

CHAPTER XVI: TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS IN THE CETRA CITY

A huge arm lashed out. Cloud spun, slashing at it with his sword. He felt it cut, felt it drive into the creatures arm. Blood shot through the air, yet the beast hardly seemed to notice, and the attack did nothing to slow the motion of the creatures arm. It continued forward and Cloud had not expected that. Before he could react it slammed into him.

A moment later he looked up, finding himself lying on the ground, almost ten feet from where he had been just a second ago. Tifa stood over him, a look of shocked concern on her face.

"Are you all right?"

He shook his head to get the cobwebs out of it, then nodded.

"Yeah, I think so."

He pulled himself to his feet, a blast from Reeve's shotgun making his ears ring. That at least momentarily delayed the creatures advance, yet didn't seem to have much more effect.

"He's a tough little bugger," Cloud muttered.

"You mean *big* bugger," Reeve shot back.

A green glow suddenly appeared in Tifa's hands, and a moment later a blast of Ultima shot outward at the beast. It staggered backwards, the best effect they'd had yet to their attacks, but a moment later it was coming toward them again. If it was hurt at all, it certainly didn't show it.

"I think it's time to go to plan B," Cloud stated.

"Run like hell?" Tifa suggested.

"Exactly."

They turned around and raced off down the road.

One could never predict how a monster would react when one turned and ran. Some just stood there, as if the tactic confused them, or perhaps were just satisfied that their need to feel superior had been satiated, making a getaway easy. Others might give chase for a bit, but did not continue for long, either because they were too slow or you passed out of that particular area of the world that they laid claim to. And then there was the final category, in which they pursued you to the ends of the earth and possibly beyond, either because they were desperate for a meal or just seemed to think it was absolutely imperative to their existence that they catch the intruders. A lot depended upon the beast's intelligence, but that was often hard to judge. Usually the more human-like the creature appeared the more intelligence it was attributed, but that wasn't always so.

In this particular instance, it was just their luck that the creature seemed to fall into the last category. They ran down the streets, following a twisting path, turning off in various directions as they went, yet the creature remained doggedly behind them. Reeve was in the lead while Cloud stayed as rearguard, Tifa right in front of him, occasionally turning to launch a blast of Ultima at their pursuer. The good part was it really didn't seem to be gaining much. The bad part, that it didn't seem to be losing ground either.

To Cloud's surprise Dannin seemed just as spry as the rest of them. Cloud had expected him to fall behind rather early, but he seemed to be keeping up as well as anyone. That helped a bit, but it just delayed things. They didn't know if the monster would quit, but it didn't seem like it was going to anytime soon. In spite of the fact that Dannin was keeping up, Cloud didn't know how much longer he could keep it up, or any of them really. Slowly, after quite some time, he began to notice that the monster was starting to gain on them. Well, not so much it gain ground as they started to lose it. Tifa was going visibly slower now, the use of the materia draining her strength faster than the others, and he had to slow down to stay with her. Besides that, they were running at random, and Dannin had told them there were plenty of monsters to go around down here. There was no telling when they might run into more. If they kept going they could end up caught between a rock and a hard place.

Whoever came up with that expression anyway? Wasn't a rock already a hard place? So it's actually between a hard place and another hard place. Or a rock and a rock.

Cloud didn't really have time to let his mind wander right now.

No, a change in tactics seemed to be what was needed. He looked ahead of them.

"See if we can get in one of the buildings," he called out. "We may be able to hide somewhere."

Reeve glanced back for a moment.

"If we go in a building we risk being trapped inside," he pointed out.

"I don't see that we have much choice," Cloud replied. "I don't think it can follow us into a building. Look at the size of it!"

Reeve didn't argue any more. He turned forward again, angling toward the buildings on the right hand side of the street. They were in an old part of the city. Well, the entire city was old, of course, but this area seemed to be particularly ancient. Oddly enough, the buildings on the left side of the street seemed even older than those on the right, as if they had been built long before and then the city had expanded, as indeed, that very well could have been the case. As it was most of the buildings on the left hand side were overgrown with vegetation, their foundations cracked and crumbling. In fact, some of them seemed on the verge of collapse, one of them even teetering with a dangerous tilt out into the street above them. They made sure to give that one a wide berth.

The ones on the right seemed to be in a bit better shape, and perhaps that was why Reeve led them in that direction. In any case, he soon spotted an open doorway and bolted inside, the others close on his heels.

There was no door, nothing to block the entrance way with. Reeve quickly led them into the next room, but then they stopped, Cloud standing by the opening, looking back.

A moment later he flinched as the creature slammed into the outside of the building. The whole structure shook, and pieces of rock or plaster or whatever it was that these Cetra buildings were made of rained down on them.

"Damn," Reeve muttered, obviously as impressed as Cloud was.

"Sounds like its going to knock the whole building down," Tifa muttered.

"Yeah," Cloud agreed, looking at the cracks that had appeared at the hit. "I think you may be right. Everyone, look around for another way out of here!"

The all scattered in different directions, searching for another exit. Every few seconds they heard the crashing again. The building would shake every time, and each time it happened Cloud was sure the whole thing was going to come down on top of them. Even if the thing didn't get in, it wouldn't do them much good to be buried in the rubble of the place.

There was what looked like some kind of machinery in most of the rooms. Cloud had no idea what it all might have been for and he didn't spend time thinking about it. He ran quickly through the rooms, swinging around until he eventually reappeared in the room they had started in. The others were all there already, except for Reeve, who stepped in just a few seconds after him.

They all looked at one another. Cloud shook his head.

"What, didn't the Cetra believe in back doors?" Reeve questioned.

"There are some windows on the upper floor," Tifa said. "Its a long drop from up there though."

"Sheesh," Cloud muttered.

The crashing came again, followed by more and louder crashing. It sounded as if an entire wall had fallen. They all hunched their shoulders in anticipation of the ceiling coming down on them, but after a moment, nothing else had happened.

"We have to get out of here," Cloud stated the obvious.

"How much longer do you think this place will last?" Tifa questioned.

"Not long, I fear," the Cetra Sage spoke up. "Though the Cetra were good craftsmen, these buildings are far too old to take this kind of punishment."

"Good thing we came in these instead of those on the other side of the street then," Tifa commented. "They looked like a good wind could knock them down."

"Yeah," Cloud said slowly. "Yeah," he repeated.

Tifa looked at him. Slowly she came to recognize that look on his face.

"You have an idea?" she questioned.

"Yeah," he repeated once more. "I do. Tifa, did the windows upstairs look out on the street?"

"Some of them did."

"All right. Go up there and get your Ultima materia ready. You remember that building we passed right before we came in here, the one that was tilting like it was going to fall over at any moment?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to go back outside. Hopefully the creature will chase me. When it runs past that building, you hit the building with Ultima and hopefully it'll fall down on top of that thing."

"Uhh, that sounds like a lot of hopefully to me," Reeve said dubiously.

"You got a better idea?" Cloud questioned.

"Well, no, not really."

"But Cloud, in order for you to get back outside you have to go past the monster," Tifa protested.

"Yeah, that is going to be a bit tricky," Cloud admitted. "But I'm pretty sure I can manage it."

"I don't like it," Tifa stated firmly.

"I'm open to alternative suggestions," Cloud said.

No one spoke.

"All right. Tifa, get up there and get ready. Reeve, you come with me. Maybe you can distract it a bit so I can get past it. Dannin... you stay out of the way."

"If I release the Ultima too soon I might crush you in the building, and if I'm too late you'll be stuck out there by yourself with that thing," Tifa tried one more time.

"We'll just have to take the chance," Cloud replied. He walked over to Tifa and took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I have faith in you."

"Well, what if I don't?" she questioned.

"You'll do fine," he reassured her.

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded, knowing there wasn't much else she could do. She turned away and walked reluctantly upstairs, not at all confident she could pull this off. Cloud nodded for Reeve to follow him and they walked over to the entrance to the other room. Cloud peered in and saw that, indeed, half the opposite wall appeared to have collapsed. There was a gaping hole where the entrance way had been. He could see the creature clearly now, though the hole it had made still wasn't quite large enough for it to get through, it seemed that would change at any moment.

"All right, you shoot at it, I'll run," he said to Reeve.

"That's the plan?" Reeve questioned.

"Yup, that's pretty much it. You ready."

Reeve shrugged and lifted up his shotgun.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

Cloud prepared to run and waited for Reeve to fire. He didn't have to wait long. At the sound of the gun Cloud took off, as if the shot had been fired to start a race and not try to do damage to the monster in front of them.

The creature barely flinched at the hit.

Still, it did seem to momentarily distract it. Or perhaps that was just wishful thinking on Cloud's part. In any case, as soon as the shot was fired he ran forward.

The doorway was still there, sort of. The wall had collapsed on one side and the creatures bulk took up most of the space there, but Cloud could see daylight through part of the door frame that still existed. He lunged through it, expecting any moment to feel like a fly under a swatter.

And then he was outside. Immediately he turned and raced down the street, trying to put some distance between himself and the creature. A moment later he turned to look back, expecting to see it breathing down his neck.

Instead it seemed to have ignored him. It was still by the building, still trying to smash its way in like some demented woodpecker.

Cloud stopped and stared at it. Either it knew there were more people inside and hadn't bothered with him, or it somehow hadn't seen him at all. Either way, this would not do.

"Hey!"

The monster, apparently so wrapped up in its destruction, didn't seem to hear him.

"I don't believe this," he muttered.

He ran back until he was standing as close as he dared.

"Hey!"

No effect. What, was the damn thing deaf?

Maybe all its senses were dulled, maybe that's why they couldn't seem to hurt it very much.

Still, not very much wasn't the same as not at all. Their attacks didn't seem to be doing much damage, but they did seem to get its attention.

He ran forward and slashed at the back of the creature's leg with his sword.

The creature spun around. After getting no reaction from it for so long, it almost took him by surprise. A giant clawed arm descended upon him, but he lunged out of the way, cutting it so close that one claw did manage to slice into his shoulder. Even that was almost enough to knock him over. Almost but not quite. Having achieved his goal of drawing the creature's ire, he turned and ran once again.

The building that was his target wasn't that far away. It would only take him seconds to reach it. As he closed in on it he glanced back, trying to spot Tifa, but the creature blotted out most of his view.

Turning around was a mistake, however. The ground was strewn with debris, mostly crumbled stone from the buildings around him. When he turned, his foot caught on one of them, and he suddenly found himself sprawled on the ground.

The fall left him uninjured, and he sprang to his feet almost immediately, but he had lost precious seconds, and now the creature was right behind him. He didn't bother to look back now, he didn't have to. He expected at any moment to feel the thing's claws on his back. He glanced up and saw he was right beneath the tilted building now. Tifa would have to use the materia soon. He had to get out of the way before the building came down on top of him.

He hadn't been able to see Tifa when he looked back, but she could see him. Perched in an opening high up in the building they had sought refuge in, she had a clear view of the entire block. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw Cloud fall right in front of her target. The monster was closing in fast. In a moment he would be in position, but Cloud was right in front of it. She didn't know if he would have time to get out of the way.

She only had a second to decide. She didn't have time to hesitate. In a moment, the creature would be beyond the building, out of the danger zone itself. She had to do it now, or leave Cloud to his fate.

Her hand tightened around the materia and its bright green glow lit up her hands.

It was bad enough the creature was after him, might even kill him, but if she timed this wrong *she* could be the one that killed him. The building could flatten him just as easily as that beast could. Could she live with that? He might be better off facing the monster than a falling building. They were too close, his stumble had left him with not enough distance to get out of the way. Or so it seemed. She couldn't tell for sure. He was out of the way now, wasn't he? Was he far enough ahead? Was it too late already?

Just do it, dammit!

She released the Ultima.

The entire front of the building she was aiming at exploded outward. As they had suspected, this proved too much for the crazily tilted structure to handle, and a moment later, with a tremendous roar, the entire building came crashing down into the street.

Tifa tried to keep Cloud in view, but it was impossible. She only saw him for a moment, running like a madman, before the debris from the building obscured him from view. From this angle, she couldn't tell if the debris was falling down behind him or right on top of him.

A moment later she was running herself, down the stairs and out of the building, into the street before the echo of the rumble of the collapse had faded away.

She couldn't see anything out on the street. Dust from the collapse filled the air around her. She ran forward blindly. She heard Reeve's voice behind her, calling out, but she didn't answer. She could only see a few feet in front of herself. She came abruptly to a huge pile of rubble in the street and realized she had reached the fallen building. She climbed over the debris, calling out Cloud's name, searching desperately, though she could barely see her hand in front of her face.

She reached the other side of the pile of rubble. She stopped, but saw no sign of Cloud. She looked around desperately but she still couldn't see very far.

"Cloud! Where are you?"

The sounds of the collapse had faded away now, replaced by an ominous silence. She couldn't hear her friends anymore, couldn't hear the beast. Except for the sound of her labored breathing, everything seemed to have gone deathly silent.

"Cloud!"

She strained her ears. She thought she could hear the faint sound of someone scrambling over the rocks, but it was back the way she had come, and she figured it must be Reeve and the Cetra Sage.

"Cloud?"

Her voice wasn't as loud this time. It wasn't a shout, more like a plea.

A moan.

She turned, staring off in the direction the sound had come from.

"Cloud!"

She ran a few steps, then stopped again. The dust was beginning to clear, but she still couldn't see very far.

"Tifa!"

His voice sounded weak, but just to hear it at all sent a wave of relief washing through her. He didn't sound far away. She ran in the direction of the voice.

"Where are you?"

"Over here."

And then she saw him. Lying on his stomach, half buried in the rubble. She ran over and stooped down beside him, pulling the debris off of him.

"Thank God you're alive! I thought I had killed you!"

"I was kinda worried you might have myself," he said. "Did you have to cut it so close?"

"I wouldn't have cut it so close if you hadn't fallen down!" she exclaimed. "Cloud Strife, why do you have to be such a klutz? I could just kill you!"

"You almost did."

"I'm sorry," she exclaimed.

"It's all right. I was the one who told you to do it, now wasn't it?"

"Are you hurt?"

He pushed the last of the debris off himself. Tifa gave him a hand getting up. He brushed himself off, looking down for a moment.

"All over," he replied. "But I don't think anything is seriously damaged."

At that moment Reeve and the Cetra Sage came running up.

"You all right?" Reeve asked.

Cloud nodded. He looked over at the pile of debris. The air had almost completely cleared now. There was no sign of the creature that had been attacking them.

"Looks like that did the trick," he commented.

"Yeah," Reeve agreed. "But maybe we better get out of here as quickly as we can. No telling that there might be more than one."

Cloud nodded.

"Good idea. I don't see anymore handy buildings to drop on one."

He looked at Tifa, but she just glared at him.

"Don't even *think* about ever asking me to do anything like that again," she told him.

"Let's go."

They continued on their way, or rather, backtracked the way they had come. Reeve hadn't been too concerned about where they were going when they were running from the beast. Getting away with their skin intact had seemed to be more important than going in the direction they had needed to go. As a result they had gotten quite a bit off track. The Cetra Sage led them back the way they had come until they reached the point where they had first encountered the monster. When Cloud thought about it he realized they had wasted a large part of the day with this little diversion. Or at least, that's what it seemed like. There was no day or night down here, only the omnipresent Cetra glow all around them. It let them see, but gave them no concept of the passage of time. There was no sun to sink to the horizon, no stars, nothing to indicate day or night. Cloud looked up and saw only inky blackness above them. Somewhere up there, he knew the ceiling of the cavern lay, but he couldn't see it. The Cetra glow didn't extent up that high. It was strange though, looking up, he could almost believe there was no cavern above them, that they were indeed out under the sky, a dark night sky with no stars or moon. Like Ifalnia, this Cetra city had a distinct feeling of other-worldliness. Time and space both seemed strangely distorted somehow, though if asked exactly how Cloud would never have been able to explain. They could have been down here for hours, they could have been down here for days. It was impossible to tell.

So all Cloud knew was that they had lost a lot of time. How much exactly he wasn't sure, but what difference did it make? They had lost whatever time they had lost and they couldn't make up for that. They would just have to hurry on as fast as they could from this point onward.

Of course, that was easier said than done. The streets around them sloped slowly downward here. They came around a turn and stopped. Looking ahead they could see the street in front of them was flooded with water.

The Cetra Sage walked up to the edge of the water and peered ahead. The street was flooded for as far as they could see. In fact, judging from the height of the waterline along the buildings, it was obvious that its depth increased rapidly.

"We don't have to cross that, do we?" Reeve questioned.

The Cetra Sage stood there for a minute before answering, looking around with a somewhat befuddled look on his face. It was obvious he had not been expecting such an obstacle.

"This was not here when I last passed through," he said.

"Great," Cloud said slowly. "Can we go around?"

He looked out over the water. It was opaque, and had a greenish tint to it. Of course, in the Cetra light, everything had a greenish tint. Still, he didn't like the look of it, and wasn't anxious to go stomping through it. He could see from the looks on the others faces that they felt much the same.

"I don't know," Dainin replied. "The last time I came through, this was the way I came. There was no flood then. It's a huge city, I'm sure there must be a way around it somehow, but it might take us quite some time to find it."

"Wonderful," Cloud muttered. "Do you think we can walk through it?"

"I suppose it depends on how deep it gets," the Cetra Sage replied.

"Look up ahead. The water level is almost as high as the top of the doorways," Reeve observed. "And it might get deeper than that beyond. I don't think we'll be able to go this way, short of swimming."

"And who knows what may be lurking out there under the surface," Tifa commented.

"Yeah, there is that. It was bad enough fighting things on land," Reeve agreed.

"Let's see if we can find an alternate route," the Cetra Sage suggested.

"How long will that take?" Cloud asked impatiently.

"As I said, there's really no way for me to tell," Dannin replied. "I know you're anxious to get there but there's no way for us to tell how deep that water gets or how far it extends. Do you seriously think we should try to cross it?"

Cloud didn't reply. Dannin was right, and he knew it. It would be foolish to attempt to cross that water given all the unknowns. Yet he wasn't happy about having to hunt for another way through and be delayed yet again.

Tifa came up beside him.

"Aeris will be all right," she said. "She can take care of herself."

"Can she?" Cloud answered sharply. "We let her run off one other time and look what happened to her."

Tifa just stared at him for a moment, disturbed by his tone. Whatever had gone wrong so far, it certainly wasn't any of their faults. She started to say something, then changed her mind and just walked away from him.

"Aeris didn't run off by herself this time," Reeve spoke up. "She was abducted. I want her back as much as you do, believe me, but it's like the Cetra Sage said, if they had wanted to kill her they could have done it long ago. I want to get there quickly too but look what we ran into last time. If we had taken our time and been more careful we might have been able to find away around that creature without being detected, and in the long run that would have saved us time."

"So what are you saying, that I've been too rash?" Cloud questioned.

"You've always been too rash," Tifa commented, in no mood to defend him.

"No, I'm not saying that," Reeve tried to be diplomatic. "I know how tough it is making the decisions. It's always easy to second guess when things go wrong. Yes, some of the things you come up with seem a bit.. unorthodox at times, but I'm sure everyone here will admit that most of the time they work out. All I'm saying is we should at least *try* to find a way around before we plunge into that water. We want to hurry yes, but if we run into something we can't handle..."

"Like a giant sea monster," Tifa suggested.

"And get ourselves killed," Reeve continued after a moment. "Then we're not going to do Aeris much good, now are we?"

Cloud stood there for a moment, then sighed. He had to concede that Reeve made a good argument. He *was* rash, at times, more often than he'd like to admit. They could at least try to find a way around.

"Very well," he agreed. "Let's see if we can find a way around it."

That decided, they set off once again. Cloud wasn't all that happy about the situation but he decided to look at the bright side. They were in the middle of a city, there hadn't been water there before. How much of it could there be? It was quite likely that they would find their way around it quite easily.

But of course, it didn't happen that way.

They walked for hours, or at least it seemed that way to Cloud. Yet every time they turned down a road in the ultimate direction they wanted to go, the watery barrier remained. Cloud held his tongue until even the others began to look impatient.

"This could take us forever," he finally said.

They stopped. No one spoke for a long time.

"I'm not anxious to try to cross that water," Tifa said eventually, though her voice did not ring with her earlier conviction.

"This lake does seem to be larger than I anticipated," the Cetra Sage said ruefully.

They walked down to the edge of the water once more.

"If it's as large across as it is wide, it's too far to swim," Tifa said.

"The buildings stick out of it," Reeve replied. "I'm sure we'll be able to get into at least some of them."

Cloud looked up at the buildings that stood in the water like so many... over-sized stepping stones and suddenly an idea came to him.

"We can't go around, we don't want to go through, what's to say we can't go over?"

The others just looked at him.

He pointed to the structures in front of them.

"The buildings are close together. The roofs are far above the water. We can cross by going from roof to roof."

"Going from roof to roof," Tifa repeated slowly.

"Yeah, we're in the middle of a city. Most of the buildings are right next to one another," Cloud continued.

"Most of them being the key point," Reeve stated, looking at the buildings in the water. "There are a few gaps."

"They don't look very far. We can probably jump them."

"Jump them?" Tifa said, not sounding at all happy about that idea.

"Yes, jump them," he repeated.

Tifa looked at him uncertainly.

"I don't know Cloud," she said slowly, then looked at the others.

The Cetra Sage seemed perfectly happy to accept whatever judgment they made. Reeve stared down the street.

"Well," he said after a moment, "It might be possible. I'm not sure I want to jump across buildings though."

"I'm sure I don't," Tifa said.

"C'mon," Cloud cajoled. "Look, what's the worst that could happen?"

"We plummet to our deaths?" Tifa offered.

"They'll be water below us, remember?" Cloud countered. "We're not going to fall to our deaths, we'll just get wet. That's the beauty of it."

"That doesn't seem all that beautiful to me," Tifa replied. "I don't want to get wet either. Especially in that water."

"So what, you're rather walk around here until your legs fall off?"

"No but... well... I don't know," Tifa ended lamely.

Cloud looked at Reeve.

"Well, what do you think?"

Reeve shrugged.

"I don't like it much, but I can't think of anything better."

"All right then, it's settled."

Even though he said that, he looked at Tifa like it was far from.

She sighed.

"Fine! But if I end up splattered against a wall, I'll never forgive you!"

"I won't let you splatter, I promise," Cloud said.

"If we're going to do this I suggest we grab some of the vines growing on these buildings to use as rope, if we need it," Reeve said helpfully.

Realizing the wisdom of this, Cloud and Reeve grabbed some sturdy vines and wrapped enough around their shoulders to let them climb for several stories, if necessary. After that they looked around and soon found a way into one of the buildings at the edge of the water. Seeing as how the building they had been in had only one entrance, Cloud wasn't sure they'd be able to find a way onto the roof. Since most of the buildings were overgrown with vegetation, he thought they wouldn't have any trouble climbing up the outside, so it wouldn't be a major catastrophe if they didn't find a way up

inside. As it happened, the point became moot when they found a trapdoor that led out onto the roof quite easily at the top of the stairs.

At first the going was easy, just as Cloud had said. The buildings here were right next to one another and they didn't have any trouble going from roof to roof. They made pretty decent time as well. Not quite as fast as they would have traveled on the streets, but fast enough to keep Cloud satisfied. Soon dry land disappeared behind them and they found themselves with nothing but buildings and water stretching as far as they could see.

"This isn't a lake, it's an ocean," Reeve commented.

No one had an argument with that.

They went on for hours. Again, Cloud wasn't sure exactly how long. They stopped to rest at least twice. Things had been going surprising well, even Tifa had to admit, at least she would have until they finally reached a gap that they had to jump.

It wasn't that large. All of them made it easily. The water had risen, and was now not far before the roofs of the buildings. This actually made things easier because it was less fearful to know you weren't going to fall very far if you missed. After making the first jump without mishap, all their spirits rose.

Still, they could see no end to the water down below. If anything, given the depth of the water, they figured they were farther from the shore than ever. Still, they shouldered onward gamely.

Eventually they were forced to stop by what Tifa had feared most. They came to the edge of one building and were faced with a gap they could not possibly jump across.

Cloud walked up to the edge and stared down at the water below, then at the buildings around them.

"Anyone see any way around?"

That was exactly what the others were looking for.

"We may be able to get across over there," Reeve said, pointing.

"Where?" Cloud questioned.

"There," Reeve said, continuing to point. "See those buildings in a line over there, three tall ones with a short one in the middle."

"Oh yeah, I see. Way over there?"

"I don't see anything closer."

Cloud chewed on that for a bit.

"That's a long way off," he said finally. "It'll take hours to go around that way."

"You're probably right," Reeve conceded.

"Well, what other choice do we have?" Tifa asked.

Cloud didn't reply, just stood at the edge of roof, looking down at the water below. It wasn't far to the next building, just a few minutes swim.

Tifa guessed what he was thinking and stepped back.

"No, you don't want to do that, do you?" she said distastefully.

"Well, I don't *want* to, but it's a lot simpler and quicker than going *all* the way around, isn't it. Why spend hours going around when it will just take us a few minutes to swim across."

"But...I.... its not..." Tifa tried to get out a coherent sentence and failed, and finally satisfied herself with just staring at him, hoping that would get her point across.

"What, you're afraid of a little water?" Cloud questioned. "You're not going to melt of anything, are you?"

"Well, no, but still. It looks... unpleasant."

"Whatever happened to that wild spirited adventuress I used to know and love?" Cloud questioned.

"Wild spirited adventuress? Who *are* you talking about?" she responded.

"Okay, maybe not wild spirited adventuress, but you never used to complain this much about the crazy things I asked us to do. What's happened to you?"

"I grew up and had a child," she replied. "I'm not the devil may care person I used to be and I'm glad. I'd like nothing more than to be back home sitting in front of the fire next to you with Zangan in my arms."

She stopped, realizing what she had just said. In Cloud's condition, that might never happen.

He noticed her look, but let it pass. That was something they couldn't worry about right now. He slowly walked over to her.

"You don't really have any valid objection to swimming across, do you?"

She opened her mouth, then shut it. She looked down at the water below.

"I didn't think so," Cloud said. Suddenly he reached out and grabbed hold of her, lifting her up in his arms. Divining his intentions, she suddenly shrieked.

"Cloud, no, *don't!*"

It was too late, by the time she had finished her sentence, they were both plunging down into the water below.

Cloud let go of her when they hit the water. With a powerful thrust of his arms he rose to the surface. A moment later Tifa's form broke the water in front of him.

"You are such a retard!" she exclaimed.

He just smiled at her.

"I love you too," he said. "C'mon, lighten up." He started to do the backstroke in a lazy circle around her. "It's like deja vu all over again."

"Deja vu all over again? Isn't that redundant?"

"You tell me."

"All right. Yes it is. And what are you talking about anyway?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"At the reactor in Junon. When we were trying to bring Aeris back to life and the metal walk broke? We had to swim to get back across and you were kind of reluctant then too if I recall correctly."

She threaded water for a moment, a pensive look on her face.

"You were a retard back then too!" she proclaimed suddenly. Then she lunged forward, grabbing his head and pushing it under.

They swam across the gap without further incident, and the others followed when they were safely across. After that they continued on their way and soon noticed that the water level seemed to be dropping again. Taking this as a hopeful sign that they were finally nearing the other side they pressed onward with renewed vigor. That came to a few more gaps, but all of them were narrow and easily jumped. Eventually Reeve called out that he could see the street once again ahead. With great relief they descended from the rooftops onto dry land once more.

"How much farther do we have to go?" Cloud questioned.

"I'm not completely sure," the Cetra Sage replied. "I've never taken this route before, but we must be very close by now."

And as it happened, he was more correct than even he thought. They had only gone a few more blocks when they saw a line of rubble in the streets in front of them.

"What's this?" Reeve questioned. "Another road block?"

"Yes, but this is an expected one," Dannin said. "That's the barricade that surrounds the old city from the inhabited portion. Congratulation gentlemen, and lady, we've made it."