

CHAPTER XI: THE CETRA SAGE

He was up on a ridge when he saw her. She wasn't hard to spot. She was out in the open, a splash of pink in a sea of green. It was like she wasn't even trying to hide. Perhaps she thought the area too remote. Perhaps she thought she was safe, or perhaps, she was just stupid.

Grem didn't care. He wasn't interested in her reasons. All he knew was that he had finally found her.

He had had a feeling he was getting close. The island wasn't that big. There were only so many places someone could hide. The others were fools flying around in the Valiant, trying to spot her from the air. It was a simple thing to hide from the airship in the forest. That wasn't the way to find someone. No, you had to be down here on the ground, down here where you could follow someone's footprints, hear the call of the jungle fauna warning each other of an intruder, where you could smell the odor of an outsider. That was the only way to hunt someone.

She had quite a lead on him. He had been up on the ridge because of the view it provided, and she was on the valley floor below. He ran down the hill, trying to keep her in view as much as he could. There was jungle all around her but fortunately for him she seemed to be keeping to the open spaces.

As he reached the valley floor the trees rose up above his head, cutting off his view of her. He ran on, certain that he wouldn't lose her this time. He had watched her closely as he came down the slope. She was traveling in a straight line and he angled in the direction to intercept her course. Even if she wasn't in the anticipated spot when he got there she shouldn't be hard to find. He wasn't going to let her slip through his fingers. He was too close for that.

Too close. Indeed, he could feel her now, just as any Cetra could feel any other. She was somewhere ahead, not far. He felt a rush of triumph as the hunt neared its climax. There was no way she could escape now. She must be able to feel him too, but that didn't matter anymore. She couldn't get away, not now. His senses would guide him to her, no matter if she tried to escape, no matter if she ran.

He reached the edge of a small clearing before he saw her again, the pink of her outfit once more standing out against the background foliage. She was still quite a distance ahead, but she had stopped, looking around slowly. She still didn't see him. Unlike her, his clothing blended in with the background, and like any natural hunter, he kept to the shadows, kept some kind of cover between himself and his quarry. If all went as planned she never would see him, never would know what hit her. He was almost close enough now to launch his attack. If it had been up to him it would have ended this way much sooner, while she was back in the City of the Ancients, but the others hadn't wanted to hurt anyone, any Cetra, even a half breed like her. Instead they wanted to kidnap her, as if she could never escape, like someone would be around to guard her for the rest of her life. No, it was better his way. He knew it and Yonsin knew it too. It was obvious from the order he had given. He should have just disobeyed his orders and done her in back in the City of the Ancients when he was watching her. It would have saved them all a lot of trouble.

Not that it mattered now. Just a little closer and it would all be over. If all went as he expected in a few minutes she'd be out of the way permanently and the others would never be the wiser.

Of course, few things ever go as expected.

He was concentrating on his prey, but he was too good a hunter to let that be his only focus. A sudden stir in the air, as well as the familiar hum of a motor made him spin around immediately, looking up in the air. The great yellow orb of the Valiant rose above the trees just behind him as he did so, swimming through the air directly at him, and, more importantly, the girl in front of him. She was out in the open, and they could hardly fail to see her.

He looked ahead again at his quarry, hoping she would run. The forest wasn't more than a quick jog away from her. It would be easy for her to slip into it. She had time.

"Run," he muttered to himself. "Run, damn you."

Instead she waved.

He looked back at the ship again. It was heading right for her.

He could hardly kill her now without their noticing.

With a muttered curse he ran forward, no longer trying to conceal himself. He had missed his chance, but he was not one to dwell on that. He would just make the best of it. Who was to say the chance wouldn't come again? It was obvious to him now why she wasn't trying to hide. She wanted them to find her. He wasn't sure why. Perhaps she had finally realized she

had no place to go. Perhaps she was cold and scared and hungry. Or perhaps not. In any case, he supposed he would find out soon enough.

~*~

Aeris stood silently as the great yellow ship slowly sank to the ground in front of her. She could feel them now, the Cetra, several of the, in fact. There was another one around, someone who she had felt before the ship appeared, and now she saw a man appear out of the forest just behind the ship. Apparently they had been hunting on the ground as well as the air.

The ship eased itself softly to the ground. A door opened, where there had been no hint of one before. Aeris strode forward, not waiting for anyone to emerge. When two people finally did come up, a man and a woman, she was standing right in front of them.

"My friend is hurt," she said without preamble. "Can you help him?"

For a moment they just stood there looking at her.

"You have with come with us," the man eventually said slowly.

"My friend is hurt," she repeated. "He's in a cave, up there." She pointed. "I'll go with you wherever you want if you just help him first."

Just then the man that had been on the ground came up to them, stopping short and staring at Aeris. It was not a friendly look.

"What's going on?" he questioned.

"She says her friend is hurt, up there in a cave," the man Aeris has originally spoken to said. "She says she'll go with us if we help him."

"I'm afraid she's in no position to negotiate," was the reply. He turned to Aeris. "Get in."

"I'm not going anywhere unless you help him," Aeris said.

Grem looked at her for a moment. She returned his gaze, clear eyed and with no hint of fear. She held a long rod in her right hand. He knew enough about her to know she was proficient in its use. Still, she was no match for him, even without help from the others. Even so, there could be benefits in acceding to her request. The human was irrelevant, but might prove a nuisance in the future if left to his own devices.

"Hurt? What's wrong with him?" he questioned.

"He's sick," she said. "He has some kind of fever. I've never seen anything like it before. I've used both my healing powers and herbs on him but nothing..."

She stopped, looking at them. The two from the airship stepped back, shock on their faces. Even the man who had been on the ground looked surprised.

"What? What is it?" she questioned. The looks on their faces merely confirmed the bad feeling she had had about this.

"Your healing powers didn't work on him?" Grem slowly repeated.

"No," she said. "At first I thought I had lost them, that you had done something to me with that blue light, but later on I was hurt myself, and I had no problem curing that, but even after that they still didn't work on Cloud. You know something about this. What is it? What's happened to him?"

She couldn't but notice that the other two had edged away from her, and now stood inside the ship.

"How long? How long has he been sick?" Grem questioned.

"A few days," she replied.

Grem glanced at the others.

"Only a few days," he said to them. "It's probably all right. He wouldn't be contagious yet."

That didn't seem to appease the others very much.

"What are you talking about? Contagious?" Aeris said.

"You're lucky you got away from him when you did," Grem said. "Don't worry, he'll recover, but there's nothing we can do for him."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?" Aeris said, sounding not at all happy. They obviously know what was wrong with him. Why wouldn't they just tell her what was going on?

"Yonsin will explain it all to you when we get back to base," Grem said. "Get in."

"I told you, I'm not leaving without him!" Aeris insisted.

Grem looked at her for a moment. Negotiating was starting to get tedious. He had been slowly inching closer to her and now stood only a step away. He suddenly lunged forward, grabbing hold of her arm and twisting it, until she cried out and her rod fell to the ground. She struck at him, but he grabbed her hand, blocking it. She tried to knee him in the groin, but he brought his leg up to block that also, and it hit him in the thigh instead, knocking him slightly off balance but not hurting him. Aeris jerked away as hard as she could. He didn't expect so much strength from her and she slipped out of his grasp. She turned and ran. He stood there glaring at her, making no move to pursue her. Now she was really pissing him off.

She was near the trees when she suddenly felt like someone had taken a white hot knife stabbed her in the back of the head. She cried out, falling to the ground, clutching her head in her hands. She had felt this kind of pain only once before, when they had been looking for the black materia in the northern crater, when she had been attacked by that creature using the lifestream as a weapon.

"Was that really necessary?" the other man said.

"She was getting away," Grem snapped. "I didn't see you chasing after her. She needed a lesson anyway. Maybe now she'll be a bit more cooperative. Now get her and bring her aboard. We've wasted enough time."

The other two just looked at Aeris, obviously hesitant.

"I told you its safe. It was too early. She couldn't have caught it," Grem said impatiently.

The other two walked slowly over to Aeris, then picked her up, bringing her back to the ship. Aeris was conscious but the pain still radiated through her head. Feebly she tried to pull out of their grasp, but she had no strength left.

"What are you talking about?" she asked softly as they walked by Grem. "Why won't you help my friend? Where are you taking me? What do you want?"

She got no replies, and a moment later the others had disappeared inside the airship with her. Grem turned and looked back up the slope. The human was still up there, and if what Aeris was telling them was true he might be more dangerous than ever. Unfortunately, there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it now.

With a shrug he turned and walked into the airship as well. A moment later it lifted off the ground and started on its way back to their base.

~*~

"Drink this."

Cloud felt his head being lifted up, then liquid passing down his throat. It felt good until he started to choke, spilling some out onto his shirt. He opened his eyes. He was in a room, or so it seemed at first. The walls were stone, but cut smoothly. There was a fireplace on the wall opposite him, and an opening beside it that looked like a doorway, although there was no door. He was lying on something soft, certainly not a bed, but the man standing beside him carried more interest to him than what he might be lying on.

He had white hair, rather on the long side. His skin was the color of caramel and had the look of parchment. His nose was slightly hooked, equidistant between two blue eyes that looked at Cloud keenly. He was old, certainly, but Cloud realized it was difficult to pinpoint just how old. He seemed... for some reason the word that sprung immediately to Cloud's mind was... ageless.

"Who are you?" Cloud asked slowly. He realized he felt somewhat better. His head was no longer throbbing, and his arm didn't hurt at all. He looked down at it and saw that the swelling was gone.

"I've been called by many names," the man replied.

He walked over to a small area enclosed by a wooden rail fence. He picked up some greens and fed them to the gold chocobo inside. Cloud realized that he was still in a cave, for the back of the room faded away into the darkness, the walls rougher there, the stone uncut.

"A gold chocobo," Cloud said slowly. "Is that the chocobo that brought us here? Are you the Cetra Sage?"

The man didn't say anything until the bird was done. Then he patted it on the head affectionately.

"Yes, I have been called that," he said. "And yes, this is the chocobo that brought you here."

"Why did you bring us here? Where is this place? Where is Aeris? What was wrong with me?" The questions tumbled out.

The Cetra Sage laughed.

"Which of those questions would you like me to answer first?"

Cloud paused for a moment. He wanted them all answered, but one was uppermost in his mind.

"Where is Aeris?"

"She's been taken by the Cetra," he replied.

Cloud's heart sank.

"How did they find her?"

"I believe she went to them to ask them to help you."

"Help me?" Cloud said slowly. Now he felt even worse. She had given herself up because of him? "What the hell did she go and do that for?"

"To try to save your life?"

Cloud felt both frustration and guilt. He should have known she would do something like this. He should have known she would do anything to help him, even if it meant surrendering to the Cetra. Damn he was such a fool. It was all his fault, he thought, but he didn't stop to think that there had been little he could have done to prevent it.

"How long have I been here?" he asked.

"I brought you here yesterday afternoon. It is now late evening."

Too long, Cloud thought.

"I have to find her," he said, determined.

"I think that would be very unwise," the Cetra Sage said.

"Why?"

"You're still very weak from your illness."

"I don't care about that," Cloud told him. Then; "did you cure me?"

"It's beyond my power to do that, or anyone's," the Sage replied. "I could only alleviate the symptoms somewhat, but it wouldn't have been fatal, at least, not to you. It doesn't kill humans. You would have recovered on your own eventually."

Relieved as he was to know he wouldn't have died, he still didn't like the sound of that.

"What do you mean, it's not fatal to humans? What was wrong with me?"

The Cetra Sage gave him a long look from beneath his bush eyebrows.

"You have the Cetra Plague," he said finally.

"The Cetra Plague? What's that?"

"It's the virus that Jenova engineered two thousand years ago to kill the Cetra."

Cloud just sat there for a minute. He had a hard time believing that. He'd heard about the virus of course. Everyone had. He'd never heard of anyone actually coming down with it though, not in his life time, anyway.

"I didn't know it still existed," he said slowly.

"Oh it can still be found endemic to some areas of the world," the Sage replied. "Round Island is one of those places. Its here, probably because the Cetra are still here."

Cloud nodded. The Cetra Plague could kill any Cetra. Perhaps it was lucky he had come down with it. If it had been Aeris...

He looked up.

"Isn't it a danger to you then?"

"Me? Why would it be a danger to me?" the Sage questioned.

"Aren't you a Cetra?"

"No, of course not," the Sage replied, seemingly much amused by the suggestion. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I don't know," Cloud said. "You're the Cetra Sage."

"The Chocobo Sage isn't a chocobo, now is he?"

Cloud had to concede the point.

"I suppose not. Anyway, I don't care how I feel. I have to get Aeris back. It's my fault she's with them."

"I'm afraid it's not as simple as that," the Cetra Sage went on. "I told you I couldn't cure you. The symptoms may have subsided but you still have the virus. You can't pass it to another human, but you can give it to any Cetra you come in contact with."

Cloud frowned. Did that mean what he thought it meant?

"You mean I'm contagious?"

"To any Cetra you meet, yes," the Sage replied. "There is no cure. Any Cetra you pass it along to will die."

The severity of the situation was beginning to impress itself upon him. A horrible thought suddenly occurred to him.

"Could I... could I have already passed it to Aeris?" he asked.

"Unlikely," the Sage replied. "You're not usually contagious until the fever subsides."

Cloud breathed a sigh of relief.

"So how do I get rid of it?" he asked.

"You can't. I told you, there is no cure. It's a chronic condition. You've become a carrier."

"But for how long?"

"For as long as you live."

And suddenly he felt as if the roof of the cavern had collapsed on top of him.

"You.. you mean, I'm going to be like this forever?" he said slowly.

The Cetra Sage looked at him, and it was not without sympathy.

"Well, for as long as you live," he repeated.

"And any Cetra I come near, any Cetra at all..." he went on, almost as if talking to himself.

"You can pass it on to, yes," the Sage finished for him. "It's spread by close contact. You might not give it to a Cetra right away, but any direct contact at all increases the risk."

Cloud sat there, shaking his head slowly. It couldn't be. This couldn't be happening. He knew he was sick yes, but, he thought it was nothing, or at worst, some kind of danger to himself. He thought it was some bug that might kill him but certainly not anyone else. He could handle that, but this? He was a danger to the Cetra, a danger to Aeris. He couldn't go near her. How was he supposed to rescue her when... oh god...

Zangan...

"I can't go near any Cetra?" he said, his voice suddenly dry in his throat. "None at all? Not even if he's born of human parents?"

Maybe that was different. Maybe a Cetra that was born from humans was different somehow. Maybe...

"It matters not," the Sage's words sliced through his hope, cutting it up into little pieces until it faded to nothing. "A Cetra is a Cetra."

"But... but my son is a Cetra," Cloud felt the words ripping at his throat as they came out.

"That is truly unfortunate."

"Unfortunate?" Cloud snapped, suddenly angry. "I may never be able to hold my son in my arms again and you call it unfortunate?"

The Cetra Sage did not appear offended by Cloud's suddenly harsh words.

"I am truly sorry," he said. "Perhaps you would like to be alone?"

Cloud sat there, and felt all the anger just draining out of him. There was no one to be angry with. It wasn't the Cetra Sage's fault. It wasn't anyone's fault.

"I'm sorry," Cloud apologized. "It's just that..."

The Cetra Sage held up his hand.

"You don't have to explain."

Cloud lowered his head, looking at the floor.

"Are you sure there's nothing you can do?" he said, almost plaintively. He could believe that he had gotten this disease, nor could he believe that he would have it the rest of his life, that there wasn't anyway to get rid of it.

"I'm sorry," the Sage said again. "It's actually very rare for a human to contract it at all. It's just a one in a million thing, really."

Just my luck, Cloud thought. What was he going to do? How could he go back, how could he tell Tifa that he couldn't go near their son, that if he did he might give him a fatal disease? How could he live with this?

It was too much to take in all at once. He just had to take one step at a time. There was nothing else he could do. He still had a mission, he had to find out what was going on here, and he had to save Aeris. He needed more information. Though this complicated things it didn't change that fact. He would just deal with what was in front of him and worry about the rest when the time came. There didn't appear to be anything he could do about it anyway.

"Why do the Cetra want Aeris?" he asked.

"It's a long story," the Sage replied.

"I've got no place to go."

The Cetra Sage nodded, then sat down on the bed beside him. Cloud noticing for what seemed like the first time that he actually *was* a bed that he was on.

"A huge Cetra city lies beneath Round Island. It was their capital, actually. I say lies beneath and not used to lie beneath because the city is still here. It's in ruins, or most of it, but it still exists. A handful of Cetra still remain as well, occupying a smaller and smaller portion of the city, doing the best they can to survive, and working feverishly to prevent the complete extinction of their race. Not long ago, they unleashed a virus of their own."

"A virus of their own?" Cloud repeated.

"Yes. This virus infects humans. Female humans to be precise. It slightly alters the genetic structure of any children they bear."

"And turns them into Cetra," Cloud finished for him, coming to the obvious conclusion.

"Indeed," the Sage confirmed.

"So that's why it's happening," Cloud said. He felt revulsion and anger growing within him. They were turning humans into something they weren't meant to be, tinkering with people without their even knowing, altering the genetics of the human race as if they were some kind of lab experiment. They had done it to his own son! "What gives them the right to play God?" he muttered.

"They're desperate," the Sage replied. "They'll do anything to save their people, no matter what the consequences."

"Can it be reversed?" Cloud asked.

The Sage shook his head.

"I'm afraid there is no cure."

Cloud was beginning to get tired of hearing that.

"I understand now," he went on. "But I still don't see what this has to do with Aeris."

"That doesn't have anything to do with her," the Sage replied. "But that's only the first part of their plan. They constructed a device, they call it an amplifier. It's powered by mako. They just finished it recently. With it they can control the voice of the planet. Well, not actually control it. What they can do is substitute their own voice for it."

Cloud's eyebrows pinched together. He had wanted information, but now that he was getting it he was almost sorry he'd wanted to know. This was getting complicated.

"Why?" he asked simply.

"They're going to use it to communicate with the Cetra children they've created. Use it to teach them of their Cetra heritage, teach them who their loyalty belongs to."

"In other words, they're brainwashing them," Cloud said.

"Yes, I suppose you could term it that," the Sage acknowledged. "It's really a perfect way for them to do it. Using the voice of the planet they can be heard by every Cetra child on the planet at once."

"And not be heard by any humans," Cloud pointed out.

"I was afraid they were going to use it to turn the Cetra children against their human parents. I was afraid they were going to start a war."

"So it *was* you who contacted Aeris in her dream."

"Yes," he replied. "I knew she would understand, and I knew if they used it, she would hear."

"And known right away what they were up to," Cloud said. "I understand now. They must have known Aeris wouldn't go along with them, so they had to get her out of the way first."

A sudden thought chilled him.

"What are they going to do with her?" he asked urgently. They needed her out of the way, and she had delivered herself right into their hands. It might already be too late...

"Calm yourself," the Sage said. "I don't think they're going to kill her. If that were their intention they would have done it long ago. I don't think they like the idea of spilling Cetra blood. There are few enough of them left as it is. I think their intention is to hold her prisoner while they try to convince her that what they are doing is right."

"They're never convince her of that," Cloud said. If he knew Aeris at all, he knew that for certain. She would never join them. "If they find out they can't, would they kill her then?"

"There's really no way for me to know," the Sage replied. "I can only guess at their intentions given the knowledge I have of them. I imagine it would be difficult to keep her a prisoner indefinitely."

"I've got to save her," he said.

"You are only one man, and you are still ill," the Sage pointed out.

"I've got to *try*!" Cloud responded.

As he said that he lifted his head, trying to pull himself up to a sitting position, but the Sage placed a hand lightly on his chest and gently eased him back down.

"Rest now, save later," the Sage said. "There is nothing you can do in this condition. First get your strength back up, then worry about rescuing your friend. You've got some time. They're not going to kill her, or not anytime soon anyway. It would be foolish to rush out there now."

Cloud lay back down with a sigh. The Sage was right, though he was loath to admit it. His fever was gone, but he was still weak from days of illness. He was in no condition to wander around looking for Aeris, much less fight. He realized he still didn't even know where the Cetra base was.

"You know where they are right?" he asked. "You can lead me to them? When I'm stronger?"

"Yes," the Sage replied. "There is a way."

Something in the way he said that made Cloud take notice.

"What do you mean by that?"

The Cetra Sage stood up again and began pacing back and forth in front of the bed, his hands clasped behind his back.

"You can't get to their base by the surface. Not without being seen anyway. They have safeguards against that. Even if you weren't ill, you wouldn't be able to fight them all by yourself."

"How many of them are there?" Cloud asked.

"Perhaps a dozen. I'm not completely sure. Certainly more than one human could handle."

"So how do I get in?" Cloud asked. It was obvious the Sage had something else in mind.

"As I said, the Cetra live in one portion of their old capital. Most of it is uninhabited, in ruins, but there are many ways down to it. There should be a way to get through to them taking that route."

"Should be?" Cloud said dubiously.

"It has been many years since I've been down there. So many I can't count. There was a way through, but who knows what may have changed since? The old ways may be blocked, or they may not. I cannot say. If you choose to go that way you will almost certainly come upon the Cetra unawares, but there are dangers. Most of the city below has been abandoned for centuries. In that time all manner of fell beast has taken up residence there. It will not be easy to get through."

"Well, I never thought this was going to be easy," Cloud commented. He slipped his hands behind his head, looking up at the ceiling. He had learned a lot. It was all clear now, but unfortunately, there didn't seem much he could do about it at the moment. He could tell he was still weak, he knew the Cetra Sage was right. He had to wait until he felt better. Hopefully no more than a day or two but even that long would try his patience.

The Sage, having said his peace, walked away from Cloud. He picked up a broom and started sweeping the ground in front of the fireplace. The dust swirled up around him and it didn't seem he was doing much good. It just seemed to Cloud as if he were moving the dust from here to there.

"What are you doing here?" Cloud questioned.

"What do you mean?" the Sage asked, without looking up.

"You're not a Cetra," Cloud said. "How did you get here? Why are you here alone on this island?"

"I'm here to observe the Cetra," the Sage replied. "It's what I do."

"But how long have you been doing it? How long have you been here?"

"I've been here since the Cetra came," the Sage said simply.

Cloud frowned.

"Here since the Cetra came? I thought you told me the city beneath us was centuries old."

"Indeed it is," the Sage agreed.

Cloud just stared at him for a moment. Since the Sage had told him he wasn't a Cetra Cloud had just assumed he was human, but now he was beginning to have doubts.

"What are you?" he questioned after a moment.

"I am the Cetra Sage," the man replied. "One of the four Sages, who have been here since long before your people, almost since the dawn of time, and I suspect will be here long after you and your people are gone."

"Are you... immortal?" Cloud asked slowly.

"No," the Sage said with an amused laugh. "No living thing can make that claim. My time here, though long by your standards, is limited."

"You said four Sages. I know of you and the Chocobo Sage. Who are the others?"

The Cetra Sage put down his broom, appearing satisfied with his work, although things didn't look much different to Cloud.

"The four Sages, who in the beginning represented the four sentient species," the Sage recited. "The Cetra Sage, me of course, the Chocobo Sage, wise in the way of those fleet of both wing and foot, the Dragon Sage, steeped in the lore of those who came first, and the Nehri Sage, the eldest of us all, and the one who is gone, who followed the doings of the wisest."

"Wait a second," Cloud interrupted. He had a number of problems with this. "First of all, no Human Sage?"

The Cetra Sage shrugged.

"I am not the one who chose."

"And Chocobos? One of the four sentient species?"

The Sage walked over and patted his chocobo on the head. It warked warmly.

"They're a lot smarter than you humans give them credit for," the Sage said.

"And who the Nehri? I've never heard of them."

"There were never many of them, and they may all be gone now," the Sage replied. "They used to dwell in the hills around the Cosmo Canyon region."

"Cosmo Canyon," Cloud said slowly. "You mean Red?"

The Sage just looked at him blankly.

"Or Nanaki I should say. Large red creatures that look something like a lion?" Cloud prodded.

The Cetra Sage nodded.

"There are at least two left," Cloud said. But then he thought of something else. "You said the Nehri Sage was eldest, and that he's gone?"

"Yes, as I said, even we are not immortal."

"Do you mean Bugenhagen, by any chance?"

The Cetra Sage thought this over for a moment. "I do not recall that name. However, the Sages have gone by many names down through the ages. It is not something I keep track of."

Cloud fell silent, momentarily out of questions. He certainly had enough to process for the moment. So Red and Nipala were Nehri. He supposed the red beast would be happy to know that. The information was interesting, but not particularly useful to him at the moment. He thought perhaps he should feel insulted that chocobos had been considered one of the four sentient species and man was not even mentioned. Still, none of that was going to help him stop the Cetra and what they were doing. He felt like his head was spinning, his mind running from one thing to the other. Zangan was a Cetra because of them, because they had infected Tifa with their virus, it had been done deliberately, without their knowledge or consent. And now... now he had the Jenova virus. Seeing his son again could be a death sentence for the child, and it was all the Cetra's fault. If it hadn't been for them he would have been human, he would have been normal!

Cloud felt his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

Aeris, Aeris was so gentle. She was so concerned with others. He was beginning to think she got that from her human half. All the other Cetra they had met so far had been arrogant and selfish. Ellnegio had helped them, but in the end it had only been to serve his own purposes. Perhaps that wasn't fair, he hadn't met all of them. He didn't know if they were all in on this plan, he didn't know if they all were going along willingly. It seemed that the Cetra were just the same as humans in

that regard. Maybe there were some who were shouting as loud as they could that this wasn't right, that they shouldn't be doing it. Maybe it was just that no one was listening to them.

Maybe, but in any case, it was hard to be objective when someone was tinkering with the genetic structure of your son.

A sound distracted him. He realized he had been hearing it for sometime, slowly increasing in volume, but it wasn't until now that it penetrated into his consciousness. It sounded as if it were coming from far away, but it was getting louder. He felt a sudden rush as excitement when he recognized it.

"Do you hear that?" he suddenly exclaimed.

The Cetra Sage paused for a moment, obviously listening. Then he shook his head.

"My ears aren't as keen as they once were," he stated.

"Never mind that," Cloud replied. "I can hear it well enough. It's the sound of a helicopter. Someone is here!"

He lifted himself up, then fell back again as he was overcome with a wave of nausea. The Cetra Sage immediately walked over to him.

"Easy, easy. You're not well enough to hop around like you're used to."

"Help me up," Cloud said. "I need to go outside and find them. I need to let whoever it is know I'm here."

The Cetra Sage obliged, and with the man's arm propped under his shoulder, Cloud managed to attain an upright position.

There was a set of stairs cut in the stone through the doorway just to the left of the fireplace. With the Cetra Sage helping him, Cloud climbed up the stairs. They emerged under the trees on a level area overlooking the ocean. It was dark. Cloud could barely make out the helicopter. It was close to the beach below, if it had not landed already. He could see no light. The only reason he could pinpoint it at all was because of the sound it was making. Cloud looked up, searching the sky, hoping the sound had not attracted the Cetra as well. The night was cloudless, but a chill wind blew from the north. The stars shined like diamonds in the clear sky above. He could see no sign of the Cetra airship.

Even now the pitch of the sound coming from the helicopter changed, and Cloud knew it had landed. Trying to hurry as best he could, they made their way down to the beach.

It took longer than he had wanted, and he was worried whoever it was might be gone by the time they got there, but when he finally broke out of the trees onto the sand of the beach, he could see figures standing by the machine.

"Over here!" he called out, waving.

Perhaps it wasn't prudent, but he didn't stop to wonder who it was. It obviously wasn't the Cetra, and since Round Island wasn't exactly on the beaten track, he assumed that his friends had somehow found him.

His faith in his friends was upheld when he heard a female voice call out excitedly.

"Cloud!"

One of the figures came running toward them, racing across the sand as best she could. A moment later Tifa threw herself into his arms.

"Tifa," Cloud said softly, grabbing hold of her and squeezing hard.

"I can't believe you're really here," he heard her say. "We didn't know where you had gone. We were so worried!"

"It's all right," Cloud said reassuringly, stroking her long hair. God how he had missed her! "I'm all right."

Reeve appeared out of the darkness in front of him. He was as happy as Tifa was to have found Cloud, but before he could say anything he noticed the man that was standing beside the young warrior.

"This is the Cetra Sage," Cloud explained. "C'mon, it's dangerous here out in the open. Let's go someplace where we can talk. I've got a hell of a lot to tell you."