffie

quipped.

"Enough of this nonsense," Lucrecia said. "Destroy them."

The Turks advanced, and Cid, Yuffie and Cait faced off against them, while Vincent moved around them to reach Lucrecia. This time they did not wait for the Turks to attack, but struck first. They all felt they had to get this battle over with as quickly as possible.

The Turks moved into their usual fight formation. Reno and Rude in front, Elena in the back casting defensive spells. Neither Cid nor the others in his party were particularly defensive minded. They all pressed the attack, and any one of them would cast cure or barrier depending on whether the situation warranted it. Most of the time they attacked with their weapons or cast offensive spells, even if it meant taking damage themselves. This seemed to be the quickest way to finish the battle.

Cid glanced over at Vincent and saw that although Lucrecia was attacking him, he didn't seem to be fighting back. He didn't know what Vincent had in mind, or even if he had anything in mind, but he knew that was no way to win a fight. He felt more urgently than ever that they had to beat the Turks as quickly as possible.

He stepped back, pulled out a red materia and concentrated.

"Judgment Bolt," he said.

Nearby he heard Yuffie cry, "Tsunami."

And then Cait, "Tetra Disaster!"

Multi colored flashes of light appeared around all three of them. Then the Turks were hit by a triple dose of summoning power. In quick succession they were blasted by a dazzling bolt of lightening, then pounded by a great wall of water, and finally they were caught in the upheaval of the very earth around them. When it was done they fell back, but they still stood.

"Is that the best you can do?" Elena questioned.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," Yuffie replied.

A short distance away Vincent stood his ground while Lucrecia blasted him with spells. Instead of fighting back he continued to try to reason with her. Their encounter in the cave earlier had proven that he could get through to her, even if he could not win her over. But this time she seemed intent on turning a deaf ear to him. And as she continued to hit him with spells he felt anger rising unbidden inside him.

"Please, Lucrecia, stop this. We are not enemies," he tried one more time.

She hadn't answered him once, and this time was no exception. He reeled back as fire flashed all around him. Suddenly he felt his anger well up inside him uncontrollably. For a moment he tried to hold it back, but once set in motion there was no turning back this tidal wave of rage. It overwhelmed him and he lost all sense of reason.

With a bestial howl his body suddenly transformed into that of a huge winged demon. It towered up over Lucrecia, a dark harbinger of death. It raised its arms, and huge flaming skulls appeared and shot through the air, striking Lucrecia again and again, until she was lost in the center of a blast of demonic flame.

The blast got the attention of all the others, and they paused for a moment in their own battle to look over. When the smoke cleared they saw Lucrecia on the ground, looking up at Vincent standing over her.

"You'll never stop me," she said, getting slowly to her feet. "The only way to do it is to kill me, and you won't do that. I swear to you I won't rest until Sephiroth is returned to me."

"What's Sephiroth got to do with this?" Elena said.

"That's why Lucrecia wants the Crystal Materia, you dolts," Yuffie answered. "She wants to use it to bring back Sephiroth."

They all looked at Lucrecia, who looked back angrily at the Turks.

"What are you waiting for," she said. "Finish them."

"Wait," Reno said before the others could move. They looked at him.

"I see now that perhaps it might have been wiser to delve a little more into the details of this assignment before we took it, and yes I realize that isn't ordinarily Turk policy," he said, looking at the others. "But there are exceptions to every rule. We

all know what would have happened if Sephiroth had been allowed to complete his little scheme. I don't think I have any desire to give him a second chance at it."

"What are you talking about?" Lucrecia questioned. "You're working for me, now do as I say."

He looked at her sternly.

"Not anymore," he said simply. "It's time for another Turk first. We quit."

Lucrecia just stared at them for a long time with her mouth open. Then she turned to look at Vincent, and he could see defeat in her eyes.

"You might as well just kill me now," she said slowly. "I can't live without him."

"I think you can," he replied. "I think you are stronger than you believe. Come with us. Cloud still needs our help. There's still time to make things right."

She shook her head, but she did not object when he took her hand and led her over to the others.

"Now let's go see what kind of trouble Cloud has gotten himself in," he said.

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The light suddenly brightened around Tarkin until they had to shade their eyes and turn away. For a long moment it blazed, then slowly faded away. Even after the light was gone Cloud hesitated to lift his head, knowing what he would see but not wanting to believe it could happen. He thought somehow that maybe something had gone wrong, that it hadn't worked. That if he looked up there would be nothing there at all.

But then he heard the laughter. That chilling familiar laughter, which confirmed without looking what he already knew but longed so desperately to deny.

He looked up. Sephiroth stood in the circle of light, looking from one to the other of them while still chuckling to himself. His gaze drifted to Cloud.

"I get the impression you're not happy to see me again," he said. He laughed again, and the sound went through Cloud like a knife.

"I admit I had hoped I was rid of your ugly continence for good," Cloud responded, attempting to sound casual. "But it looks like it didn't work out that way. Fortunately I see no reason why we can't quickly remedy that situation. We bested you once, I guess we'll just have to do it again."

Sephiroth laughed again. It was bad enough he had to be back, but did he also have to be so damn cheerful, Cloud thought.

"The mouse might have killed the cat once, but I wouldn't lay odds on it happening a second time," Sephiroth replied. "Besides, I've learned a few things while I was gone."

He raised his arms. There was a flash of light and a tremendous explosion. The entire room shook and Cloud and his friends were flung backwards. Cloud hit the wall hard behind him and fell to the ground.

"Shit," he heard Barret exclaim.

Cloud got slowly to his feet, his ears still ringing, and held his sword in front of him. Even as he did so he heard someone say something behind him. He turned to see Cid, Yuffie and Cait enter the room, followed by the Turks, and finally Vincent and Lucrecia. When she saw Sephiroth she stopped and her eyes grew wide.

"Sephiroth," she said softly. "My son."

Sephiroth turned his attention toward her.

"You, my mother?" he said dismissively. "You are not my mother. Jenova was my mother."

"No," Lucrecia said. "I am your mother. I was the one that bore you."

"You were a vessel, that is all" he replied disdainfully. "My mother was Jenova, it is her cells that gave me true life, not

yours. You are just like the others. You are all of the race that stole this planet from my people. And now you will all pay for it!"

Sephiroth raised his arms again and there was another thunderous blast. Again they were all thrown to the ground.

"This is going to get tiresome real fast," Barret exclaimed.

Cloud pulled out the Ultima Materia.

"Let's finish this," he said grimly.

Barret and Vincent opened up with their weapons. Cid and Yuffie closed in with spear and shuriken, while Cait attacked with his materia. After Cloud blasted Sephiroth with the Ultima materia he glanced over to see that even the Turks were attacking Sephiroth. Only Lucrecia remained unmoving.

Red slipped around to the side of Sephiroth and came up beside Tifa, quickly releasing her. As they ran back to the others Red paused for a moment to pick something up.

In moments everyone was letting loose at Sephiroth with everything they had, but it seemed he had grown stronger somehow, for he was brushing off their attacks with little difficulty. He was no longer laughing, but the condescending smile remained on his face.

He launched his explosive attack twice more, and though Tifa and Red cast cure and wall as soon as they rejoined the others, the attack still did more damage than they could repair.

Red came up beside Cloud, and Cloud felt him press something into his hand. He looked down to see what it was, and then at Red. They said nothing but Cloud nodded in understanding.

Sephiroth launched his explosive attack again, and again they fell back. They got slowly to their feet, all except Elena who remained down.

"We can't take much more of this," Reno said, standing over her.

Sephiroth advanced on them slowly, realizing as well as they did that he was slowly overpowering them. As he advanced he suddenly noticed something lying on the floor next to him. He stopped for a moment and idly picked it up. Then he advanced again, stepping into the circle of light. He had been toying with them so far, but now he decided that playtime was over. He concentrated on his summon spell, and opened his mouth to utter the words.

"Nor...."

He stopped, and his mouth worked soundlessly for a moment. That was not what he had meant to say! He looked at Cloud and suddenly understood when he saw the yellow light blazing through Cloud's hands.

For a long time neither one moved as they battled mind to mind. Sephiroth knew he was stronger now, much stronger, and now that he knew Cloud was trying to influence him, he knew this failed excuse for a SOLDIER could not force him to do this. Concentrating fiercely, he took one slow step forward.

Tifa, who was standing to Cloud's right, suddenly reached out her hand. While still concentrating on Sephiroth, Cloud slowly reached over and took it. Sephiroth suddenly felt the pressure on his mind increase.

Tifa reached out with her other hand, and Red took hold of it. Slowly and without a word, the other came over. First Cid, then Cait and Barret, and then Yuffie.

Sephiroth felt his mouth moving again and redoubled his efforts. Sweat dripped from his brow, but no words came out.

Yuffie felt someone come up beside her, and turned to see Rude next to her. Slowly he reached out and she took his hand. Then Reno stepped beside him along with a now recovered Elena. Vincent took her hand and looked silently at Lucrecia.

Lucrecia walked up next to Vincent, but she did not take his hand, instead just looked at Sephiroth. He stared back at her, concentration contorting his face, but for the first time they saw a hint of fear in his eyes.

"You are my son," she said softly. "And I love you. But you've been very bad."

She reached out and took Vincent's hand.

"Nor.." Sephiroth said again.

He shuddered as if he had been hit by a physical blow. His mouth twisted and a strange gagging sound came out.

"Nor par tellemar..." his face contorted and turned red with rage. His eyes grew wide and veins bulged on his forehead. Finally the word came out in a gurgling croak;

"Aeris."

The light flared up, and once again they had to turn away.

When the light faded Cloud looked up immediately, eagerly.

The first thing he noticed were green eyes, but these did not glow with the mark of SOLDIER, these were kind and tender, surrounding by Aeris delicate features and long brown hair.

"Aeris," he said softly, hardly believing it.

She smiled and stepped down out of the circle of light.

"It's good to see you again," she said, looking around at them all.

"I'll be damned, we did it," Barret said. He turned to look at Yuffie, who was still holding hands with him and Rude. They all hastily dropped hands and looked away from each other.

Cloud and Tifa walked up to Aeris, still holding hands. Cloud turned to face the others and took Aeris hand with his free one, smiles on all their faces.

"Mission accomplished," he said triumphantly. "Now let's go home!"

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AUTHORS NOTE: This officially ends the story. I would like to say first that I think Final Fantasy VII is not only the best RPG, but the best game ever, period. I have tried to remain true to the spirit of the characters in the original game, although I have to admit my favorite character was Tifa, and my bias toward her may have shown through some. I thought the original game took an even handed approach toward each of the girls, and I tried to maintain that throughout my story. I admit some people might find this unsatisfying, including myself to some extent, but in all fairness I didn't feel it was right for me to choose between the two, especially since it is pretty obvious which one I would have chosen. The truth of the matter is when I first started writing this story I wasn't sure whether the resurrection of Aeris would be successful. But when I thought of the plot twist of having Sephiroth exchanged for Aeris, I knew it was just too good to resist. I hope you enjoyed my story and thought it a fitting continuation of the original, and if you have any comments please feel free to email me at FCVERDE@ix.netcom.com.