

CHAPTER X: A DAY AT THE RACES

At first all she saw were stars. Innumerable pinpoints of light spotting the dark void of space. The stars had never seemed so bright to her, nor the emptiness between them so black. The lights moved, twisting around in a tilted spiral, disorienting her. Was it the stars that were moving or was she?

A curved line rose up out of the darkness. Her dizziness vanished as her eyes locked onto this fixed point. A wind blew in her face. She looked around and saw she was high on a mountaintop. Impossibly high. So high that she could see the curvature of the planet in the distance, and it seemed as if the whole world was laid out below her.

And everywhere she looked, she saw destruction.

Bombs burst in the air over Junon. Gunfire sounded in the streets of Wutai. Fires blazed uncontrolled in Kalm. Goolagong was nothing more than a blackened twisted mass of debris. Shouts could be heard as men fought hand to hand in Ifalna. Everywhere she looked there was war. Even up here, even from her lofty perch she could hear the screams of the wounded, and shrieks of women and children, the crackling of the fire, and the moans of the dying.

Had the world gone mad?

"It has begun."

Aeris looked around. Who was that? Who had spoken? There was no one here, there was no one on the mountaintop with her. The place was barren.

"What has begun?" she shouted.

"The war," the voice replied. "The war to end all wars. That war that could mean the end of everything."

"What war?" Aeris shouted again. "What are you talking about. Who are you?"

She looked around helplessly.

"Where are you?"

The wind suddenly gusted up stronger, whipping her hair around her face.

"The first steps have been taken. Before long it will be too late. Too late to stop it. Too late to turn back. You have but a small time left. "

"A small time left for what?"

The sounds of battle seemed to be getting closer to her. The voice was becoming harder and harder to hear.

"There is not much time. Before long events will begin to move of their own accord. Much as the first few drops inevitably lead to the rainstorm. You must act now before the storm is upon you."

"I don't understand! What must I do?"

"You must seek out the Cetra Sage."

"The who?"

The rattle of gunfire sounded nearby.

"Please, I can hardly hear you!" Aeris shouted.

"Do not tarry. It may already be too late."

"What is going on? What war are you talking about?"

She heard the whistle of a shell. The night sky lit up around her an explosion shook the earth. Aeris nearly fell to the ground, her ears ringing so that she could barely hear the voice as it replied.

"The war between humanity and the Cetra."

"Happy birthday dear Zangan, happy birthday to you!" filtered through the room, some voices more off key than others. Cloud put the cake down on the table in front of the young child, a single candle burning in the center.

"Blow it out," Tifa said, standing behind her son.

With an assist from his mother, the candle was extinguished. "Yay!"

Tifa stood up, smiling at the crowd gathered round. Most everyone from Avalanche was there, save for Vincent. She always liked to see them all gathered together. It seemed to happen so infrequently these days.

She turned and walked into the kitchen. Marlene was just coming out, a large stack of plates balanced precariously in her arms.

"Whoa, let me take some of those," Tifa said, stopping her.

"I can do it," Marlene reassured her.

"I know you're trying to be helpful," Tifa said, "but that's a little too much."

She lifted some of the top plates off the stack.

"I'll take care of this, Aunt Tifa," Marlene protested. "You should be relaxing. It's your son's birthday."

Tifa smiled. It had been a hectic day. Barret had come by early, been one of the first one's there, actually, and Marlene had been running around the whole time like a fiend helping her out.

"I really appreciate the help," Tifa told her. Especially since no one else had helped much. Well, Aeris and Shera had, but they had only arrived recently. "But it's okay, I'll do my part too."

Marlene nodded, giving in, and they brought the dishes over to the table and distributed them as Cloud cut the cake. Tifa sat down beside Zangan and gave him a small piece.

"Hey, this is really good," Cid commented as he wolfed down his own slice.

"Thanks," Tifa replied. "But I can't take credit for it. I got the cake from the bakery. I was just too busy to make one."

"Yeah, well, it's good anyway," Cid told her.

"Surprised your taste buds haven't been killed by nicotine," Yuffie commented wryly.

"Oh shut up you little twerp," Cid shot back. "My taste buds are just fine."

"Yeah, I really have to give him a lot of credit," Shera said, draping her arm on Cid's shoulders and kissing him on the cheek. "He's cut down a lot since Sydney was born."

"All right, don't get all mushy on me woman," Cid muttered, glaring at her.

The cake was soon devoured. Tifa set Zangan on the floor to play with Sydney, then helped Marlene clean off the table. Red curled himself up on the floor right in front of the couch, in a square of sunlight shining through the window. Sydney ran over and leaped on top of him.

"Kitty cat!" she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around him.

"Awww," Aeris commented.

Red looked uncomfortable.

"Whattsamatter Red, not good with kids?" Yuffie asked.

"No, it's not that," Nipala spoke up. "He's not happy being called a cat."

"Really?" Reeve spoke up. He hadn't known that, and from the look on the other's faces, neither had they.

"Well, she's just a baby," Aeris pointed out.

"I know," Red stated, giving Nipala a look. "That's why I didn't say anything."

"What's wrong with cat anyway?" Barret asked.

Red looked like he really didn't want to go any farther with this conversation.

"Well, it's insulting, frankly," he admitted. "I don't go around calling you all monkeys."

"No, but your kids might," Aeris said.

"Yeah," Yuffie spoke up. "When are we going to see some baby Nanaki's running around?"

"Yuffie," Aeris chastised.

"What?" Yuffie said innocently.

Red just lay there for a moment, looking flustered. Aeris suspected his cheeks would be pink if he wasn't red already.

"It is unlikely you ever will," he said after a moment.

That caught them by surprise.

"What do you mean?" Aeris said. For a long time Red had thought he was the last of his species, so of course at that time children were not a possibility. Now that they had found another of his kind however, she assumed that kids would be a natural next step for them. He and Nipala seemed to like each other well enough...

"I'm afraid you'll probably all be long gone before we have any children," Red clarified. "Our species doesn't reach sexual maturity until we're about two hundred years old."

Cid, on his third piece of cake and the only one still eating, made choking sounds.

"Two hundred!" he blurted out. "No wonder you're nearly extinct!"

"Yes, I suppose our longevity does have it's disadvantages," Red stated. "A lot of our kind were killed before they had a chance to have kids."

"Dang," Barret said. It was obvious they were all having a hard time grasping this. "If that don't beat all."

"That's really a shame," Aeris spoke up. "I think you would look cute with kids, Red."

Nipala grinned. Red glared at her.

"So, getting back to the original subject," Cid said. "Would you prefer being called a dog?"

"That's just as bad," Red replied. "We're not cats or dogs."

"Well, what the hell are you then?" Yuffie exclaimed.

"Yeah, I've always kind of wondered that myself," Cloud said.

Red shrugged.

"We are what you see."

"Oh gee, that's informative," Yuffie muttered.

"But don't you have a name for yourselves?" Aeris questioned. "Surely you must call your species something?"

Red looked at Nipala, who gave a shake of her head.

"If we ever have, the name is lost to us," he responded.

"Well, we'll have to come up with our own name for you then," Aeris declared.

"Yeah," Yuffie agreed. "You're kind of a combination of cats and dogs, so how bout we call you Dats, or Cogs?"

"How bout we don't," Red replied succinctly.

Syndey ran over and pulled on her mother's blouse.

"Mommy! Zangan won't play with me!" she said.

The others looked over to see Zangan sitting on the floor, staring off into space.

Tifa walked over and knelt down in front of her son, but he didn't even seem to see her.

"It's okay, he's listening to the planet," Aeris said.

Tifa remained still, her hands on her knees, staring at Zangan. She had seen this before. It wasn't the first time it had happened, but even so she wasn't really used to it, and she supposed she never would be. Even after a year she could still hardly believe that her child was a Cetra. She'd never forget what happened the day he was born...

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"Yes, I understand," Tifa said. "All three of us."

The door to their room opened, and Tifa looked up to see Aeris sitting comfortably in a wheelchair, with Reeve behind her. Tifa was about to greet her, but feel silent as she saw the serious look on her friends face.

"What's wrong?" Cloud asked. It was apparent to Tifa that she wasn't the only one who had picked up on it.

For a moment Aeris didn't say anything at all.

"We were just over in the nursery," she finally said hesitantly. "We saw the baby."

"And?" Cloud exclaimed. For some reason Tifa felt a knot forming in her stomach. Was there something wrong after all?

"And...he's a Cetra," Aeris finished.

"What?"

"He's a Cetra," Aeris repeated. "I could feel it. I could feel it as soon as I walked in. There's no doubt about it."

"But..." Tifa said, then feel silent.

"That's impossible," Cloud snapped, putting into words what Tifa couldn't finish.

"I know," Aeris said. "I can't explain it, but it's true."

No one spoke for a long time. Tifa just sat in bed, feeling...well, she was not sure what she felt. All this time, since the baby's conceptions she'd been worried, worried that something would go wrong. All kinds of scenarios had played out in her head, all kinds of horror stories, including the one Jinn had suggested. Yet none of them had prepared her for this. None of them had included their baby being a Cetra.

"That can't be right," Cloud said, obviously just as confused as she. "Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

"I'm not," Aeris said firmly.

Cloud glanced at Tifa for a moment, then back at Aeris.

"Could I talk to you outside for a moment?"

Tifa frowned.

"What do you want to know?" she asked before Aeris could respond.

Cloud didn't turn toward her.

"It's nothing," he replied. "We'll just be a moment."

Tifa wasn't sure what he was thinking, but she was certain it was a lot more than nothing.

"Cloud, what are you thinking?" she asked.

"I said it's nothing," he replied.

"Cloud, I want to know what's going on!" she said, sure he had some idea in his head, an idea he obviously didn't want to broach in front of her. "You don't have to protect me!"

Cloud hesitated, looking at her for a minute, then nodded.

"I just thought, are you sure it's not Jenova you're feeling?" he asked Aeris. "We know now that Jenova and the Cetra were the same species. I would think whatever feeling you got from them would be similar."

Tifa held her breath for a moment, but Aeris shook her head.

"No, there's no mistake," she said. "In spite of their similarities, the feel of a Jenova and a Cetra are quite different."

Tifa felt herself sigh in relief. At least he was not a Jenova. She could be thankful for that. But why then did the knot in her stomach not go away?

"But how can that be then? Neither Tifa nor I have any Cetra blood." Cloud asked.

"I told you, I can't explain it," Aeris repeated. "I just know it's true."

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There had been no explanation. They took Zangan to some of the best doctors on the Planet. None could offer a plausible explanation. Genetic testing was done on all three of them. Zangan was definitely their child. That was easily established, but they could find nothing aberrant in his DNA. They took samples from Aeris too, just to have a Cetra template, but that led to nothing as well. It turned out that Aeris DNA was no more different from a human's than one human was to another. Whether that was because she was half human they couldn't really tell unless they had a full Cetra to test as well, and that of course was impossible.

The doctors had been baffled. There was no explanation, and life went on. Except for Zangan staring off into space every so often, which Aeris had explained was him listening to the planet, he seemed perfectly normal, perfectly human. Then one day Tifa and Aeris had been strolling down the street in Ifalna when they had passed a young woman pushing a baby carriage and Aeris had gone suddenly white. When Tifa has asked what was wrong, Aeris had said she had felt it again, the child in the carriage was a Cetra too.

She stopped the woman and interviewed both her and her husband. Both of them seemed perfectly normal in every way and had never had any contact with an Ancient except for occasionally seeing Aeris.

By now it had become obvious that there was a lot more to this than just some strange quirk of Jenova cells from Cloud that had mutated or something, which had been the best guess up to that moment. Neither of these two new people had ever been exposed to Jenova cells, or ever even heard of Hojo. More questions were asked. Her suspicions aroused, Aeris began to frequent the OB ward at the hospital. In the next three weeks she found four more Cetra children.

A new investigation was promptly launched. Though Cetra genetic material could not be distinguished from human, an enzyme was found in Cetra blood that was absent from humans, which meant a simple blood test could determine a baby's heritage. Shockingly, it was found out that roughly one of every three children born in the last year in Ifalna were Cetra.

And Ifalna wasn't the only place it was happening. When they had tested people in other cities they have found Cetra children there too. It seemed to be happening all over the world, though not quite as frequently as in Ifalna, and in the last few months it seemed to be increasing in frequency.

There were many people working on the problem, if you could call it that, but so far no one had come up with any answers or any explanations.

Tifa wasn't sure what to make of it all, of course. Thinking about it, it could have been a lot worse, but she still was not completely comfortable with it. Zangan was her child, and to think there was something alien about him, even something as harmless as being a Cetra, which might actually be beneficial to him, still worried her. She couldn't help but think that something bad would somehow come of it.

But perhaps that was just the pessimist in her.

Zangan suddenly opened his eyes. He turned to look directly at Aeris. "Sage," he said, quite clearly.

Tifa just looked at him.

"Did he just say, Sage?" Cloud asked after a moment, a frown on his face.

"It certainly sounded like that," Shera said slowly.

"Sounds like he's learned a new word," Reeve commented.

Tifa shook her head slowly.

"Where would he learn a word like that?" she asked, frowning. Zangan had just begun to talk. At the moment his entire non baby talk vocabulary consisted of Mama, Daddie, and Choco, referring to a small stuffed chocobo that they had gotten him shortly after birth. He had only picked those up because they were spoken often in front of him. She was quite sure no one had been talking about sages in front of him.

"Maybe it was coincidence," Cid suggested. "Maybe it just came out sounding like sage."

"Maybe," Cloud agreed.

Tifa might have thought the same thing, but she suddenly noticed the look on Aeris face. "Aeris, are you okay?"

"I...I was going to bring it up later. After the party was over," Aeris said hesitantly.

"Bring up what?" Reeve asked, sounding concerned.

Aeris told them about the dream she had had the night before.

"I would have told you sooner, but I didn't want to put a damper on the celebration or anything," she said when she was done. "It was so vivid, but even so, I thought it might be nothing, just a weird dream. But now, I'm not so sure."

They all just looked at Aeris. No one spoke for some time. Tifa lifted Zangan and pulled him into her lap.

"Cetra Sage?" Barret finally spoke up. "You mean like that Chocobo Sage dude?"

"Yeah, Aeris, are you sure that wasn't what it was?" Cloud asked.

"No," Aeris said, shaking her head. "It was Cetra Sage. I'm sure of it."

"Who the hell is the Cetra Sage?" Cid questioned.

"Never heard of him," Cloud said.

He turned to look at Red, who shook his head. "Nor have I," the red beast stated.

"So what does it mean then?" Yuffie asked.

Tifa got up. Carrying Zangan, she left the room. Cloud noticed a troubled look on her face. He was tempted to follow, but he wanted to know what was going on first.

"Well, I'd say it's pretty obvious," Red said. "Someone wants us to seek out the Cetra Sage."

"Or something," Cid pointed out.

"Yes," Red conceded. "Someone or something wants Aeris to find the Cetra Sage, ostensibly so we can avert some kind of war between the Cetra and mankind."

"The whole thing sounds pretty suspicious to me," Shera said. "A war between us and the Cetra. We've always been friends, haven't we?"

"Was Ellengio our friend?" Cid asked.

"Yes," Aeris replied after a moment. "He was just trying to do what he thought was best."

"What he thought was best for the Cetra," Cid pointed out.

"He wouldn't have hurt us," Aeris countered.

"Even if we'd tried to stop him?" Cid replied.

"We *did* stop him," she reminded him.

"Red, have humans and Cetra always been friends?" Cloud asked.

"As far as I can recall, yes," Red replied. "But of course, I'm not really an expert on the subject. I'll have to go back to Cosmo Canyon and ask the Elders. They would probably know better than I."

"And while you're there, you can ask them about the Cetra Sage," Aeris said.

"Indeed," Red agreed.

"So we just wait until Red goes to consult with those bookworms?" Barret, ever the man of action, questioned.

"What else can we do?" Reeve said. "We don't even know if this Cetra Sage actually exists, much less where to find him."

"I don't know," Cloud said slowly. "Aeris, you did say this 'voice' left the impression you didn't have much time."

"Yes," Aeris agreed. "It basically told me I had to act immediately or it would be too late."

"Which doesn't make any sense at all," Cid said.

"What makes you say that?" Barret questioned.

"Okay, let's assume for a moment everything this voice told you is true," Cid continued. "That if you don't do something there will be a war between humans and Cetra. Well, right now the only Cetra around, besides you of course," he nodded toward Aeris; "are babies! I don't know for sure how quickly Cetra mature but surely it'll be *years* before any of them are old enough to wage war."

"He's got a point," Barret conceded.

"Maybe," Reeve said slowly. "But that assuming that this all started with Zangan."

"Hum?" Nipala said.

"We became aware of this because Tifa and Cloud are good friends with Aeris and it was their baby that was a Cetra. Zangan might have been the first one we found, but that doesn't necessarily mean he was the first one it happened to. For all we know this could have been going on for years before we discovered it. For all we know, there might already be adult Cetra here."

"But wouldn't we know that? We've been testing people," Yuffie said.

"We've been testing babies," Reeve pointed out. "We haven't tested any adults. This might have been happening for a long time. In fact, it might be an ongoing thing."

"I think that unlikely," Red spoke up. "We've been testing babies because they can't talk, they can't tell us they're Cetra. An adult, of course, would be able to. If there were adult Cetra around don't you think someone would have noticed, or they would have told someone? It's like Shera said, humans and Cetra are friends. They'd have no reason to hide the fact."

"Whatever is going on, I'm pretty certain it's a relatively new phenomena," he continued. "Maybe it didn't start with Zangan, but it couldn't have started too much earlier. A year or two, maybe. I think it would become obvious pretty early in life whether someone was a Cetra or not, and their parents would pick up on that, especially now that we know it's happening."

"Which brings up back to the original problem," Cid stated. "Why the big rush if it won't be years before this war thing is even possible?"

"There is another possibility," Nipala said. "Maybe there are adult Cetra here, adult Cetra that weren't born from humans. Aeris thought she was the only Cetra left, but then we found Ellengio. If he was here, how do we know there aren't more?"

"Hmm, yes, that is a thought that hadn't occurred to me," Red admitted. "Still, even if there are other Cetra alive, I can't believe there can be many. Ellengio was just one man, easy to overlook. I don't think it would be as easy to miss a large population of them, and there would have to be a large population if we're talking about a war with humans. That's not a one man operation."

"Ellengio was found on the southern continent," Reeve pointed out. "A continent we hadn't even been aware existed. If you can hide a continent from us..."

"Good point," Cloud said.

"We didn't know about the southern continent because it was deliberately hidden from us," Yuffie said.

"And who's to say if there are any other Cetra around they might not be hiding themselves from us too?" Reeve asked.

"To what purpose?" Aeris questioned.

"I don't know," Reeve replied. "I'm just offering it as a possibility."

"We can babble about imaginary continents and hidden people all day and it's not going to get us anywhere," Barret cut in.

"What are we going to *do*?"

They all just looked at him for a moment.

"He's right," Cloud said. "All this is just guesswork. I don't think anyone wants to fly around at random on the off chance we'll run into another hidden continent. What other leads do we have?"

No one spoke.

"I'll fly Red to Cosmo Canyon as soon as the parties over," Cid finally stated. "Maybe he can get an answer right away."

"The research might take some time," Red cautioned.

"Why don't you ask the Chocobo Sage?" Marlene questioned.

"Huh?" Barret said, looking at her.

Marlene stopped, noticing them all looking at her.

"Well," she said slowly. "They're both Sages right? Maybe...one knows something about the other?"

Again there was silence.

"Marlene, you're a genius," Cid said.

Marlene looked embarrassed.

"Yes, that's a great idea," Cloud agreed, kicking himself in his mind, and suspecting the others were doing the same. "I don't know why we didn't think of it ourselves."

"Because we're a bunch of dumbasses," Barret proclaimed.

"All right, the new plan is, Cid takes Red and Nipala back to Cosmo Canyon to do their research, then comes back here to fly us to the Chocobo Sage tomorrow morning," Cloud said. "Sound good?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," Cid agreed.

Cloud looked around. None of the others seemed to have any objection. Having gotten that out of the way, Cloud walked out of the room in search of Tifa.

He found her sitting on the floor in Zangan's room, showing Zangan how to do a small jigsaw puzzle. Her shoulders jerked, startled, when he opened the door, but when she saw it was him she turned back to what she was doing without saying a word. He sat down on the floor beside her.

"What's wrong?"

She didn't say anything. Didn't look at him.

"Tifa?"

She shrugged.

"I just...I'm just worried," she said. "Hearing Zangan say that word, it was like it wasn't even him talking. It was so clear, like he was...possessed or something."

Cloud put his arm around her.

"You mean like me with Sephiroth?"

Tifa shuddered. "I just don't want someone or *something* to use my son as a mouthpiece."

"It wasn't Sephiroth, Teef," he said as reassuringly as he could. "As far as we can tell, it was someone who wanted to help us."

"I don't care!" Tifa snapped. She pushed his arm away and stood up suddenly, looking up at the ceiling.

"I don't want anyone toying with my son, no matter what the reasons! Leave him alone!"

Cloud stood up, reaching for her, but she pulled away.

"Tifa."

"Leave me be," she exclaimed, turning to look at him for a moment. "Maybe I can't hear the planet but that doesn't mean it can't hear me!" She looked back at the ceiling once more. "So you just leave Zangan alone. You hear me? You leave my baby *alone*!"