

CHAPTER XIX: AERIS CREATES SOME CHAOS OF HER OWN

Given the fact that Aeris was a prisoner of some rogue Cetra, or what she thought of as rogue Cetra, and, though she didn't think they were anxious to kill her, the threat of it was still there if things went sour for them, you would think things would be pretty exciting in a not so nice kind of way for her. Though it was true she did feel some excitement and trepidation, those were, however, not the most significant emotions she was feeling right now. No, what she was actually feeling most strongly at the moment was extreme boredom.

There wasn't much to do when you were a prisoner. The door was locked. She couldn't leave her room and options inside of it were few and far between. The room contained a cot for her to sleep on, a small dresser to store her few possessions and a couple of pegs along the wall to hang things and that was about it. There were no windows. The glow of the walls around her was the only illumination. She didn't even have a book to read.

That didn't leave her many options when it came to keeping herself occupied.

A knock on the door interrupted her musing.

"Come in."

A woman entered carrying a tray of food. She walked over to the table and placed the tray on it, then straightened, looking at Aeris.

"How are you?"

Aeris didn't reply for a moment. She had seen the woman before. She was one of the people who had been in the airship when it had landed, when they had picked her up.

"I'm all right," Aeris replied slowly. "A bit bored."

The woman nodded.

"Yes, I suppose that would be true cooped up in this small room. I'm sorry. I can bring you some books if you like."

Even though this was the first time they had spoken it was obvious this woman's attitude toward her was much different from Grem's. She didn't like Grem, didn't like him at all and she was certain the feeling was mutual. Grem had been the only one who had been in to see her since her little talk with Yonsin and she had assumed it would be him this time as well, although he never knocked so she had known it would be someone else. She wasn't sure if this was a good thing or a bad thing. Even though Aeris seemed not to pose much of a threat Grem had acted wary, watching her like a hawk every time he had been with here, nor had he spent any more time in her room than was needed to do whatever he had come for.

"I'd like that," Aeris said. She walked over to the table, looking down at the food. Well, at her drink to be precise. She had noticed when they brought her food that a mug of clear water was usually included and was happy to see that this time was no exception. The mug and plates seemed to be made out of some kind of stoneware. It had the same feel as the walls around them, but the dinnerware did not glow so she wasn't sure if it was exactly the same. No one knew the secret of that glow, whether the rock was mined naturally that way or the Cetra somehow infused it with the illuminating light later on. At least, she had never met anyone who knew. Perhaps the Cetra here knew the secret. Someday maybe she'd find the time to ask, but not now. Now she had other things on her mind. The mug was quite heavy, was the only item she had contact with here that had any heft to it. Except for the pieces of furniture and her few possessions there was nothing else in the room, nothing she could use as a weapon.

Of course that wouldn't do her much good if she didn't get the opportunity to use it. Grem, coming in and out, watching her every second, hadn't given her the chance. Perhaps this woman would, if she could get her to linger. Perhaps now might indeed be a good time to ask about the glow.

Before she could bring it up, however, the woman spoke again.

"My name is Dalliana. I'm sorry we have to keep you in here like this. If there's anything I can do for you, besides the books, I mean, just let me know."

"You could let me go," Aeris suggested.

Dalliana gave her a rueful smile.

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

Aeris knotted her hands together.

"What you are doing is wrong. You know that," she said.

Dalliana looked troubled. For a moment she didn't seem to know what to say.

"We don't all agree with what Yonsin is doing," she said. "In fact, some of us argued vehemently against it, but we were overruled. We took a vote and this is what was decided at the council meeting."

"And that's the final say?" Aeris questioned. "Right or wrong doesn't matter?"

"Of course it does," Dalliana replied, clearly uncomfortable. "It's not as simple as that, however. We have a right to exist. We have a right to continue as a species. It was argued that that right takes precedence over the rights of the humans."

"Well I don't agree with that," Aeris proclaimed.

"I don't really agree with it completely myself," Dalliana stated. "And some of the others agreed, but we were outvoted."

"And you have no recourse?" Aeris asked.

"No," Dalliana replied. "Once the council has decided, there's really nothing else that can be done."

"You can try to stop them," Aeris suggested.

"I can't go against the council!" Dalliana replied. "I have to go along with the majority. I can't let my personal feelings interfere. If everyone did that, nothing would get done. There would be chaos!"

Aeris looked down at her food for a moment.

"Maybe a little chaos is what's needed around here," she said slowly.

Dalliana didn't reply.

"I don't mean to make you uncomfortable," Aeris said. This wasn't really something she should be discussing right now. She didn't want to chase Dalliana away. This might be the only chance she got. "I'm sure there's nothing you can do. I'd like to know a little bit more about you all, and as you must have noticed, there really isn't all that much to do cooped up in this room. Can you at least stay and talk for a bit?"

"Certainly," Dalliana said, immediately brightening. "To tell you the truth, we've been curious about you as well."

"How many of you are there?" Aeris asked, sitting down at the table and offering Dalliana a seat as well.

"There are only eleven of us left," Dalliana said, taking her up on her offer. "That's if you include Marlek who we haven't heard from in quite some time."

"Marlek?" Aeris prompted.

Dalliana hesitated, and once again the troubled look appeared on her face.

"He was the most vocal against what we were doing," she said eventually. "No one has heard from him in weeks."

Aeris said nothing, just raised an eyebrow at this.

"Well, it's not unusual for people to leave the island for an extended period of time. We often go off for weeks or months doing research on various things."

"Is that what he did, went off to do research?" Aeris asked.

"I don't know," Dalliana replied. "That's what Yonsin told us."

"But you're suspicious?" Aeris prodded.

"Well, yes, a bit," Dalliana answered after a moment. "You have to admit it seems a strange coincidence that the man who most vehemently argued against what we're doing should disappear like that."

"You suspect foul play?" Aeris continued.

"I... I don't know," Dalliana replied. "There are so few of us left. Every Cetra life is precious. To not harm one another is one of our most important tenets. I don't think Yonsin would ever hurt another Cetra..."

Aeris looked at her for a moment. It was obvious from the expression on Dalliana's face she had more to say than that.

"But?" Aeris cajoled.

Dalliana looked around for a moment, as if worried someone might be within earshot, even though they were in the room alone and the door was closed.

"But I wouldn't put it past Grem," she said softly. "I don't trust him. I don't trust him at all."

Aeris couldn't blame her. She had a feeling that if it was up to Grem, she'd be dead already.

"How did Grem end up having such a say in things?" she asked.

"He and Yonsin have been friends since childhood," Dalliana replied. "They've always stuck up for one another. Don't really know what they see in each other, they're both so different but there it is. Grem is Yonsin's biggest supporter. Grem might not have much of a personality but Yonsin does. He can be quite charismatic when he has to be, and I have to admit he gives a good argument. They convinced most of the others to go along with them, in spite of our misgivings."

Aeris nodded, nibbling on her food. She wasn't really very hungry. She was too nervous.

"I see," she said.

They talked for quite some time. Dalliana asked a lot of questions about what it was like living among the humans. Although most of the Cetra had gone out among them at various times in their lives, Dalliana had only had incidental contact with them, and didn't really know much about them. She also told Aeris about the other Cetra and what it was like living among them, things Aeris had always wanted to know and had never had the opportunity to find out. Ellengio was the only other Cetra she had known but she had never really had a chance to sit down with him and have a heart to heart talk. All in all it was quite pleasant, which made Aeris just feel more guilty concerning what she was about to attempt. She would have liked to have learned a lot more, but, unfortunately, she didn't have time.

Having finished all she was going to eat she stood up, picking up the plate but fumbling it suddenly and dropping it onto the floor.

"Jeez, I am so clumsy," she apologized, bending down. "I slipped the other day and now this. I guess I'm just nervous."

As she had hoped, Dalliana came over to her and stooped down as well to give her a hand picking up the remains of her meal.

"That's all right," the woman said pleasantly. "It's no problem at all. We'll get this all cleaned up in no time."

As she spoke Aeris half rose and took the mug from the table. She hesitated a moment, looking at the woman in front of her who hadn't noticed her movement. Dalliana had been kind to her, and she thought that under different circumstances they could have become friends. The woman hadn't hurt her, had been sympathetic in fact. She might need a friend like that.

She wished it was Grem's head that hovered in front of her now. She wouldn't have any qualms about cracking the mug against his skull. Still, she had no choice. She may not get a chance like this again. She didn't think Dalliana was going to convince anyone to let her go, or to stop their little project. What they were doing was wrong and had to be stopped at all costs. If it was up to Aeris to provide a little chaos, then that's what she would have to do.

With that, she brought the mug down on the other woman's head.

Dalliana made a little grunting sound, swayed for just a moment, then collapsed to the floor, fortunately without looking up. Aeris hadn't wanted to see the look in her eyes. She felt bad enough for doing this as it was.

Dropping the mug Aeris pulled herself to her feet. She hurried over to the dresser, getting down on her knees to grab the materia orb she had hidden on the floor underneath it. She stood up again. Walking quickly over to the door she opened it a crack. Looking out she could see no one in the corridor beyond.

Clutching the materia in her hand she ran out into the hallway. She had a feeling Grem wouldn't be far away but as she ran down the corridor and into the next room the place seemed deserted.

He spotted her as soon as she exited the building. There was just no place to hide. The building had no windows and she didn't have time to hunt around for another exit. She didn't know how long Dalliana would be out and even though the woman was sympathetic, Aeris was pretty certain she'd raise the alarm once she regained consciousness. Perhaps she could even have been able to give them the slip and find a way out of the city without being recaptured, but what would happen then? That would do nothing to thwart their plan. She didn't know if she could find Cloud again. She didn't know if

he was even alive. She couldn't get off the island, she couldn't alert her friends. She would be trapped and it would only be a matter of time before they found her again.

No, she had to do something to stop them now, while she had the chance. They would be assuming she was trying to get away, trying to escape. She could use that to her advantage.

Grem was standing at the entrance to the next building down the street, talking with another Cetra. Aeris didn't try to hide. Her plan depended on speed and surprise, not stealth. She came through the door at a run, the materia clutched tightly in her hand. From what he had done when she had first been captured she knew Grem could take her down if he got close enough. She wasn't going to let that happen.

His eyes turned toward her as soon as she came out the door. For a moment he didn't react. In spite of his wariness he still hadn't expected this. Fortunately her destination was in the other direction. She ran down the street, trying to put as much distance between them as she could.

It didn't take long for Grem to recover. He was after her a moment later. She didn't have any illusions about being able to outrun him. She had put some distance between them, enough for her to be out of range of his psychic attack, (or so she hoped) but it wouldn't last long. Already he was beginning to catch up.

Fortunately her destination wasn't that far away. The mako reactor building was just down the road from her prison. She made a beeline for it. She heard shouting behind her but she ignored it. She didn't see anyone in front of her, but she didn't know if anyone was in the reactor building, or if they would try to stop her. She clutched the materia more tightly in her hand. If they did try to stop her, she wouldn't take it lying down.

She reached the door to the building, flinging it open and rushing inside. She saw the face of a surprised Cetra, someone she had never seen before, but then she was past him, running down the corridor as fast as she could. She didn't know how much time she had but she knew she didn't have much, perhaps only seconds. Grem wasn't that far behind her and would rapidly catch up.

She reached the room where the reactor was, the same room she had been in when Yonsin had showed her around. She stopped there, panting, trying to catch her breath. She looked behind her, down the hallway through the still open door, and saw both Grem and the Cetra she had passed when she came in charging down the corridor toward her.

She lifted the materia in front of her and concentrated.

She heard another shout from Grem, but it was too late. A moment later, with a thunderclap-like roar, a streak of lightning tore through the heart of the reactor. Aeris hadn't been sure how powerful this materia was. She hadn't known what kind of damage it would do, she had only hoped it was strong enough to make repair of the reactor difficult, to slow them down as much as possible. She had to admit, from the sparks that were shooting up into the air and the flames that were burning in the equipment, the effect seemed to be exceeding her expectations.

She lowered her arms, then turned to see Grem standing just a few feet away, staring at the reactor and the damage she had done. A moment later he turned to look at her, and the expression of sheer hatred on his face was like nothing she had seen before.

She lifted her materia again, but even as she did her concentration was violently interrupted by his psychic assault. She lifted her hands to her head, falling to her knees as pain rippled through her mind. It was as if Grem had taken a white hot branding iron and shoved it deep into her brain. This was no knock out punch. Not this time. He wasn't holding anything back. This was a full fledged assault meant to do only one thing, to mercilessly kill her. She tried to fight, tried to hold off the assault, but she had no weapons. Her materia slipped uselessly from her hands. With the pain tearing through her head she couldn't concentrate long enough to use it. She collapsed to the ground, no longer even aware of what her body was doing, agony her only reality. She had never felt pain like this before.

She screamed.

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"This reminds me of that climb up through the wreckage of Sector Seven to get to Shinra headquarters. Remember?"

Cloud sat down on a large piece of... well, he wasn't sure what it was. It had a smooth finish but he couldn't tell if it was metal or stone or some kind of plastic. He reached down and gave Tifa a hand, hauling her up beside him through the debris. He could see Reeve and the Cetra Sage below, struggling just as much as he had to get up here.

"Yeah," Tifa said, stopping to catch her breath. "And the funny thing is, we were rescuing Aeris then too."

"Yeah, I guess we were," he agreed.

Tifa stared above them.

"I think we're almost at the top," she commented.

"Good," Cloud replied. "At first I thought this pile of junk would be inadequate to keep monsters out but maybe it is. I certainly wouldn't climb up here without a good reason!"

Tifa nodded without replying but she could see his point. It had been a hard climb. She looked down again as Reeve and Dannin reached them.

"If nothing else, we're getting a good workout," Reeve observed.

"Yeah," Cloud agreed, getting to his feet. "Let's just hope we're not too exhausted by all this climbing to fight when we get over the top."

They continued on their way and it turned out Tifa was right, they didn't have much farther to go to reach the top. Only a short but difficult climb got them to the apex, where they found themselves looking down once more on the city, a city that looked pretty much the same except here the streets were clean instead of filled with debris. Cloud motioned for the others to duck down when he saw two people in the street as well, not very close, but not that far off either.

"So what's the plan now?" Reeve questioned.

"I'll try to draw their attention while the rest of you look for Aeris," Cloud said simply.

"How many of them do you think there are?" Reeve asked.

"I have no idea," Cloud said.

"How will we find you again?" Reeve inquired.

"I don't know," Cloud replied.

"Are we going to go back out the way we came in?" Reeve questioned.

"Beats me," Cloud answered.

Reeve looked at him for a moment.

"Well, this seems exceptionally well thought out," Reeve observed.

"In other words, no different from any of my other plans," Cloud replied with a grin.

"Just remember you have the plague," Tifa spoke up. "If you come into contact with any of the Cetra, you could kill them."

"If I come into contact with any of the Cetra, the plague may be the least of their worries," Cloud replied, fingering his sword.

"We're not here to slaughter them, just to get Aeris back," Tifa said.

"You say that after what they've done to Zangan?" Cloud responded. "To the other human children?"

Tifa hesitated a moment.

"I'm just saying be careful and that you shouldn't kill indiscriminately. You don't know how many of them are actually involved in all this. Some of them could be innocent."

"Maybe," Cloud said slowly. "Don't worry, this isn't a vengeance thing. We're here to get Aeris and that's it. I'm not going to slaughter them. I'm not going to turn into Sephiroth, if that's what you're worried about."

Tifa just looked at him for a moment. That hadn't actually occurred to her, but his mentioning it just made her more determined to see nothing like that happened. Still, his words reassured her.

"All right then, I guess you better..."

She was interrupted by the sound of an explosion. All their heads turned. It hadn't sounded too far away, and for a second Cloud thought they might have been discovered somehow, but looking down the street he saw they had not drawn any attention. The two people he had seen were looking off in the other direction, the direction the sound had come from. After a moment they ran off in that direction.

"What the hell was that?" Reeve questioned.

"I don't know," Cloud said slowly, staring off in the distance. At first he saw nothing, but then spotted a billowing cloud of black smoke rising from one of the buildings.

"Looks like a diversion has been conveniently provided for us," he stated. "C'mon!"

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Aeris wasn't quite sure if she ever lost consciousness. It was hard for her to concentrate on anything besides the pain. All she knew was that the agony seemed to last forever, and yet, suddenly, it was gone.

It was gone and, much to her surprise, she was still alive.

She found herself on her side on the ground. She lifted her head, blinking, the echo of the pain still reverberating through her mind, to see Grem and Yonsin standing a few feet away. Yonsin was looking from the reactor to Grem to her with a stunned expression on his face. She must have missed some of the conversation.

"She used a lightning materia on the reactor," Grem was saying. "She deliberately and maliciously sabotaged the project. Now let me finish what I started!"

Yonsin just stood there for a moment. He looked at Aeris.

"It's true? You did this?" he questioned.

Aeris didn't see much point in denying it. She nodded.

"Why?" Yonsin asked. "How?" He still seemed shocked, unable to comprehend what was happening, what she had done.

"She stole a lightning materia from somewhere," Grem spat out. "She didn't even try to get away, just came right here to try to destroy the reactor. She's ruined the project. Let me finish her off!"

Yonsin didn't reply, just stared at them, then at the other Cetra who was there, obviously the man who was in charge of the reactor, for he stood nearby in front of a control panel, frantically pressing buttons and pulling switches, but he did take the time to glance over at them every once in a while, especially at Grem's last words. Aeris wasn't sure if he looked that way because of what had happened with the reactor or because of Grem's open intentions of killing a Cetra or both.

"How badly is the reactor damaged?" Yonsin questioned.

The man did not reply for a moment, his hands running quickly over the controls in front of him.

"It's damaged the cooling system and I can't compensate," the man said. "I've been trying to shut it down but that isn't working either. Nothing seems to be working. The core is heating without any checks. It's going to go critical in about fifteen, twenty minutes."

"Critical?" Yonsin repeated.

"Yes, critical!" the man exclaimed. "If I can't shut it down the reactor is going to explode, and if that happens, it'll take the whole island with it!"

They all just stood there for a moment. Aeris had hoped to put the reactor out of business for a few days, a week perhaps. Long enough for the others to find out what was going on here. She had hardly expected this. The whole island was going to be destroyed?

"And there's no way you can stop it?" Yonsin questioned, the urgency evident in his voice.

"I'm trying!" the man replied. His hands flew over the controls some more. "I don't...no, I can't regain control. I can't access the damaged systems. There's no time to work with it. We have to get out of here. Now!"

No one replied. No one moved. Even to Aeris, it seemed hard to believe that her simple attack had caused so much damage.

Grem suddenly spun around and stared at her.

"It's all *her* fault!" he accused.

Aeris had nothing to say to that. She glanced over at her materia, lying on the floor. She didn't think she could reach it before Grem attacked her again, if that's what he had planned, not that she had any doubt that was indeed his intentions. It appeared the only reason she was still alive at all was because of the timely arrival of Yonsin. After what she had done to his pet project, however, she had a feeling he wasn't going to be very sympathetic to her plight.

Yonsin, for his part, still seemed to be having difficulty taking it all in. He didn't say anything for quite some time, just stared at the reactor as if that could somehow make it not have happened, make it all better, but of course, that wasn't going to happen. Finally he looked at the others.

"We have to leave," he said, softly, calmly, simply. Having finally accepted the situation, he chose the only reasonable route open to them.

"But what about her?" Grem questioned, stabbing a finger at Aeris.

Yonsin turned to look at her. She couldn't really read his expression. He only hesitated a moment.

"Leave her," he pronounced.

"But we can't just leave her here," the other man with them protested. "She'll die. She's a Cetra."

"She's only half Cetra," Grem snapped. "That makes her less than Cetra, less than human."

"She's still Cetra!" the other man insisted. "We don't kill our own!"

"We're not killing her," Yonsin interjected. "We're just leaving her. The laws say not to kill a Cetra, they don't say anything about leaving one to her fate. She's responsible for what happens here. If the reactor blows up it's her fault. It's got nothing to do with us."

The third man didn't seem completely convinced, but he did not protest.

"C'mon, let's go," Yonsin said.

And that was it. They turned and just walked away, though Grem looked back at Aeris with what she thought was a smug expression. It didn't matter to her, she didn't really care what Grem thought. A moment later she was alone. She coughed, and realized the room was starting to fill with smoke. She looked at the controls the man had been working with. She couldn't make heads or tails of them. If he said there was nothing to be done, she certainly wouldn't be able to do anything. Maybe if Cid were here, he'd be able to figure something out.

She calmly turned and walked out of the building. Cid wasn't here, and since he probably wouldn't be able to do anything either, that was probably a good thing. She could see no one out on the street. The place appeared to be deserted. It might indeed be by now, if the Cetra had already taken off in their airship. She looked up, wondering if she would get a glance at it, but all she saw above her head was darkness.

Now that she was out in the street she realized she had little else to do. She didn't know where the other Cetra had gone, didn't know where their airship was located, not that she could get on it anyway. She wouldn't be able to get out that way, and there was no other way. She thought about trying to find Cloud, but she had no idea where he was either.

She felt a pang of regret, thinking about Cloud. He was still trapped here on the island too, and he had no idea what was about to happen. She hadn't meant to make the reactor blow up, had only meant to damage it, to slow them down, not to take out the whole island. She was more than willing to give her own life to stop their project, but she didn't want Cloud to die as well.

Then again, for all she knew, he could already be dead, having succumbed to his ailment after she left him, left him to find help.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, to no one in particular.

"Aeris!"

Her head jerked up. She turned and could hardly believe her eyes when she saw Cloud running toward her, almost as if her thinking about him had somehow magically conjured him up. Conjured up him, and others as well, for she saw he was not alone. Tifa and Reeve were with him, as well as a man she had never seen before.

"Cloud," she said softly. In spite of everything she smiled. At least she would get to see her friends, one last time before the end.. but then again, if Tifa and Reeve were here...

"We have to leave!" she said, suddenly running toward them.

Cloud suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"Wait!" he exclaimed.

And she did, just the tone of his voice halting her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have the Cetra plague," Cloud called out. "That's why I was sick. I won't die from it but I'm a carrier. I can give it to you if you come near me. It could kill you."

Aeris stood there for a moment, her mouth opening slightly, but nothing coming out. So that was it, that was why he was sick, why her healing powers hadn't helped. She didn't have time, however, to think of all the implications right now.

"The mako reactor is going to explode!" Aeris exclaimed, pointing behind her. "It's going to destroy the entire island. We have to get out of here!"

"We have a helicopter!" Tifa spoke up after a moment.

"How much time do we have?" Cloud questioned.

"I'm not sure," Aeris replied. "Not much."

"I've got a feeling we'll never make it back in time," Cloud said slowly.

"Maybe we can," the Cetra sage spoke up. "If the Cetra have fled, we don't have to go back the way we came. The entrance the Cetra use is nearby, and we're not that far from your flying machine going that way. We may have time."

"Well then, let's get out of here!" Cloud agreed.

There was no time to waste. With the Cetra Sage leading them they ran through the city until they reached a winding flight of stairs, very similar to the one in Ifalna. They quickly ran up them, the Cetra Sage in the lead, followed by Cloud, who made sure he stayed well ahead of Aeris. He knew he had the plague, and he knew she could catch it from him, but little else. He just didn't know enough about it, and he wasn't sure if anyone did. He assumed it was spread by contact, so as long as he didn't touch her she would be okay. Or so he hoped. It might even take prolonged contact for her to actually get it but could he really take that chance? He didn't think so. They just didn't know enough. The only safe thing to do was to stay as far away from her as he could.

The entrance to the cavern was right at the top of the stairs. Down in the caverns there was no way to tell what the weather was like, so they were surprised to hear the howling of the wind and see flashes of light and the crack of thunder as they approached the exit. They stepped out of the cave and into a downpour.

There was nothing they could do. They didn't have time to wait for it to stop. Without hesitating they plunged out into the storm.

They were on the side of the mountain, the peak far above their heads. Cloud looked down and he could see the beach, a dark line of sand, even through the rain. He looked around but all he saw otherwise was jungle. He didn't know where they were, how close they were to the Cetra Sage's cave or the helicopter. He didn't recognize anything, but Dannin led them on unhesitant, running through the trees and over obstacles with the legs of a much younger man.

They made their way downward, angling toward the beach. Lightning flashed, and the sound of thunder rang in their ears. The rain was coming down in buckets, drenching them. Cloud wondered how long this had been going on.

Running along the beach was harder, the sand slowing them down, but, fortunately, they didn't have far to go. Once they reached the helicopter Reeve jumped right in, quickly sitting down in the pilot's seat and starting to power the copter up. Tifa stepped in as well, turning to wait for the others. Cloud was right behind her, but he did not enter, instead stopped and turned to look at Aeris. The helicopter was small, the crew spaced limited. They would be in close proximity.

"Cloud..." Tifa began, then stopped, realizing what he was thinking. She looked at Aeris too.

"We don't have a choice," Tifa continued after a moment. "We have to get off the island. No one can stay here and there's no other way to leave."

"That's not exactly true," the Cetra Sage spoke up.

He turned, looking up the jungle covered slope. Then he brought his fingers to his lips and whistled. It was a shrill piercing whistle, much louder than Cloud would have expected. That's right, Cloud remembered, the Gold Chocobo. He looked up the slope too. The Cetra's Sages cave was far up there, somewhere. Though the whistle was loud, it seemed unlikely the sound would reach that far, especially in a raging storm.

For long moments they stood there, unmoving. The helicopter blades whirled beside them, at full speed now. The helicopter was ready to take off. The island could go up any minute now. They didn't have time to delay.

Then it was there. The gold chocobo emerged from the trees, trotting quickly over to the Cetra Sage.

"I'll go on the Chocobo," Cloud volunteered.

"Cloud..." Tifa began. She said nothing more, even as he turned to look at her. She didn't like the idea of them being separated. She glanced over at the waves, crashing on the shore, the wind whipping them up into a frenzy. It wasn't safe to ride even a gold chocobo through that. It would be dangerous and she so didn't want him to do it but... but what other alternative did they have? Aeris taking the chocobo was the only other choice and it wasn't any better. Instead of putting her husband in danger it would be her best friend.

"I'll go with you," she said.

Cloud shook his head.

"It's too dangerous."

"So, dangerous for me but not for you?" she questioned.

"There's no need to endanger both of us," Cloud said impatiently. As much as she didn't want him to go on the chocobo, he didn't want her to go either, and they didn't have time to argue about it.

"I don't want to leave you," Tifa said.

"I know that," Cloud said slowly. "I don't want to leave you either but there's no sense in risking both of us."

"The helicopters a risk too," Tifa replied. "We don't even have enough fuel to get back."

"Tifa, please," Cloud said.

"The young man is right," the Cetra Sage interjected. "It will be difficult enough for the chocobo with one person on it. Two would be a difficult burden to bear in such weather."

Tifa didn't reply. It made sense. It all made sense, but she was loath to admit it.

Reeve turned to look at them from inside the cockpit.

"Can we get a move on here?" he questioned.

"Tifa..." Cloud began.

"All right," Tifa said, her shoulders slumping. They were right and she knew it. "Just please, be careful."

"I will," Cloud replied, relieved that she wasn't going to give him a hard time about this.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too," Cloud replied. He stepped forward and kissed her. "Now get the hell out of here!"