

CHAPTER XXII: CHILDHOOD'S END

"They've landed on the same island the mako mine is on."

Yonsin did not reply, just stood there contemplating the controls in front of him. He and Grem stood on the bridge of their airship, flying just west of the island in question. Though the storm had tossed the Slipstream around quite violently at times, this airship flew through it placidly, as if the sky outside were clear.

Grem waited patiently until he could no longer tolerate the silence.

"Well, are you going to go after them?"

The hum of the engines was the only response Grem got for quite some time. He knew Yonsin had heard him. Was the man going to ignore him totally? He was tempted to grab Yonsin by the neck and shake him before the man responded.

"No."

Grem stared at Yonsin but the man said nothing more. The airship turned gracefully in the sky, heading south now past the island.

"Where are we going?" Grem questioned.

"I'm not sure," Yonsin replied.

A look of displeasure warped Grem's face. Ever since they had realized the reactor was going critical, it seemed like Yonsin was in some kind of fog, as if the magnitude of what had just happened was too much for him to digest. His movements were mechanical, his voice a monotone. It was as if all emotion had been drained out of him. He sounded... defeated.

Grem suddenly reached out and grabbed Yonsin by the shoulder.

"What is wrong with you?" he snapped. "That half breed bitch destroyed the amplifier, ruined all our plans! She's with them now, on that island. She's right there. They all are! Their airship is no match for ours. We couldn't have a better opportunity to destroy them!"

Yonsin just stared at the instruments through this outburst. He didn't even turn to look at Grem.

"She's a Cetra," the man replied. "We don't kill Cetra."

"She's *half* Cetra!" Grem retorted. "She's more human than Cetra. She's been contaminated by them. She's worse than a human!"

"Killing her isn't going to bring back the project," Yonsin said hollowly.

"So you're just going to let her get away with it?" Grem asked incredulously.

"Are you saying you just want to slaughter them all?" Yonsin replied, for the first time his voice showing just a little bit of emotion.

"Yes!" Grem declared. "After what they did? We were trying to save the Cetra and they've ruined it. Who knows how long it will take to rebuild the amplifier."

"We're not going to rebuild the amplifier," Yonsin said.

"What? Why not?"

Yonsin shook his head grimly.

"It took five years to build the first one, plus the reactor, and that was with the resources we already had on Round Island. Now we have nothing. Starting from scratch, it would take even longer. By the time we get it done the children will be too old, already having been brought up under human influence. The first few years of life is the most important, that's when the imprinting takes place. By the time we'll built a new amplifier that time will have passed. It will be too late."

"All the more reason to make her pay for what she has done!" Grem snapped. "She destroyed your dreams! Our dreams! Because of her the Cetra as we know them are doomed! The humans will corrupt all those children and without the amplifier there's nothing we can do about it. She's a traitor. She had betrayed her race, her heritage. She deserves death!"

"It is not our place to decide who lives and who dies," Yonsin replied. "Killing her is not going to change what has happened. Nothing can do that. Taking a life of a Cetra, even a half Cetra for the sake of revenge would make us just as barbaric as the humans we've been trying so hard to distance ourselves from."

"Dammit Yonsin, these are the words of a coward! If someone commits a crime they are punished for it. That's justice! As our leader it is your obligation to your people to see that justice is served. She's right there on that island. There's nothing to stop you from meting out the punishment this woman deserves and yet you just turn away. If ever a crime cried out for the penalty of death this would be it, but you're afraid to shed even a single drop of her tainted blood. Well, if you don't have the courage to do this deed, then stand aside for someone who does!"

"You shall do no such thing!" Yonsin replied, his lips a thin line. "There will be no more Cetra deaths. There will be no more breaking of our most sacrosanct rule. You have already crossed that line once and, fool that I am, I did not take a stand against you. You're right, I am a coward. I'm a coward for not going to the others and telling them the truth as soon as I found out you had killed Marlek. I was so worried about my own standing that I let you walk all over our most cherished belief. Well, no more! It's time the others found out the truth. It's time they found out exactly what kind of monster you really are!"

And with that Yonsin engaged the autopilot and stepped away from the controls.

"You can't do that," Grem hissed, his voice filled with sudden menace, though Yonsin appeared not to notice, or to ignore the threat. "We are still tied together, you and I. It was you who was in charge, who knew what I was capable of. The situation has not changed. If I go down, you still go with me."

Yonsin spun around to look at him.

"Go down? How much farther can we go? The project is over. I needed the cooperation of the others to make the amplifier work. There is no more amplifier. There is nothing more to cooperate about. It doesn't matter if they learn the truth now or not. I no longer have anything to lose."

"You're still our leader," Grem countered. "If they find out you knew all this time that I killed Marlek they will think you unfit to lead us. They will choose someone else."

"So what if they do? There's nowhere left to lead us. There is no more amplifier, no more master plan. Without that we are nothing but a small group of people slowly dying out and there's *nothing*, nothing we can do except sit back and helplessly watch it happen. Do you think I want to be the leader of *that*? Let them choose a new leader if that is what they wish. It no longer matters anymore."

Yonsin turned away once again, making his way toward the exit door. Grem just stood there. He couldn't believe this. He couldn't believe after all these years together, all these years of carefully cultivated friendship it would come to this. Yonsin wasn't just a coward, he was a weakling as well. He was just going to give up, just walk away from it all, leaving his lifelong friend twisting in the wind. The man had no honor or loyalty. Well, if that's the way he was going to be, then there was no point in his having any loyalty either, now was there? As far as he was concerned Yonsin was no better than that half breed bitch. He didn't care about the Cetra. Hell, he didn't even seem to care about himself anymore. He didn't deserve to be leader. He didn't deserve any better than any other Cetra who wouldn't fight for their cause.

His eyes darkening he walked quickly up behind Yonsin, reaching him just as the other man stepped in front of the door. A knife that Grem kept hidden beneath his shirt suddenly appeared in his hand, and just as Yonsin reached to open the door Grem drove the weapon into the man's back.

Yonsin cried out and staggered a few steps, stumbling against the wall, then turned as he fell to the ground, a look of shock and surprise etched on his face.

"Grem... you... what did you do? How... you stabbed me."

Grem stood there, silent, not moving, the bloody blade clutched in his hand.

"Grem... you..."

Yonsin reached out, as if in supplication, but Grem just took a step back. The man's hand remained poised in the air for a moment before finally falling to his side, and with that, Yonsin toppled to the floor and was still.

Grem paid no more heed to the lifeless body before him, instead turning quickly and walking over to the controls. He deactivated the autopilot, then swung the ship around until it was headed back to the island the Slipstream had landed on.

Yonsin was a weakling, and as such had deserved death. Now it was up to him, Grem thought, to see that justice was done.

He looked down at the controls in front of him, his finger hovering over the intercom to the fire control officer. He wasn't sure who was in charge at this time. The other Cetra rotated their duties on the ship so that everyone had some proficiency in all areas. Unfortunately, even from the bridge he couldn't fire the weapons unless the fire control officer brought them on line first.

He pushed the button.

"Bridge to fire control."

"Fire control."

A female voice. Dalliana. Great. The last person he would have wanted to be down there.

"Ready the weapons for firing," he commanded.

"Grem? Is that you? Why do you want to fire the weapons? Where's Yonsin?"

"I don't have time to discuss this!" Grem spat. "It's an emergency. Now ready the weapons!"

Perhaps if he made it sound urgent enough, she would put her thick-headedness aside for a moment and do as she was told.

No such luck.

"Where's Yonsin?" she questioned again after a slight pause.

"He's busy!" Grem snapped. "This order comes directly from him! Now do as you are told! We are about to be attacked!"

"Attacked? Attacked by whom?"

"I don't have time to stand here and explain the situation to you!" Grem shouted. He only wished she were up here on the bridge beside him so he could let his knife do the explaining for him once again. "Ready the weapons!"

Again there was a momentary pause.

"I'm *not* going to ready the weapons unless I talk to Yonsin..."

Grem slammed his hand down on the intercom button, cutting her off.

"Damn that woman!" she snarled. He wanted to go down there and teach her a lesson she'd never forget, but first things first. The half breed had to be taken care of, then he could deal with the rest of the crew. Looking down at the body of Yonsin on the floor he knew all hell would break loose when the others found out what he had done. It didn't matter though. It was as Yonsin said, it was all over. There was nothing left to hold them together. They had no future to fight for anymore. The half breed had to die. He was doing the right thing, and he didn't give a damn what the others would think.

He couldn't use the ship's weapons without the cooperation of the crew, something he was unlikely to get now. It looked like he would have to mete out justice the old fashioned way, up close and personal. Well, that was fine with him. Better, in fact. This way he would get to see the look in her eyes as the life slowly drained out of them.

He kept the airship headed directly toward the island, his eyes watchful for a place to land.

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"Tifa, come inside."

It was still raining, though the worst of the storm seemed to have passed. At Tifa's insistence Cid had landed the Slipstream on the island where they had found the mako cavern, where the mysterious, or not so mysterious now, chocobo had appeared and whisked Cloud and Aeris away. Now she stood in the sand, the wing of the Slipstream protecting her from the light rain that was all that remained of the storm that had nearly killed them staring out at the ocean. To the east Aeris could make out a tinge of light on the horizon that signaled the beginning of the dawn.

Cid, Reeve and Cait were inside, Reeve already asleep. They were all exhausted. Aeris felt ready to drop where she stood. She could think of nothing she'd like to do better than flop down in one of the cushioned seats of the Slipstream and sleep.

for a week, unless it was to flop down on her bed at home in Ifalna and sleep for a week, but that was not really an option, now was it? And it seemed that flopping down on a seat on the plane wasn't either, as long as Tifa stood out here.

Tifa didn't reply, just stood there as if she hadn't heard. Aeris looked out at the ocean they stood beside. White foam gurgled in the surf, the huge waves of earlier having died down to almost nothing, the oceans voice low and sonorous now as it washed up on the shore. The storm had passed, as if it had spent itself while they were caught in it's grasp, and now it's fury had passed away now that they were safe.

She could see nothing in the darkness. The churning clouds above blocked out any light of moon or star. In the east the faint light that told of the approach of the sun was still too weak to penetrate the clouds above their heads. There was no sign of Cloud, not that Aeris really expected there to be. The Slipstream was much faster than a chocobo. Even with their time spent in the water it was quite likely they could get here long before Cloud. And besides, they didn't even know if he would make landfall on this island. They had not prearranged any such thing, which, in hindsight, seemed foolish, but no one had thought of declaring a meeting point when it was all over. They had all had other things on their minds at the time. There were dozens of islands in this area where he could come ashore.

If he came ashore at all.

No, she couldn't think like that. Cloud had survived. She just knew he had.

"Come inside," she tried again. "You're exhausted. We all are. Come in and get some sleep. When you wake up, Cloud will probably be here."

Again Tifa did not reply, gave no indication that she even heard, just stood there, her brown eyes staring at the vast expanse of ocean in front of them.

"I think I might have a better view over there," she said eventually.

She nodded her head, indicating a long finger of land that jutted out into the water to their left.

"Tifa..." Aeris began but fell silent when she realized her friend was not listening and had instead started walking out from under the wing into the lightly falling rain. After a moment, Aeris followed. A slight turn of her head was Tifa's only sign of acknowledgment.

"Go back," Tifa said softly. "Go back and get some rest."

Aeris did not feel the need to respond to that statement.

They walked down the beach in silence. The rain had lightened again, and now seemed more a fine mist than actual rain. Even so it clung to Aeris' skin and left her hair damp and limp. As they walked down the beach the light grew slowly in the east.

Tifa was leading her out onto a spit of sand that jutted out into the sea, sand that had lingered long after it's brethren had been washed away. Behind them the beach ran to the forest, and the Slipstream which she could now barely make out in the early morning light. To the left a small strip of sand ran on as far as the eye could see, the dark vegetation of the forest pressing close to the water. Ahead of them a few blades of sea grass sprouted from the dunes and beyond that, only the dark blue water of the ocean.

Tifa stopped at last, more by necessity than by choice, for now her feet rested just a few inches from the surf. She stared out into the water in front of them.

"He's all right," Aeris finally spoke again. "I know he is."

Tifa smiled ruefully at that, a smile with no humor or happiness. Those words were nothing less than what she would expect from Aeris, words of reassurance. It was what Aeris did best, after all. Unfortunately it didn't make Tifa feel any better.

She wet her lips but did not speak. What was there for her to say? In spite of the fact that she had told Aeris to go back, in spite of the fact that she knew Aeris' words were just a hollow attempt to make her feel better, she was still glad her friend was here with her. Neither of them needed to say anything.

Tifa looked out over the ocean. She could see quite clearly now. The sun still hadn't risen, but it must be just below the horizon, and now the dark clouds above them had turned a pale gray.

She noticed Aeris look up suddenly, her brow pinched together.

"What is it?" Tifa questioned.

Aeris didn't answer for a moment, her head roving the expanse of air above them.

"I feel..." she said slowly, hesitantly, "... the Cetra."

"You feel them? They're here?" Tifa questioned, for the first time since she was plucked from the water her voice showing some emotion.

"Yes," Aeris replied. "Somewhere near."

They both looked around, then at one another, not sure what that meant, but both of them suspecting it was a bad thing.

"Maybe we better head back."

This time it was Tifa making that suggestion.

Aeris nodded and they immediately started back the way they had come. They hadn't gotten very far, however, when a man suddenly appeared out of the trees a little to the north of them. He started walking rapidly toward them. They both stopped and stared. Even at this distance Aeris recognized the man.

"Grem," she said softly.

"You know him?" Tifa questioned, though the answer was already obvious.

"Yes," Aeris replied. She knew him, and just as certainly, she knew his purpose. "He's here to kill me."

Tifa's eyes widened slightly at that. She studied the man approaching for a moment and realized she recognized him as well. It was the man she had chased back in Ifalna. The man who had killed that strange person she had been talking to. He appeared to have no weapon. He was no great physical specimen either, no larger than an average man. Nothing about him appeared particularly menacing. Which was a good thing, Tifa thought, since neither she nor Aeris had any weapon themselves, or any materia at the moment, for that matter.

Still, he was a Cetra. They had never fought a Cetra before. She didn't know if they fought any differently than an ordinary human being and yet she suspected they did. Ellengio had been an old man. They had never fought him either, but almost had at one point, she thought, when they had used the super materia to foil his plan. It hadn't come to blows then, but there had been a feel about him at that moment, an air of menace that seemed all out of proportion to his outward appearance. Somehow she suspected none of them had ever seen the real power of a Cetra.

And yet she didn't doubt what Aeris had just told her. If the man was really here to kill her, Tifa was going to stand in the way.

"Go back to the ship," she said. "Get the others."

She had a feeling it was going to take more than just her and Aeris if they had any hope at all of winning this battle.

"I think that's a very good idea," Aeris replied. "Let's go."

Tifa stood her ground.

"Go back and get the others," she repeated. She had a feeling they couldn't run from this man. The only way to warn the others was for someone to stay behind and slow him down a little.

"Tifa, I'm not going to leave you here," Aeris retorted.

"Go!" Tifa commanded. "We don't have time to argue!"

It was true. The man was much closer now, would be upon them soon.

"This is my fight!" Aeris protested. "He's here to kill me!"

"All the more reason to keep him away from you!" Tifa retorted. "He may not be as anxious to kill me. Besides, we have no weapons and no materia. I'm the one who's trained to fight with her fists!"

Aeris opened her mouth, then shut it. She looked from Tifa to Grem and back.

"Hurry!" Tifa exclaimed.

Aeris turned and ran.

Tifa watched Aeris for a moment. The Slipstream wasn't that far away. She could see it clearly now in the ever growing light. It wouldn't take Aeris long to get there. Hopefully she would only have to hold the man off for a few minutes at most.

She turned to face the man who was approaching once more. He was almost upon her now. He was looking at her but hadn't stopped, hadn't broken his stride. Without a word she stepped in front of him and assumed her battle stance.

His eyes impassive, he altered his course and turned to walk right past her.

For a moment she did nothing at all. She had expected him to stop, had expected him to at least say something to her, had expected him to attack her. She hadn't expected him to just ignore her!

Not exactly sure how to respond, yet seeing he was already past her she reached out and grabbed hold of his arm.

"Stop!" she exclaimed.

With a shrug he jerked his arm out of her grip and continued on.

Just from the way he had pulled his arm free she could tell he was strong. He obviously wasn't interested in fighting her, wasn't interested in her at all. By his attitude she could tell he didn't consider her any kind of threat. Well, maybe she could change that opinion.

She ran forward and slammed into him, attempting to knock him off his feet.

She managed to knock him off his stride, but little else. He did not fall. Instead, his elbow came around, striking her suddenly in the side of the head, causing her to cry out. He easily slipped out of her grasp and she fell to the sand. She brought her hand up to her temple, her head screaming in pain. Forcing herself to ignore it, she looked up.

The man had stopped, finally. He was standing there, just looking at her.

"I have no qualms about killing you," he said. "Don't do that again."

And then he turned and continued on his way.

In spite of the pain, Tifa pushed herself to her feet. The fact of the matter was she was pissed off now. The fact that he had brushed her off so lightly was a blow to her pride. She might not be a Cetra, she might not be some big muscle bound guy, but that didn't mean he could ignore her, that didn't mean she was helpless.

It was probably stupid to feel that way, she realized, but it didn't matter. Her feelings were irrelevant. Her purpose here was to slow the man down so Aeris could get help. She was determined to do that no matter what the consequences.

Running at the man once more she leaped into the air and, holding nothing back, using all her mako enhanced strength, launched a kick directly between the man's shoulders. As she stuck, she caught sight of a whitish aura appear around him for a second.

He grunted, then staggered forward and fell to his knees. For a moment he remained motionless, then he suddenly pulled himself up and turned to face her. She could see anger seething across his features.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said grimly.

Tifa just stood there, her hands up in front of her. She said nothing, but she couldn't ignore the unease she felt suddenly growing inside her. She had struck him as hard as she could. That attack would have broken the back of a normal human, but it had barely staggered him. The whitish light she had seen briefly around him told her he had a physical barrier. He had used a defensive materia, but when? She hadn't seen him do it. Had he cast it before they saw him? If so, how could he keep it up for so long? She wanted to get his attention and now she had it. Was she going to live to regret that?

Green light flared suddenly. Materia!

Tifa lunged to the side just as a blast of lightning cracked on the ground where she had just been standing. In spite of the fact that it was only a near miss she still found herself thrown to the ground and her nerves tingling from the electricity. She was no materia expert but that had been a very powerful spell. She glanced back and saw that the sand had been fused into a black solid mass where the strike had hit. If that hit her she was toast and she had no defensive materia with which to protect herself.

Green light, again!

She dodged to the side again, then four more times in rapid succession, as fire or ice or lightning flashed nearby. Tifa stumbled to a halt, staring at the man, waiting for the next attack, trying to figure out exactly what he was doing. How could he use different materia so rapidly?

Her dodging had put some distance between them. Since she had no long range weapon this was not a good thing. Then again, after the failure of her initial attack she wasn't sure if she could hurt him even if she was standing right next to him. She had to keep in mind that she didn't have to beat him. All she had to do was stay in the fight until her friends arrived.

Still, she couldn't dodge forever, and she had to admit there wasn't much satisfaction in just avoiding his attack. Perhaps he had a weak point, if she could find it, but that wouldn't happen unless she was close enough to strike.

She ran forward. As soon as she did the materia attacks commenced once more and she had to take evasive action once more, dodging to the sides, but always trying to move closer to him this time. She soon noted that he wasn't aiming his attacks right at her anymore but instead anticipating which direction she would dodge in and unleashing the attack there. She realized her trying to reach him made it a lot easier to guess but there was nothing she could do about that. Right, left, left, back, left... aaaaah!

She felt searing pain shoot down her thigh as fire enveloped her left leg.

Wrong choice!

She stumbled, falling to her knees, the pain throbbing through her leg. She looked up and saw Grem standing only a few paces away now. So close...

"I have to admit you've got more fight in you than I thought possible from a human," Grem said. "It might have been amusing to play with you for a bit longer, but I'm afraid I have more important things to do."

Tifa watched the green glow grow in the man's hands once more. In spite of the agony it caused her, she forced herself to get to her feet. Her left leg could barely support her. She could barely stand erect, much less dodge an attack. Something was different this time though. The materia was taking slightly longer to release, and she saw a greenish cloud of sparkling lights begin to materialize around the man. She'd seen those lights before.

Ultima. He was using Ultima.

She spun to the side, turning, and as soon as her left foot hit the ground her leg collapsed underneath her and she fell once more.

She turned, pulling herself up to a sitting position. The light surrounded the man. It would only be seconds before he released it. There was no place for her to hide, no where to run. If her leg was unhurt she might be able to lunge for him, to reach him and disrupt the spell before he could use it, but her leg had betrayed her.

"Bastard!" she screamed, and a moment later the wall of Ultima slammed into her.

Grem watched, not without some satisfaction, as the woman was flung backwards through the air like a rag doll by his Ultima attack. Her body thudded into the sand in a heap, coming to a stop half a dozen meters from where she began.

Grem turned away. That Ultima attack had almost certainly killed her, and even if it hadn't, he knew she would be no more of a hindrance to him.

"Tifa!"

Four figures were running toward him from a short distance down the beach. Four figures, but he was only concerned with the one on the left.

She was back.

No one wasted any time talking. The battle commenced without a word. Reeve got off the first shot, firing his shotgun at Grem, but the barrier their opponent had erected protected him from sustaining any damage. The Cetra Sage stayed back, out of everyone's way. Cid ran forward, spear in hand, Cait beside him, Aeris held back, both because Cid had told her to do that, and because they had loaded her down with most of the defensive materia the group possessed. There wasn't much. All their best materia had remained on Grouchoon, and the stuff was almost impossible to find since the mako reactors were gone. Yuffie had hoarded most of what they had found since, so the pickings were slim, and, Aeris was sure, no match for what Grem might have obtained from the mako reactor the Cetra had been using.

Still, there wasn't anything they could do about that. Alone any of them would have no chance in such a mismatch. She was hoping their superiority of numbers would make up for that. It would be difficult for one person to fend off all their attacks, even if his materia was superior.

Or so she hoped.

She had another concern as well. Tifa. She had recognized the Ultima attack immediately and had felt a queasiness in her stomach from the moment she had seen it. She could see her friend now, lying in the sand behind Grem like a dead thing. She wanted to run to her, but Grem was in the way, making reaching her impossible. They had to get him out of the way as quickly as they could.

It soon became obvious that that was going to be easier said than done.

Aeris immediately cast magic barrier on everyone, figuring, rightly as it turned out, that Grem's magical attacks would be the greatest threat. She followed that up with barrier and haste. She had to get everyone's defenses up before the battle began in earnest. After that she spent a moment to direct a cure spell in Tifa's direction, praying she was in range and that Tifa wasn't so far gone as to be beyond a cure spell's help. It was the best she could do. She didn't have time for anything else, didn't have time to even look to see if it had done any good, for a moment later she was fully occupied helping the others fend off Grem's attack.

And a fierce attack it was. As with his attack on Tifa, he seemed to be able to cast spells amazingly fast, coming one after the other, just seconds apart. Not only were they fast, but powerful. So powerful it almost took her breath away. In spite of the magic barriers she had erected, Grem's attacks were still getting through. He was using some kind of All materia, for each attack struck at all of them. Aeris had to try hard to not scream in pain every time one of his spells struck her. Nor could she dodge like Cid and Cait were doing, with only moderate success, she noted. Such strenuous physical activity would break her concentration, rendering her own spells useless.

They had given Reeve most of their attack materia, but, to no one's surprise, Grem had a magical barrier around him too, and Reeve didn't seem to be doing any more damage than Cid and Cait, who were now engaged furiously with Grem, trying to cut through his physical barrier or at the very least upset his own spells. This worked to some extent, but he was so fast with his magic that even when spells were disrupted he had a new one cast almost without missing a beat, spells that were constantly forcing Cid and Cait to dodge away from him to save their own skins.

Aeris soon found herself almost exclusively casting cure spells as fast as she could, just to keep everyone in the game. Even going as fast as that she still couldn't keep up with Grem. Not only that, but by trying to keep up she was exhausting herself at a prodigious rate. If she kept this up she knew it wouldn't be long before she collapsed from exhaustion, unable to cast any more spells.

Grem was casting spells even faster than she was. If she was going at his speed, she would have collapsed a long time ago, yet looking at him, he seemed to be showing no signs of tiring. She knew she had an unusual affinity for materia and spell casting because of her Cetra heritage, but she was just half Cetra. It would be stronger with a full Cetra such as Grem. It was quite possible he could go on for hours before beginning to tire. She didn't think they were going to wear him down.

Which was a very bad sign for them, because it was looking less and less likely they could beat him outright either.

Shifting to the offensive she tried to cast silence and slow on their attacker, but those spells had no effect. It was difficult to get spells like that to work when your opponent was a stronger magic user than you were, which Grem obviously was.

She cried out as she was hit by yet another ice attack. Immediately she cast cure on herself and the pain subsided, though it did not disappear completely. It was bad enough she was losing strength by casting spells, her strength was also being drained by the physical abuse that was slowly accumulating in spite of her own protective spells.

Sensing his opponents weakening, Grem suddenly unleashed a flurry of lightning spells aimed exclusively at Cait, knowing that the mechanical beast would be particularly sensitive to them. In spite of the magical barrier around him this eventually proved too much, and with a sudden shudder sparks flew from his body, followed a moment later by black smoke and the smell of burnt circuits, and with that, Cait slowly toppled over and was still.

Obviously, not a good development, Aeris thought. Grem looked as fresh as he had when she and Tifa had first spotted him walking along the beach, and here they were, down two fighters already. It wasn't going to be any easier with just the three of them left.

Or was it three?

Out in the water she suddenly noticed something else that made her heart beat faster. He obviously must have been in view for quite some time now, for he was quite close to the shore, but their battle had monopolized her concentration. Racing toward them from the ocean was a gold chocobo with a familiar figure perched on top.

Cloud!

It was obvious he had already assessed the situation, for even as the chocobo ran up onto the beach Aeris could see Cloud unlimbering his sword.

He was coming up behind Grem. The man did not see him. Eventually, however, something gave away Cloud's presence, perhaps some sixth sense on Grem's part, perhaps the thudding of chocobo feet in the sand. Whatever the cause Grem spun around suddenly just as Cloud's blade came slashing down.

The sword struck Grem on the shoulder with a blinding flash of white light as it contacted the barrier around their opponent. For a split second the barrier held, but even a barrier cast by someone as accomplished as Grem was no match for the Ultima Weapon backed by Cloud's mako enhanced strength. The sword ripped through the barrier and tore into Grem's shoulder.

The man cried out and stumbled, falling to his knees. Even from where she was standing Aeris could see blood on the man's shoulder. He had been hurt. For the first time he had been hurt, but how seriously?

Not seriously enough to stop his attacks, it became apparent a moment later as fire flashed around Cloud. The chocobo cried out and bucked, and Cloud fell to the sand. Grem had been taken off guard and the fire spell was not his strongest, which was a good thing for Cloud since he didn't have the benefit of Aeris' protection spells, something Aeris immediately went about correcting, quickly casting magic barrier and cure on Cloud even as he sprung up from the sand again, sword in hand.

Immediately sensing that the man before him was his most formidable foe, Grem launched a blizzard of attacks aimed solely at Cloud. Seeing that even this did not stop the warrior Grem concentrated once more and Aeris saw the telltale flickering lights of an Ultima attack.

There wasn't much Aeris could do except brace herself for the onslaught. There was no way to dodge Ultima. Her magic barrier was already intact around her friends. All she could do was hope the barriers would hold.

They did. Barely.

Even though the barriers held, that didn't mean they got off unscathed. Aeris found herself sprawled on the sand, every part of her body screaming in protest of the pain she had just endured, a strange ringing sound in her ears. Shakily she pulled herself to her feet, seeing that everyone else, except their opponent, of course, had fallen as well. Her trained eye saw the magic barriers surrounding Cid and Reeve flicker and fade away. She could tell her own was gone as well. Only Cloud's, which had been cast later, still held.

But that wasn't the worst part. Her eyes fell on Grem and widened immediately when she saw the greenish light and white sparkle of yet another Ultima attack about to be launched at them.

Frantically she tried to cast her own spells again, trying to raise their magical protection once more, knowing full well she couldn't possibly succeed before Grem released.

And then... Grem stopped. She was looking right at him when suddenly a strange look came over his face. Instead of a wave of Ultima rushing toward them the white sparkles disappeared and the green light faded. Grem stood there for a moment, obviously befuddled about just what was going on.

Aeris knew right away what happened, just as Grem must have realized a moment later. Someone had cast silence on him. Aeris had tried that before and it had not worked. She just wasn't strong enough to affect such a powerful magic user. Whoever had cast it had to be much stronger than her, stronger than Grem.

Aeris looked around and saw a group of people emerging from the forest close to where she and Tifa had first seen Grem appear. There were nine of them, she realized as they approached. It was the other Cetra, though Aeris could not see Yonsin among them.

Grem made no move, just stood there motionless. Aeris saw her friends looking around curiously, obviously not sure what was going on, whether to continue their attack or not, and whether these new arrivals were friend or foe.

Aeris had no doubt. If they were foes they would never have stopped Grem. Intuitively realizing the battle was over, she suddenly rushed forward, running right past Grem, who made no move to intercept her, toward the young woman who lay crumpled on the ground behind him.

"Tifa!" she cried out, falling to her knees beside her friend.

At her cry Cloud looked up suddenly, for the first time noticing the still form of Tifa on the sand not far from him. His mouth falling open he started to run toward her, but then stopped suddenly, seeing Aeris kneeling beside her.

Aeris hands reached out, her touch telling her that Tifa was still alive, though badly injured. Aeris bowed her head, concentrating, but she was exhausted. She didn't have the strength left to evoke her healing powers. Besides that, even if she could, she could tell that Tifa's injuries were beyond her skill to heal.

She turned to look at the newly arrived Cetra.

"My friend is hurt! Can you help her?"

Immediately Dalliana hurried over.

"Let me see," she said, kneeling down as Aeris stood up to get out of the way.

The Cetra woman studied Tifa for a moment, running her hands along the wounded girl's arm and side, then she bowed her head, closing her eyes. A moment later a breeze stirred her hair, the breeze rapidly growing stronger until the wind whipped all around her. Aeris stood behind her, feeling herself suddenly refreshed, benefiting from the healing power even though it was not directed at her. She marveled, and yes, felt just a little bit envious, at how much stronger this power was than her own.

The wind faded away, Dalianna's hair coming to rest once again upon her shoulders. Aeris bent forward, looking at her friend once more. A moment later Tifa's eyes fluttered open. She shook her head, then looked around blearily.

"Anyone get the license number of the truck that hit me?" she asked weakly.

Aeris knelt down again, her hand reaching out to grab hold of Tifa's.

"You're all right!" she exclaimed.

Tifa looked at Aeris and smiled. She moved her limbs experimentally.

"Well, I don't know about all right, but I think I'll live," she declared.

"You will," Dalliana said.

Aeris turned to face the Cetra woman.

"Thank you," she said. "And I'm sorry."

"For what?" Dalliana asked.

"For hitting you over the head earlier," Aeris replied.

Tifa gave Aeris a look. What was *that* all about?

Dalliana smiled.

"It's all right," she said easily. "I prefer to look at it as you knocking some sense into me."

"Hit her over the head?" Tifa couldn't help but ask.

"Yeah, well, it's kind of a long story," Aeris admitted, looking somewhat embarrassed about the whole thing.

"In that case I think it can wait until later," a voice interrupted them. The woman turned to see Cloud standing not far away.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to say hello to my wife now," Cloud continued.

"Cloud!" Tifa burst out, her head lifting at the sound of his voice. She struggled to get up, but the pain that shot through her body as she did this told her it was a very bad idea and she sank back down onto the sand.

Aeris nodded and, after giving Tifa's hand a quick squeeze, she and Dalliana walked back to the others. As soon as they had Cloud ran over to Tifa. Aeris turned to face Grem once more. The man still had not moved, nor said anything. Both Cid and Reeve still stood poised for battle, as if expecting their opponent to resume his attacks at any moment.

"So what are we going to do with him?" Cid said warily, his spear pointed straight at Grem.

Aeris turned to look at Dalliana.

"I suppose that's up to you," she said slowly.

Dalliana looked at Grem for a moment, then slowly walked up until she stood in front of him. She reached out her hand.

"Hand over your materia," she said.

To Aeris great surprise, Grem did as he was asked, his face impassive. Apparently it was obvious even to him that he had no chance fighting all of them together.

When he had been striped of all his materia Dalliana turned and pointed to the forest.

"Now go," she said.

Grem didn't move, and for a moment Aeris thought he was going to say something. He didn't, however, instead he turned toward the forest and walked past Dalliana. Not far away Cid lifted his spear and took a step forward.

"What are you doing?" he questioned.

Dalliana turned to face Cid.

"He had broken out most sacrosanct rule," she said. "He has shed the blood of another Cetra. For that his punishment is permanent banishment. He will never be accepted as part of Cetra society again."

Cid stared at Dalliana as if she had two heads. He suddenly stepped forward, blocking Grem's path, his spear pointed right at the man's chest.

"Banishment?" he blurted out. "Banishment? That's your punishment? He tried to kill us all!"

"And he killed a Cetra," they heard Tifa speak up. "Back in Ifalna."

"Marlek," Dalliana said slowly. "And he killed Yonsin."

Aeris eyes widened at this.

"As I said, he has broken our most sacred rule. All Cetra are pledged from birth not to take the life of another Cetra. There are so few of us now, every Cetra life is precious. For that he suffers from the most severe punishment we can mete out."

"And banishment is it?" Cid said incredulously. "That's the most severe punishment you have?"

"What do you suggest?" Dalliana questioned.

"I don't know," Cid retorted. "He killed two Cetra and tried to kill us. I certainly don't see any remorse on his face. A life for a life, I say, and he's already over his quota!"

Dalliana turned to stare at the pilot.

"Have you heard nothing I said?" she questioned. "With so few Cetra left, every life is precious. Our laws state that no Cetra will kill another under any circumstances. If we kill him, then we are as bad as he is!"

Cid stared at her for a minute, then his features hardened, and he lifted the spear until it was poised right below Grem's chin. The man did not flinch.

"The Cetra might have laws against killing other Cetra, but human's certainly don't!" he snapped.

"Cid..." Aeris began but Dalliana held up her hand.

"It is true, you do not," the Cetra woman said. "You seem to have no qualms about killing your own people when the mood suits you. Very well, if this is the punishment you think this man deserves, then go ahead and do it."

There was a murmur from the other Cetra at this, but none of them came forward to articulate their feelings.

Dalliana ignored them, instead staring hard at Cid. The pilot had to admit he hadn't expect her to say that. He looked at Grem, who returned his gaze as if completely unconcerned about the outcome, whatever it may be. Cid's face went grim, and his hands tightened around the Venus Gospel, preparing to thrust the weapon forward into the man's unguarded neck. Aeris wanted to cry out, to tell him to stop, but she forced herself to remain silent. He wouldn't do it. He was a better man than that. Wasn't he?

He was.

With a curse he lowered the spear and turned away.

Grem just smirked at him and started walking once again.

"Wait!"

They turned to look at Cloud, who slipped out of Tifa's embrace and stood up.

"Perhaps this man deserves death and perhaps not," he said. "I don't think that's for me to decide and apparently no one else here is willing to make that choice. Even so, do you really think it's a good idea to let him just walk away. We know he's dangerous. He's killed before. What's to prevent him from killing again?"

"What do you suggest?" Dalliana asked again.

"I think the obvious choice is to lock him up," Cloud replied. "Put him somewhere where we know he won't harm anyone ever again. It seems to me by letting him walk away, you're just giving him a license to kill again."

"Even if we wanted to, that would be quite impossible" Dalliana replied. "Where would we put him? All our facilities were destroyed with Round Island. Even if it still existed we had no prison, we have no place to put him."

It seemed kind of hard to believe that the Cetra had no prison. It was obvious by the mere presence of Grem that they did sometimes break laws. Was banishment their only resort for a law breaker?

In any case, this was not the time to discuss the finer points of Cetra law.

"Humans do," he said.

"True enough," Dalliana replied. "Unfortunately, humans have no prison that could hold this man."

"But surely there must be *something* you can do!" Cid interjected, still hardly believing what he was hearing. "You mean to tell me after what he did you're just going to let him walk away?"

"No, he doesn't have to walk away," the Cetra Sage spoke up for the first time. "He can take the chocobo."

They all turned to look at him.

"*What?*" Cid sputtered.

"It's a long way to civilization," the Cetra Sage continued. "He'll need some transportation."

Cid just stood there with his mouth open. This time, his friends seemed just as surprised as he was.

"Why are you helping him?" Reeve couldn't help but question, looking at the Cetra Sage.

The Cetra Sage just shook his head.

"Let him go," was all he said. Then he walked over and led the chocobo to the man. After a moment's hesitation Grem mounted, and a moment after that he spurred the bird forward, into the forest and just like that, he was gone.

Cid lowered his spear, shaking his head slowly.

"I don't believe this," he muttered. "What's to say he won't come back later to finish what he started?"

"He won't," Dalliana spoke up. "Without his materia he would be no match for you all."

"It still seems an awful risk," Cloud spoke up. "There's still some materia out there in the world. Who's to say he won't be able to find some somewhere?"

"He will trouble you no more," the Cetra Sage said simply.

Cloud gave him an odd look, but the man said no more.

Dalliana turned to look at Aeris and her friends.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?" Aeris questioned.

"For all that has befallen you," the Cetra woman replied. "All of you. The entire human race, in fact."

They fell silent for a moment. The amplifier was gone. With both Yonsin and Grem out of the picture, Aeris was sure the remaining Cetra would try nothing like that again, even if it were possible. Still, that didn't change what has already happened.

"What about Zangan?" Tifa spoke up eventually, articulating what all the others were thinking. "What about all the other children? Can anything be done for them?"

For a long moment Dalliana made no reply, then she slowly shook her head.

"There's no cure for the virus that infected them," she said. "They are Cetra and will always be. As will their children, and any others humans who have been infected by the virus will have. Eventually... eventually it will spread across the entire world."

"The entire world," Cid muttered. "Then... all children will eventually be born Cetra?"

"Yes," Dalliana replied. "Unless the virus is stopped it will continue to spread until your entire race is infected."

"No cure..." Tifa repeated, and Cloud could hear the pain in her voice.

Cid dropped his spear, raising his arm to wipe it across his brow.

"So that's it then? This is the end. The human race is doomed?"

No one spoke, they all just stood there, looking from the Cetra to the Cetra Sage, but no one seemed to have the answer they wanted to hear.

"Perhaps," the Cetra Sage finally said. "It depends on how you look at things."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Cid muttered, looking at the Cetra Sage darkly, still obviously annoyed at the man for offering Grem a ride.

"The human race is an offshoot of the Cetra," the Sage replied. "Thousands of years ago a portion of the Cetra turned their back on their heritage, became estranged from the rest of the Cetra. These people eventually devolved into the human race."

"Devolved?" Reeve questioned.

"It might be a blow to your pride, but that is the most logical way to look at it," the Cetra Sage replied. "They went back to a more simple time, turning their backs on all the worlds problems, isolating themselves, giving up most of what made them Cetra. But this was not the way it was supposed to be. The Cetra were not meant to live like this. Eventually, your Cetra heritage would come to the fore again. Someday, what the Cetra virus is doing would have happened spontaneously. Someday you would have bore Cetra children even without the virus. It is your destiny. If you want to say that the human race was doomed, then it was doomed from the start. I don't care to look at it that way. Instead, I say the human race is not disappearing, it's just evolving back to what it was supposed to be in the first place."

He paused for a moment, looking in turn at each of the humans in front of him.

"The human race isn't becoming extinct," he said slowly. "It's growing up."