

CHAPTER XX: LEAP OF FAITH

"Can I help you?"

"I'd like to buy a gun."

Elena nodded, looking at the woman standing in front of her. She looked to be at least seventy years old.

"Hubert, that's my husband, told me to get this one," the woman continued, sliding a piece of paper in front of her.

Elena looked down at the paper. It was an advertisement from her store. One of the guns on it had been circled.

"He said it's on sale," the woman added, nodding her head.

Elena pointed to the picture.

"Well, yes it is," she said, "but Ma'am, that's the Valentine Special. It's a fifty caliber pistol. Don't you think you'd be better off with something a little smaller?"

"My husband, Hubert, told me to get *that* one."

"I realize that, but it... it's really too big for you ma'am. We have some very nice guns here that are much more in line with what you'd be needing."

"Now don't give me no lip, young lady," the woman said, hands firmly on hips. "My husband, Hubert, was in the war. He told me he had a gun just like that and it saved his life he doesn't know how many times. He told me that's the one I should get and he should know! Besides, it's on *sale*."

Elena just stared at the frail woman in front of her. She looked to be about eighty pounds.

"Ma'am, this isn't a gun, it's a cannon. If you fire this you're more likely to kill yourself than anyone else," she tried one more time.

"I *told* you, my husband..."

"Yes, Hubert, I know," Elena sighed, surrendering. "Very well, I'll box it up for you. That'll be three hundred and twenty three gil."

The woman opened her small purse and gave the gil to Elena, who packaged up the gun and handed it to the woman, not even sure if she could lift it, much less fire it. The woman managed it, then strolled out the door, appearing quite content with herself.

Elena had to shake her head. She just hoped she wasn't anywhere nearby if that woman actually tried to fire that thing. Well, she had done what she could to talk the woman out of it.

The door to the shop opened again, the little bell attached to it ringing. Elena looked up, then frowned as she saw Shera standing in the entrance way.

She stood there as the woman walked over to her.

"Hi Elena," she said slowly.

"Hi Shera. What are you doing here?"

She stopped in front of the counter. She didn't reply for a moment. The look on her face, the way her lips were pinched together, the way her eyes looked so serious, instantly made Elena think something was wrong.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Its... its Reno," Shera said. "He's been hurt."

"Hurt? Badly?"

Shera nodded.

"Badly enough to.. die?"

"We don't know yet," Shera replied. "He's in the hospital in Rocket Town. They're doing all they can for him."

Elena opened her mouth, but nothing came out. She felt her throat going dry.

"It was... Vincent?"

Shera nodded again.

Elena turned away.

"I'm sorry," Shera said.

Elena just looked at the ground, saying nothing. This was just the kind of news she had been dreading, had been hoping to never hear. She felt her shoulders shudder.

"Where are the others?" Elena questioned.

"Rude, Red and Lai Li came with me. They're down at the airport," Shera replied. "Yuffie stayed in Rocket Town. She didn't want to leave Reno."

"Yuffie stayed in Rocket Town?" Elena repeated, looking up. That was a surprise, but it made her feel good in a way, as well. She knew there was something going on between them.

"Yeah," Shera responded, but there really wasn't time for that. "Elena?"

The young blonde just looked at her.

"That's not all," Shera continued.

Elena waited, not sure that she wanted to hear anymore.

Again Shera hesitated, wondering how she had gotten roped into this. She had thought her part in this was done once she had handed the Bronco over to the others. What a surprise it had been when they had showed up at her door with this plan.

"Red and Lai Li have reworked Lucrecia's cure. They think that Vincent needs one massive dose to kill all the chadara cells at once. They think that's the only way to save him. The problem is, Vincent won't let anyone get close enough to administer it. That's how Reno got hurt in the first place."

Elena nervously rubbed her hands together, waiting to see what this had to do with her.

"Yuffie tried the first time but she couldn't get close enough to him. That's how Reno got hurt. We still think there's a little bit of Vincent in there, but he won't let us get close. He won't let anyone get close. We think... we think that only someone he really cares about would have a chance..."

Shera stopped as Elena's mouth slowly opened. By now it was obvious what Shera wanted.

"We think it's the only way to save him," Shera slowly added.

And then they just stood there, looking at each other.

Finally, much to Shera's surprise, Elena shook her head.

"No, no, I'm not going to do that."

"How can you say that?" Shera replied. "You love him, don't you?"

"I loved Vincent! He's not Vincent anymore."

"Yes he is! He is Vincent. I know he's in there somewhere, and so do you! C'mon Elena, you're his only chance!"

Elena just shook her head.

"No, no, I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm *afraid*!" Elena exclaimed. "He killed Lucrecia! Lucrecia, the woman he loved, would have done anything for. The woman that tormented him for all those years with his love for her. If he killed her, what chance... what chance would I have?"

Elena fell silent, her voice choking off.

For a moment Shera didn't know what to say. So that was it. She could see it now. Elena was afraid, not afraid of dying, but afraid that Vincent didn't love her, didn't love her more than his old flame.

"Loved," Shera finally said.

"Huh?"

"You said loved. Past tense. Vincent doesn't love Lucrecia anymore, hasn't for a long time, not since you came into his life."

Elena just stood there, shaking her head. She felt tears beginning to form in her eyes.

"No, he doesn't love me anymore than he loves her," she said. "He wouldn't listen to me."

"Don't be ridiculous," Shera replied. "Of course he loves you. Just because he didn't listen, you think that means he doesn't love you? Do you know how many times Cid hasn't listened to me? If I used that as a criteria, I'd think he hated me more than anyone in the world!"

Shera offered a crooked smile, but Elena was too upset for her attempt at lightening the mood to have any effect.

Shera sighed. They had had a feeling there was something wrong, had a feeling Elena would be reluctant to do this. The fact that she had left to come back to Junon had left that impression. That's why the others had recruited Shera for this job. None of them were very close to Elena. They didn't think they had much chance to convince her. Shera really didn't know Elena all that well either, but she could understand where they were coming from. She suspected Reno would have been the best choice for this job, followed by Tifa or maybe Aeris, but none of them were available. Rude knew her best out of those left, but the man was seriously lacking in conversational skills.

So it had fallen on her. They had come to drag her away from her daughter once again. Right now, she wasn't sure she was up to the task.

"Vincent went on the rampage through Rocket Town," she continued. "Fortunately no one was killed, and the only one hurt was Reno. It could have been a lot worse though. The people in Rocket Town are up in arms about it. They want him stopped, and they want him stopped now, and if we don't do it they'll take matters into their own hands. They've already formed a group to stop him if he comes in again. They're all armed, and I don't think they'll hesitate to shoot if they see him again, shoot to kill. This could be his only chance, Elena."

Elena felt a hollowness forming in the pit of her stomach. It was all so unfair. She could understand what Vincent was trying to do, but she couldn't get past the fact that he had gone in spite of her pleading with him not to. She couldn't help but feel that it did mean something, that it meant that he didn't trust her, didn't really love her. And yet...

Yet she didn't want him to die. She certainly didn't want that. The very thought of it made it feel like her heart was being torn out. She didn't know if she could live without him, and yet she wanted him to feel the same way. She wanted him to love her as much as she loved him and she just didn't know if that was true.

But she would never find that out if he was killed, now would she?

And there was one other thing that Shera was right about. She had heard Cid and Shera disagree about plenty of things. True, maybe none of them had been as important as the decision Vincent had made, but they were disagreements just the same, and yet their marriage still seemed as strong as it had ever been.

She lowered her head, looking at the ground, feeling her conviction slipping away, and she wasn't sure if that made her happy or sad.

"All right," she gave in. "All right. I'll help."

~*~

Aeris sat down in the co-pilot's seat next to Reeve. She looked out the window but all she could see was rain washing against the windshield. All else was black, except with the occasional burst of lightning, which gave her a view of the whitecaps the wind was blowing on the angry sea below. The whitecaps weren't the only thing being tossed by the wind, the helicopter was suffering the same fate. Every once in a while the aircraft would rise suddenly, lifted by the wind, or worse, drop precipitously. Each time that happened Aeris would grab hold of the seat so tightly her knuckles would turn white. She looked over at Reeve, who was staring at the green glow of the instruments, or occasionally out into the darkness in front of them, his face tense. He was concentrating so hard, she didn't know if she should disturb him.

She looked down at the instruments in front of her, wishing she could help somehow, but she had no idea how to fly a helicopter, nor did Tifa or, she suspected, the Cetra Sage. Reeve was on his own here.

"Is it true?" she finally broke the silence, speaking softly, so only Reeve could hear.

For a moment he didn't reply.

"Is what true?" he asked without looking at her.

"That the helicopter doesn't have enough fuel to reach land?"

Again he was silent, then he nodded.

Aeris clasped her hands in her lap and rubbed them nervously. She glanced behind her. Tifa was in the seat across from her, staring out the window, had been since they had taken off. Aeris knew what she was looking for, some sign of Cloud below them. She glanced out her own window once again. It was impossible to see anything down there.

She got up and made her way over to Tifa, holding on to anything that was available. It wasn't easy to stand with the helicopter being tossed the way it was. She reached Tifa and put a hand on her shoulder. Tifa turned to look at her.

"I'm sure he's okay," Aeris said.

Tifa didn't reply, just nodded her head slowly. It was obvious that Aeris' words weren't much reassurance to her.

They were silent for a moment, then Aeris spoke again.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?" Tifa questioned.

"I can't help but think this is all my fault," Aeris replied.

Tifa lowered her head for a moment, then she looked up again and forced a smile onto her face, even though it was the last thing she felt like doing. She reached up and patted Aeris hand on her shoulder.

"It's not your fault," she said. "It's not your fault some maniac Cetra are trying to wipe out the human race, or that part of their plan was to kidnap you. There's nothing you could have done to stop it. In fact, you tried your best to do just that. I don't blame you for anything, Aeris."

Aeris stood there for a moment, then nodded. It was funny, she had come over here to try to reassure Tifa, and ended up being reassured herself. She wasn't sure if either attempt at reassurance really helped much, however.

"Aeris, while you're up, can you see if there are any life jackets back there somewhere?" Reeve questioned from up from. "And there's probably some kind of emergency kit as well."

"Yes, of course," Aeris replied. She walked farther into the back ,where there were a number of storage compartments, again having a hard time staying on her feet, and searched around for a few minutes.

"I found an emergency kit," she said eventually. "But there seem to be only two life jackets."

For a long time Reeve didn't reply. She looked forward and saw him concentrating on the instruments. She was about to repeat her statement when he spoke again.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid so," she replied.

Again it took him some time to reply.

"Put one on and give the other to Tifa."

Aeris hesitated a moment, looking at the bright orange flotation devices in her hands. For some reason she couldn't get her mind to believe they would actually have to use them. She couldn't imagine them surviving out there in the ocean, with no helicopter to protect them.

After a moment she handed one of the life jackets to Tifa.

Tifa looked at the life jacket, then at the Cetra Sage.

"Maybe it would be better if you wear this," she said, holding it out. "I'm young and in good shape. No offense, but I'm probably a better swimmer than you."

The Cetra Sage held up his hand.

"No, no, my dear. You're young, as you said. You have a family, your whole life ahead of you. I've been on this Planet for a long time now, longer than I should, perhaps. It would be better for us all if you keep it."

Tifa hesitated a moment, then lowered her hand. She lifted the jacket again and fitted it around herself. Aeris put hers on as well, just as reluctantly, looking up at Reeve once again. She was tempted to suggest he use it, but she had a feeling that for once, that would be an argument she could not win.

The wind buffeted the aircraft again, almost knocking Aeris over once more. Reeve looked back at her.

"C'mon and get back in your seat before you get hurt," he said.

Aeris carefully made her way back to the front and sat down heavily. She looked at Reeve once again. If anything he looked even more grim than before. He glanced over at her for a moment.

"We're going to have to ditch soon," he said.

"Is that... is that really necessary," she replied. It seemed silly to get out of the helicopter while it still had any fuel at all. "Can't we just keep going? Until we run out of fuel completely, I mean."

"If we run out of fuel we'll crash," Reeve said. "If we ditch before hand at least we'll have some control over where we end up."

Aeris wasn't sure there was much of a distinction. They were going to end up in the water, regardless.

"You haven't been able to get in touch with anyone?" she asked. She had heard Reeve on the radio a number of times since they had taken off.

Reeve shook his head.

"I thought I heard something earlier, but I wasn't sure, and I never heard it again," he replied. "Something was interfering with communications when we came here. I don't know if the Cetra were doing it or it was some kind of natural phenomena, but we couldn't get through when we got close to Round Island. I think we're far enough out now to be past that, but with the storm, I can't say for sure."

He wasn't even sure if it would help. The Slipstream was damaged. It couldn't fly, or at least, it couldn't when Reeve had last talked to Cid. That had been a couple of days ago so it's possible the Captain might have gotten the ship to fly again by this time. If he didn't, then they had to hope Shera was there with the Tiny Bronco or they'd be dead.

He looked out the window at the blackness below them.

They might already be dead. Even if the Slipstream was airworthy, it wouldn't do a bit of good if they couldn't get in touch with Cid to tell him where they were. He had given their last position when he had thought he might have heard a reply, but he didn't know if anyone had heard him. As far as he knew, his friends had no clue they were out here in the middle of this about to ditch into the ocean in the middle of a storm. If rescue wasn't on the way, their chances of survival were slim indeed.

He glanced at the fuel gauge. It was dangerously close to empty.

He looked outside, then glanced back at the others. He was as reluctant as Aeris to leave the safety of the helicopter, but he knew he couldn't delay much longer. If they ran out of fuel he would lose control, and their chances of exiting the aircraft safely would decrease dramatically.

Not that leaving safely was all that easy even now. He slowed down, bringing the bird to a hover, as best he could in the wind. He could barely see the surface of the ocean below him in the darkness. The waves were rolling by below, their peaks coming dangerously close to the aircraft as he got down as low as he could.

He looked behind him again.

"Tifa, you and the Cetra Sage, get ready to go."

Tifa unbuckled herself and got to her feet, having as much trouble standing erect as Aeris had had. She made her way over to the door on the side of the craft and pulled it open. Immediately she was pelted by rain and the sound of the wind howled through the helicopter.

She looked down, shading her eyes to prevent the rain from blowing in them. She could barely see the water below her.

"Can you get any lower?" she yelled. It was the only way to be heard above the storm.

"This is the best I can do," Reeve replied. He didn't dare get any lower for fear of being swamped by a large wave. He was still a good ten feet above the wave tops, maybe twenty. The waves themselves looked huge, some of them maybe another fifteen, twenty feet high. If Tifa jumped in a trough, she could fall almost forty feet before hitting the water, high enough to cause serious damage, maybe even kill her.

"Try to time your jump so you land when the top of the wave is right below us," he shouted.

Tifa looked down at the raging sea below her. The water looked like a cauldron at full boil. She didn't want to jump at all. It seemed like madness to leave the safety of the helicopter for that.

"I'll try," she said hesitantly.

The Cetra Sage stood right beside her. She reached out and took his hand. He didn't have a life jacket, and she didn't think he'd be able to stay afloat very long without one. They had to stay together.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

He nodded.

Tifa looked down again, staring below them, trying to time the waves as they rushed by underneath. A few times she almost went, but each time she hesitated until it was too late.

"Tifa, we don't have all day!" she heard Reeve shout.

She nodded, though he wasn't looking at her. She looked down again, her jaw set. No more hesitation this time. They didn't have time for that. She waited until a coming wave was nearly right below them, then forced her reluctant feet to step forward.

"They're gone," Aeris called out as soon as she saw Tifa and the Cetra Sage disappear out the doorway. She turned and plastered her face against her window, trying to catch some sign of her friend below, some sign they had made it to the water safely, but she could see nothing.

"Now it's your turn Aeris."

She turned to look back at Reeve.

"I'm not going without you!" she exclaimed.

"I'll be right behind you," he replied. "The helicopter has no autopilot. If I leave the controls it's going to go down. It's better if you're not on board when that happens. There's no sense in risking both our lives."

"You don't even have a life jacket," she pointed out.

"I'll manage," he replied.

"No you won't. I won't let you. I'm not leaving you!"

"Aeris, be reasonable! It doesn't make sense to risk..."

But she wasn't looking at him. Had turned away to stare out the window, and with that any words he had to say died in his throat. He had seen the look on her face before she turned away, had seen it before, and he knew that wild horses would not be able to budge Aeris from that seat unless he went with her.

A cracking voice over the radio interrupted their impasse.

Aeris turned around at that, the both of them staring at the communications device.

"Was that Cait Sith?" Aeris exclaimed.

"I don't know," Reeve replied. "I think so."

He fiddled with the dials in front of him.

"Cait! Cait, is that you? Come in!"

Mostly static, but then Aeris heard the voice again. It was definitely Cait!

"Where...the storm...Cid is...Slipstream."

Reeve continued to move the dials, trying to get a better signal, but it didn't seem to be helping any. At the same time he was talking into his microphone, explaining their situation and giving the coordinates. Occasionally Aeris heard Cait speak again, but each time, she could only make out a few words.

Suddenly red lights starting flashing on the control panel in front of them and Aeris heard a high pitched beeping sound.

"What's that? What's that mean?" she said, knowing that whatever it was, it could not be good.

"That's the low fuel alarm!" Reeve stated. "It means we're out of time!"

He reached up and with a single push unlocked his harness. Aeris had never put hers back on after she sat down. He reached out and grabbed hold of her hand.

"We have to go! Now!"

He stood up, pulling her up with him, and she did not resist. As soon as his feet left the pedals, the aircraft began to tilt forward, angling down toward the sea below them.

They scrambled for the open door. By the time they reached it the helicopter was almost vertical and they had to pull themselves up what had once been the floor but was now a wall before suddenly falling free.

Reeve looked down fearfully as they fell. Or tried to. He was disoriented from the tilting of the aircraft and wasn't really sure which way was which, although if he had thought about it, down would be the direction they were plummeting in. They hadn't looked before jumping. They hadn't been able to time the waves. He braced himself for a strong impact.

For naught, as it turned out, for they were in the air for barely a moment before they struck the water. The aircraft had lost altitude and hit the waves itself barely a moment after they had scrambled out. They only fell a few feet before finding themselves sinking into the sea.

The first thing Aeris noticed when they struck the water was that it was cold, much colder than she had expected, for some reason. She hadn't really been thinking about that. She sank for but a moment, before the life jacket pulled her back to the surface. She lifted her head, sputtering, feeling the strong taste of salt in her mouth. They had been holding hands as they fell, but the impact had separated them. She spun around, searching frantically, but Reeve was no where in sight.

For a moment she felt panic welling up inside her, but then his head broke the surface, right beside her. She reached out and latched onto him, holding on for dear life.

"Don't scare me like that!" she shouted.

Reeve nodded without replying. Lightning flared, lighting up the world around them for just a moment. He could see nothing but the mountainous waves surrounding them. There was no sign of the helicopter, no sign of safety. They were lost, adrift in a raging sea.

"Where are the others?" Aeris yelled.

Reeve shook his head. He couldn't see them now, nor had he seen any sign of them when the lightning had flashed. In a sea like this it was almost impossible to think they could find them. The only thing they could do was hang on and hope to stay afloat themselves. Tifa and the Cetra Sage were on their own.

And it seemed that staying afloat wasn't going to be easy. The life jacket was meant to keep one person afloat, not two. Because of his added weight, Aeris was lower in the water than she should have been. Every time a wave washed over them she almost sank below the surface. In addition to that, the wind was blowing the water into the air all around them, skimming it off the top of the waves, to blow right into their faces. Even if they didn't sink, the wind blowing the water in their faces alone was enough to make it difficult to breathe.

Aeris coughed, trying to clear her throat. She blinked, the water dripping in her eyes. It was difficult to even keep her eyes open, much less look around. Not that there was anything she wanted to see. The waves were huge, looking like the side of a mountain coming toward them, and she was certain that each one would bury them under tons of water as it reached

them, but instead it lifted them up. She felt herself rising each time, like going up a vertical wall on some insane elevator ride, until they reached the top, and for a moment they could look around and see the crests of the other waves marching toward them or away. Only for a moment that lasted, and then they were plummeting down the other side, Aeris' stomach practically in her throat.

"Do you think Cait heard us?" she shouted.

"I don't know," Reeve replied. "I hope so."

Aeris fell silent. With the water blowing around them, it was hard enough just to breath, much less talk. Besides, there was nothing to say. They were in a desperate situation, but no one needed to be told that. Cait had either heard them or not. If he had, hopefully help was on the way, though how long it would take to get here was anyone's guess. If he hadn't heard, or if there was no other aircraft available...

Then they were dead. It was as simple as that. She didn't know how long they could survive in this water, but it wouldn't be long. If they didn't drown, they would eventually succumb to the cold. Already she could feel her fingertips and toes getting numb. The water wasn't frigid, but it was no sauna either. It might take hours, but eventually the cold would kill them.

If they even survived that long. They still had this wonderful storm to contend with.

So they just tried to hang on as best they could, just last as long as possible and hope for the best. There really wasn't much else they could do. Aeris hoped that the storm would let up over time. She had no watch. Reeve had one but she didn't bother to ask the time. It seemed such a silly thing to bother with when you were struggling just to survive. She had no idea how much time went by. Hours seemed to pass and the storm continued unabated. She clung to Reeve as best she could, determined not to let go, knowing he wouldn't last five minutes without her and her life jacket to cling to.

They both grew weaker. She could feel the wind and the rain and the constant struggle to keep her head above the water taking it's toll on her. In addition the numbness she felt continued to spread. Both her arms and legs were cold as ice now, and she could barely feel them. She clung to Reeve as best she could, trying to share their body warmth, but at this point, there wasn't much body warmth to go around.

Neither of them had spoken for a long time. She looked at Reeve and saw his eyes were closed. Her grip on him tightened.

"Reeve!" she said sharply.

His eyes opened, looking at her through the rain. He blinked.

"What? What is it?"

"You closed your eyes," she said.

He managed a wane smile.

"Just resting a bit," he replied with an enthusiasm he didn't feel. The truth was he felt tired, more tired than he ever remembered being. He knew, however, that that feeling was not a good sign. His arms and legs were both numb. He knew if either of them fell asleep, it was unlikely they'd wake up again.

"Well... do it with your eyes open!" she replied.

He smiled again.

"I'll try."

They were silent for some time.

"I can't feel my hands," Aeris eventually commented.

"I can't feel my hands or my feet," Reeve responded. He let go of her with one hand, causing her to grab hold of him tighter than ever. He looked at her for a moment, then shook his hand, inspecting it. It was white, and water logged.

"Well, at least I can still move it," he said.

Aeris wasn't sure how much longer that would be the case.

"How long have we been out here?" she questioned.

Reeve shrugged. He tilted his hand and looked at his watch. He reached over with his other hand and touched one of the buttons.

"I don't know," he replied. "It's too dark to see and the little light doesn't seem to be working. I think it's water resistant but not waterproof, though I don't think even waterproof was designed to protect against this." He indicated the waves around them.

They fell silent once more. He couldn't tell how long it had been but it seemed like forever. He looked up at the sky, hoping to see some light on the horizon, some sign that dawn was not far off. Not that it mattered much. The light of day wasn't going to make things any better. Sure, they might be easier to spot in the daytime, but it didn't matter how easy or hard they were to spot if no one was looking for them. He could see nothing, however, no sign of the break of day. For all he knew dawn could still be hours away.

He looked at Aeris and saw that her eyes were now closed.

Leaning forward, he kissed her on the cheek.

Her eyes opened.

"What was that for?" she questioned.

"You have to rest with your eyes open too," he said.

She didn't reply.

He looked around.

"I don't know how much longer I can hold on."

"Don't say that."

"My arms are numb. I'm afraid I'll drag you down with me."

She held onto him tighter.

"Don't let go of me," she told him.

"The odds of rescue are slim."

"Don't you dare even think about giving up. They'll find us, I know they will," she said.

Again he couldn't help but smile.

"How do you do that?" he questioned.

"Do what?"

"Have such absolute faith that everything will work out in the end."

She didn't reply to that for a moment. She really didn't have an answer.

"I don't know. I've always felt that. I always felt I had a purpose here, and my time would not end until I discovered it. I thought I had once, when I prayed to Holy, when Sephiroth killed me, but you all brought me back, so there must be more to it."

Reeve fell silent, nodding slowly. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't share her faith. He was quite certain there was a very good chance they could both die here. Still, he had to admit her words brought some comfort with them.

"I'm glad you're here with me Aeris," he said. "Well, I'm not glad you're *here*, stuck in the middle of the ocean, but if I had to be here with anyone, I'm glad it's you, well, actually, I would rather you *weren't* here if it meant you were safe but..."

She laughed, as best she could with the rain blowing in her face.

"Don't worry Reeve, I know what you mean. Thank you for saying so, and don't worry, we'll get out of this."

"I just wish..." he began.

"What's that?"

She was staring behind him. He turned his head, but all he saw was a wall of water in front of him as they plummeted down into a trough.

"I thought... I thought I saw a light," Aeris said.

"Where?" Reeve questioned.

She lifted her hand.

"Over that way," she pointed. "But you can't see anything now. Wait until another wave comes along."

They didn't have to wait long. After a moment another wave lifted them up. When they reached the peak the both stared into the darkness in the direction she had indicated. All they could see was the tops of the waves and the dark sky boiling above their heads, but then they both saw it, almost simultaneously. A flash of light, up in the sky, not too far off, like some kind of... searchlight.

"It's them!" Aeris cried out.

Reeve wasn't sure she was right, but he was sure something or someone was out there. It didn't really matter who. Even if it was the other Cetra, (though why the hell they would be here was beyond him) even if it mean being captured, he didn't care. Anything was better than staying in the water.

"The emergency kit," he said, as excited as she was. "There should be a flare gun in there!"

Aeris pulled the kit over her shoulder with some difficulty. Her fingers were so numb now she could hardly make them obey her commands. It took her what seemed like forever to get it open, and then to search around for the flare gun before finally pulling it out. Reeve held onto her impatiently, staring into the sky whenever they rose with a wave, hoping whoever it was above them didn't leave before they could fire a flare. He wanted to reach for the gun himself, but he knew his limbs were in no better shape.

Aeris lifted her hand. A moment later a yellow streak shot into the air.

They stared up into the sky, watching the flare arc upwards, then slowly turn and begin to descend. They turned and looked in the direction they had seen the light. They could see nothing for a long time. Reeve felt his heart thudding in his chest. This was it, he knew this would be their only chance. If they weren't found now, it would be all over.

The clouds seethed above their heads, alive with the raging storm and... something else. The clouds parted to a greater darkness. Suddenly a roaring filled their ears, and it was not the roaring of the wind. They looked up to see a black jet descending down upon them.

~*~

"There they are!"

"Where? Get the light on them!" Cid exclaimed.

A spotlight suddenly shifted downward, aimed at the ocean below, just in front of them. Cid could make out the bright orange of a life vest, and the small figures of two people drifting in the water below.

"I see them!" he exclaimed. "Drop down the ladder!"

Cait scrambled to obey as Cid brought the Slipstream down lower, as low as he dared. The wind was erratic, making it hell to keep the aircraft steady. He couldn't see directly below him, he couldn't tell if the ladder reached the water.

"Are we low enough?" he called back.

Cait was standing by an open hatch in the floor of the craft, looking down at the water below, and the ladder he had dropped down. It barely skimmed the top of the waves.

"The ladder just reaches the water," Cait told him.

Cid nodded. It was the best he could do. He dared go no lower for fear of one of the bigger waves swamping the aircraft. That would be a disaster.

"All right, I'm heading for them. Lead me in."

Cid could see ahead of him but not anything directly below them. He would have to depend on Cait to guide him in once they got close to the two below.

He slowly moved the craft forward. It wasn't going to be easy. The Slipstream wasn't really designed for this kind of thing, but it would have to do. It was all he had, and if he hadn't finally gotten it repaired earlier today, he wouldn't even have that.

The Slipstream moved slowly forward, until the people in the water disappeared from his view. They would only be able to grab the ladder for a moment, when they were at the crest of the wave. He didn't know what kind of condition they were in. They were obviously conscious, or they would never have been able to fire off the flare, but he knew they'd been in the water a long time. They might not have the strength to even climb up the ladder. If not, Cait would have to go down to try to help them, and that would be dangerous as well. Also, with him hovering, barely moving forward, the jet wash was pointed straight down at the people below him. At this height, it would cause all kinds of havoc. He hoped they'd be able to handle it.

"You're right on course," Cait announced.

Cid nodded, clutching his cigarette in his teeth, almost pinching it in half in concentration.

"A little to the left."

Cid moved the Slipstream in the desired direction, going as slowly as he could. Just keeping the craft level in this weather was a chore, much less on course, but he knew the slightest deviation would result in the ladder being out of reach of those below.

"Left more."

The Slipstream responded sluggishly. Fortunately it was large enough so that the wind didn't blow it around too much.

"All right. Straight ahead. Almost there!"

Cid tried to keep the Slipstream as steady as possible as it moved slowly forward. Agonizing minutes seemed to pass, so long in fact, that Cid was certain the ladder must have passed up the two people below him by now. He turned to ask Cait what was happening but at the same time Cait spoke again.

"They've got it!"

Cid looked forward again, staring at the instruments, trying to keep the ship as steady as possible.

"Are they climbing up?" he called back.

For a moment Cait didn't reply.

"Yeah," he said finally. "They're having a hard time though."

Cid felt a strong urge to leave the controls and go see what was going on, even climb down the ladder to help the others below, but of course, that was impossible. Unlike Reeve's helicopter, the Slipstream did indeed have an autopilot, but it wasn't designed for this kind of delicate work. It would never be able to hold them as steady as Cid could in this storm.

So he sat there, concentrating on the controls and keeping the plane in place, as the moments passed with excruciating slowness.

Finally he heard a thump. He looked back to see that Aeris had pulled herself up into the ship and flopped down onto her knees. Turning around she reached down, and a moment later Reeve was pulled up as well.

"Got them!" Cait announced triumphantly as he pulled up the ladder, then slammed the hatch closed to the storm.

They could still hear the sound of the jet's engines, and the storm as well, but it was muted. To both Aeris and Reeve, the quiet was heavenly.

"We have to find the others," Aeris spoke up.

She was tired, wet, and freezing to death, but in spite of that she pulled herself to her feet and walked quickly over to where Cid was sitting.

"Tifa and the Cetra Sage are still in the water," she announced.

"The who what?" Cid asked.

"The Cetra Sage," Aeris repeated. "I'll explain it all later. We have to find them."

Cid nodded slowly.

"I take it they don't have a flare gun?"

"No, they don't," Aeris confirmed.

Cid chewed on his cigarette. In that case, it wasn't going to be easy. He looked out the window into the blackness beyond. They would have to be right on top of someone in this to see them.

"They left the helicopter just a minute or two before us," Reeve spoke up. "Hopefully they shouldn't be far away."

"Let's hope not," Cid muttered. "All right, I'll start a search pattern. Everyone, keep your eyes open."

Reeve pulled himself to his feet, and they all took up positions around the craft so they could look out in all directions.

Aeris stared down at the sea below. Cait had found blankets and wrapped them around both her and Reeve, which took the chill out just a bit. She was still cold, but her own discomfort had to take a back seat to finding Tifa and the Cetra Sage. She was worried sick about her friend. She felt that she was here for a reason, that she wouldn't die before she accomplished what she had to do. She felt no such convictions about Tifa. They had been in the water longer. For all she knew, both her friend and the Cetra Sage could already be dead.

She found herself praying silently under her breath.

"I see something!" Reeve called out.

Aeris heart leapt.

"Where?" she questioned. He was on the other side of the plane from her. She was beside him in an instant.

"Over there, to the left," Reeve exclaimed, pointing. "Damn, its gone. Cid, bring her over that way!"

"What did you see?" Aeris questioned.

"I'm not sure," Reeve replied. "It looked like something in the water but I couldn't be sure. I only saw it for a moment."

They both stared out the window as Cid brought the craft in the desired direction. Aeris could feel her heart beating in her chest. It had to be them. It just had to!

Cait swept the searchlight over the water ahead of them.

"There!" Reeve shouted, but it wasn't needed, they could all see the people in the water below, they could all see the orange color of the life jacket, the heads or two people bobbing in the waves, the hand rise feebly into the air as Tifa tried to wave to them.

"Quick, get the ladder down!" Aeris exclaimed.

Reeve was already moving, getting up and pulling open the hatch. He tossed down the ladder as Aeris came up beside him, while Cait kept the spotlight trained on the two below them.

Once more Cid headed toward his target, this time with Aeris guiding him. Again it seemed to take a ridiculously long time for the ladder to reach those below. Finally it did, however, and Aeris saw the two people below latch onto it. As the Cetra Sage began to pull himself up, however, Tifa's hands slipped off and she fell back into the water, the ladder quickly blowing out of her reach.

"Tifa couldn't hold on!" Aeris shouted. "You have to go back!"

Cid let the craft go forward a bit, then rotated the plane until it was facing back the way it came. By the time this procedure was completed, the Cetra Sage was safely on board. He collapsed to the ground as Reeve and Aeris pulled him up. He was ice cold to the touch.

"Tifa must be freezing down there," Aeris stated. "I hope she can hold on."

"If not I'll go down and get her," Reeve said.

The plane made its way toward the girl in the water one more time. Aeris watched the ladder more toward Tifa. For a second Aeris thought it was going to pass by out of Tifa's reach, but she struggled toward it and managed to grab hold, and this time she didn't let go.

"She got it!" Aeris yelled out triumphantly.

Tifa pulled herself up the ladder with agonizing slowness but eventually she was close enough for Reeve to reach down and pull her up. As everyone had done, she collapsed to the floor of the craft as soon as he was pulled aboard, her breath coming in short gasps and shivering uncontrollably.

"C..c....cold," she managed to get out.

Aeris wrapped a blanket around her while Reeve closed the hatch. He then walked over to the pilot and slapped him on the back, while Aeris helped Tifa up and into one of the seats. She then plopped down in one herself, for the first time allowing herself to feel some relief. They had done it, they were all safe. It was more than they could have hoped for.

She looked over at Tifa. The girl was wrapped in her blanket, still shivering. Aeris could see her face, even though she was looking out the window. There was no relief there. Her face was pale, her eyes lined with concern as she looked down at the vast expanse of water below them. As fast as it had come, Aeris felt her relief fading away. It wasn't true, they weren't all safe. There was still one of them left out there somewhere.

Aeris saw Tifa's lips move. She couldn't hear what the girl said, but it was easy enough to read her lips. A single word.

Cloud.