

IC H A P T E R XXIII: UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN...

A cool breeze wafted through the open window of one of Cid and Shera's upstairs bedrooms, stirring the chiffon curtains that framed it. It was a warm day, unusually warm for this time of year. The late morning sun shone brightly outside, reflecting off the green leaves of the oak tree whose branches could be seen through said window. A family of larks had built a nest on one of the branches and the sound of a brace of young birds trilling for food could be plainly heard. A man sat on a bed facing the window. Though his red eyes seemed to be staring right at the window the truth was the sights and sounds of the outside world were lost to him. Deep in his own thoughts, the beautiful day unfolding outside went unnoticed, was, in fact, of no interest to him.

Vincent had been sitting like this for hours, ever since he had arisen. His friends had brought him here, he wasn't sure when. He suspected several days had passed. He remembered that. The first coherent thoughts he seemed to have had in days. He knew what had happened. Even when he transformed into the Chaos beast he was still aware, still knew later on what he had done. In this particular case, he wished with all his heart that he didn't.

He had spent almost thirty years locked in a coffin, his personal demons haunting his dreams, showing him just what a monster he had been. The demons hadn't vanished when he had awoken. The still plagued him, his tortured soul demanding he make amends somehow. Before this all happened, when he was a Turk, he had killed when ordered to, without remorse. He had never thought about what was happening to him, what kind of stain he was putting on his soul. He wasn't sure why these burning feelings of guilt haunted him now. Was it because of what had happened to Lucrecia? Perhaps. That might be part of it, but he could never discount that possibility that it was something Hojo had done as well. It would have fit right in with the man's demented sense of cruelty to give a conscience to a remorseless killer.

Whatever it was that drove him, there was no escape from it. No matter how much he tried, he could not hide nor suppress these feelings inside him. And so, ever since he had awoken from the coffin, he had tried to set things right.

Tried, and failed.

He had tried for so long now to make up for past mistakes, but instead, it just seemed as if his list of sins continued to increase.

He had killed Lucrecia.

No matter that it had been the Chaos beast that had done the actual killing. No matter that he hadn't had any control. All this time he had been trying to make up for what he had allowed to happen to her and what had come of it? What had he done except to make matters worse.

He was cursed. It was something he had suspected from the very beginning. Hojo had turned him into an abomination, something less than human, something that was never meant to have lived. His life was a cruel joke. Even if he had never admitted it to anyone, he had harbored a secret hope deep in his heart that somehow if he strived hard enough and long enough redemption might be possible. He realized now that wasn't the case. No matter how hard he strived he would never find the redemption he sought. It just wasn't meant to be. The powers that be were cruel, would just lead him on, giving him reason to believe, again and again, only to dash what little hope he had just as it seemed to be within his grasp.

It seemed that everything he touched was destined to wither and die. This was his doom and there seemed no hope of altering that fate. He had felt this way on Grouchoon, when he thought he had lost Elena. He had been ready to walk away, to leave everything and everyone behind, for their own good, because eventually he would poison them, poison them all by his mere presence. He should have walked away then, but when he found out Elena was still alive he had let himself believe that maybe he had been wrong, had allowed himself to believe that maybe, just this once, there was some hope for him after all.

And what had come of it? He had walked out on Elena, walked out when she had begged him to stay. He had killed Lucrecia, the woman he had loved, loved more than he had thought he could ever love anyone, the woman he would have died to save, should have died to save. Instead she was dead now, and by his own hand. How could he possibly make up for that? How could he have even the faintest hope of redemption with her blood on his hands?

He didn't. He had no more hope. Redemption was impossible. The only thing that would come from his presence here, the only thing he could give to the people he had come to think of as his friends was pain and death. It was his destiny.

He looked down, staring down at his hands. The metal of his left hand gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the window. His other hand, his human hand, lay in his lap, palm up, looking pale, almost white in the sunlight. His eyes rose,

taking in the bandage wrapped around his shoulder, covering the wound Rude had given him, the wound that had stopped him from killing Elena as well.

If he stayed, he was certain it would be just a matter of time before he finished the job.

The wound ached still. He could barely move his arm. It was something he wasn't used to, this pain, this slow rehabilitation process. The Chadara cells within him gave him unprecedented healing ability.

Or had given him, rather.

They had succeeded at that, at least. The plan had succeeded. Red and Lai Li had calculated properly. The Chadara cells were gone. He was human again. Truly human.

It was funny. To become human again, he had thought he would give anything for that, pay any price. He was wrong, the price had been Lucrecia's life, and it was too steep.

Rude was too good a shot. His bullet had left Vincent wounded but had not killed him. How he wished that bullet had torn through his heart instead of his shoulder.

That was too easy for him, however. At this point, death was a release, was more than he deserved. No, death would be too easy. He wasn't done. He wasn't done suffering. If he suffered for the rest of his life, for eternity, it still wouldn't be enough.

And it would be best for everyone if he suffered alone.

Abruptly he stood up, the first movement he had made, other than his eyes and the slow rise and fall of his chest, in hours. He held back the groan the pain his shoulder tried to pry from him at the movement.

He walked slowly over to the window, looking out. The bedroom overlooked the back of Cid and Shera's house. He could see the Tiny Bronco parked below him, surrounded by the white picket fence that outlined the boundaries of the yard. He was on the second story, a few bedrooms and a bathroom that Cid had added after Sydney had been born. A week ago, it would have been a simple matter for him to leap down to the ground from here.

Now he'd probably break a leg. He had forgotten how weak a normal human body was, how little punishment it could take. It had been so long, so long since he had been human, there was so much he had forgotten. He marveled at the others, those who hadn't had the benefit of his 'enhancements'. Cloud had the benefit of Jenova cells, and was mako infused to boot. Tifa had been mako infused to but not at first, and the others, the others were just ordinary humans and yet they had been through so much, had fought against Shinra, Sephiroth and Jenova. Looking at it now, realizing just how fragile a human body was, gave him new insight into just how much courage they had.

They were good friends. He would miss them.

He stepped forward, right next to the window frame and looked down at the building below. The Tiny Bronco was parked just under the window. If he landed on the wing, he wouldn't have far to drop. It was close enough that he was certain it wouldn't do him any harm.

It was the only way. He couldn't go out the front door. He'd have to walk right past them all to do that, and they wouldn't let him get by without some kind of explanation. And what could he say? They wouldn't want him to leave, he was certain of that. He knew at least some of them would try to talk him out of it and he didn't want to deal with that. There was no point in arguing about it. It would just make things worse.

No, a clean break was best. They might not be happy with that, might hate him for leaving without even a word of goodbye, but he had never been good at goodbyes.

His hands reached down and grasped the edge of windowsill.

"Vincent."

He spun around, startled, to see Elena standing in the doorway. He had been so wrapped up in his own thoughts he hadn't heard the door open, wasn't even sure how long she had been standing there. Normally the slightest noise would have alerted him to her presence. With his old senses there was no way she could have opened the door without him detecting it. It was difficult to adjust to this.

He just stood there, looking at her. She didn't move, just remained by the door, her hands clasped in front of her, a pensive look on her face. The silence stretched between them. Vincent's throat felt dry. She was the last person he wanted to see.

Her presence would make this ten times more difficult than it already was. Silently he cursed himself for taking so long to make up his mind. It would have been so much easier if he had gotten out the window before she walked in, and yet... and yet it felt so good to see her again...

"Elena," he said slowly.

And with the simple evocation of her name, the spell that had been paralyzing her seemed to be broken. She ran forward and threw herself into his arms.

"Vincent!" she sobbed. "I was so scared! I was so worried about you. I'm so glad you're all right. I thought, I never thought... that I'd see you again. I never thought the drug would work on you. I thought you were going to be the Chaos beast forever. I can't believe it, I can't believe you're human, that you're really human. I was so sure it wouldn't work. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't think it could happen, I didn't think you could be human again. I tried to stop you. I was jealous when you went off with Lucrecia, I was afraid I was going to lose you. I know I said some stupid things and I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I was terrified when Rude shot you. I thought you were going to die. I thought it was all over. I was so stupid. Can you ever forgive me?"

Vincent remained silent through this torrent of words. Elena had her arms wrapped around him, her head buried in his chest. His arms just hung limply at his sides. Elena eventually stopped, looking up at him with tear stained eyes. She had been with him all night, sitting beside him, waiting for him to regain consciousness. That was the last thing she remembered. She must have fallen asleep for when she woke up she found herself in a bed in the other room. Someone must have carried her in there because she didn't remember it. She rushed back to his room, and there he was, just standing there by the window. She had never felt so happy in her entire life. She wanted to say more, she wanted to just stand there and hold him forever and ever, but... but she looked up in his eyes and she could tell something wasn't quite right. He wasn't looking at her, just staring into space. He hadn't put his arms around her. He was showing no emotion at all.

"No," he said slowly.

Elena stared at him for a moment, an icy feeling suddenly tugging at her heart. No, he wouldn't forgive her? Was that what he meant? The way he said the word, with no emotion whatsoever. It sounded so much like the Vincent she used to know, the Vincent he had been when they had first met, the cold calculating man who let nothing get near him.

"No," he said again. "It is I who should be sorry. You were right. You were right all along."

Elena still wasn't sure what to say, what he meant. The drug had made him human again, just as he had hoped. She was the one who had told him not to go, the one who thought it would not work.

"What... what do you mean?" she said slowly.

"You were right all along," he said. "I should have left well enough alone. I should have been happy with what little I had. But no, I couldn't do that. In spite of all that's happened to me, I was still foolish enough to hold onto some hope, to believe that perhaps it all could work out for me in the end, that I could live happily ever after."

Elena's arms dropped to her sides. She still didn't understand what he was trying to say.

"But... but we can," she said. "You're human again. It worked. Chaos is gone, he'll never come back. You don't have to live your life as a half monster anymore. For the first time, there really *is* hope."

"Is there?" he questioned. "And what price had to be paid for this? Lucrecia is dead. My list of sins just gets longer. What good is being human if the price I had to pay for that was the life of a loved one?"

Elena took a step back, staring at him.

"A loved one," she repeated slowly. "Did... did you love her that much?"

"Yes," he replied. "Once. All these years I've been trying to make up to her for what I did to her, what I let happen and now... now she's dead, by my own hand. How can I atone for something like that?"

"Atone," she said slowly. "Vincent, there is nothing to atone for! You didn't kill Lucrecia, it was the Chaos beast."

"It's the same thing!" he exclaimed. "I *was* the Chaos beast."

"No! No you weren't! The Chaos beast may have resided in you but he was *not* you. You were two separate entities, to different beings. You can't hold yourself responsible for what the Chaos beast did!"

"Can't I?" Vincent replied. "The Chaos beast was my curse, my punishment for my sins. Now that it's gone, do you think anything will change? Do you think that just because the beast is gone the gods will relent, will let me live in peace? I used to believe that was possible but now it is obvious that it is not so."

"Vincent, please stop it. You're talking nonsense!" Elena retorted, a hint of desperation seeping into her voice. What was he thinking? How could he be like this? She had thought it was over, finally over. The demon was gone. She had thought they could live in peace now, that they could finally find some happiness.

"If only it were," he replied. "Everything that comes near me becomes blighted. That is my curse. The Chaos beast may be gone, I may be human again, but that isn't going to change. Everything, everyone that I love... dies. If I stay, I will only end up hurting you."

Elena took a step back, looking at him with her mouth open. She had been crying tears of happiness when she came in, when she had seen he was all right. The tears continued to flow, but her euphoria had been replaced by a cold feeling welling up from her stomach.

"What...what do you mean if you stay?" she stuttered. "What are you trying to say?"

He just stood there looking at her for a moment, but that just made the feeling inside her grow. He reached out toward her but she suddenly stepped back, not letting him touch her.

"What are you saying?" she demanded.

"I'm saying..."

He stared at her but not another word came out. It was just as he had been afraid of. It would have been so much simpler if he had just slipped out the window five minutes earlier. She would have been hurt, yes, but she wouldn't have had to go through this. This was just dragging out the inevitable.

"Goodbye."

The word was spoken softly, calmly, yet it sent a shudder through Elena's body, as if she had been struck. He didn't see it. He wasn't looking at her. Instead he was moving. Out the window, before she could react, before she could say another word. He heard her cry out his name as his feet struck the wing of the Tiny Bronco, an agonized, wailing sound, the sound of a lost soul. Gritting his teeth, he ignored it, a moment later dropping to the ground.

To see Reno sitting beneath the wing of the plane, a cigarette perched between his lips. He must have come out here for a smoke and now was just sitting there looking at Vincent. He was right beneath the window. He must have heard. He must have heard everything.

Vincent frowned, giving the ex Turk a look of disapproval for overhearing their conversation, as if it was his fault.

Reno just took a long drag from the cigarette. Vincent was about to turn away when he spoke.

"You're such an ass wipe."

Vincent stared at him for a moment.

"I'm in no mood for you," he said coldly.

Reno removed the cigarette from his lips and stood up slowly. He walked over until he stood right in front of Vincent, who was giving him his patented stare, the one that usually send a cold chill down the recipients back. Reno wasn't buying it.

"Don't give me that look," he growled. "You're not dark evil ex Turk Chaos beast guy anymore, remember? You're human now, just like the rest of us. Not only are you not used to that, but you're hurt as well. That wound is going to take some time to heal. I could probably kick your ass pretty easily if I wanted to."

Vincent doubted that. Reno didn't look to be in any better shape than he was. Vincent could see the hint of a bandage wrapped around the man sticking out from his shirt. Still, he had to admit Reno had a point. He suspected his presence wasn't nearly as commanding as it used to be.

"I don't have time for this," he muttered and turned away, but as soon as he did Reno reached out and grabbed hold of his arm. Vincent spun around again.

"Don't have time?" Reno snorted. "What, you got somewhere pressing you have to be? Just can't wait to find some dark corner to crawl in so you can wallow in self pity? Are you really in that much of a rush to do that?"

Vincent just glared at him. Before he could say anything, Reno continued.

"You know, you want to go, that's fine. There's never been any love lost between the two of us. You want to walk out on the best thing that ever happened to you, I can't stop you. Okay, so to this point your life sucks. So what? Join the crowd. Yeah, I know you've gone through a hell of a lot worse than I have, I know I can't 'feel your pain'. I know you've suffered more than anyone on the entire Planet and if you want to walk away and let that rot out your gut for the rest of your life then go ahead, but don't you *dare* whine about how it's all the fault of the powers that be, that some esoteric being has it out for you, that no matter what you do you're doomed to fail.

That is such a cop out. That's the excuse of a loser who doesn't have the guts to even *try* to make things better. It's so easy for you to blame the gods, or blame Hojo, or blame *anyone* but yourself because then you don't even have to try, now do you? After all, what's the point of trying if can't succeed, right? Well that's just bullshit! It's the not gods fault you're so screwed up, it's not Hojo's fault either. There's only one person to blame here, and that's *you*. You've got a simple choice, stay here and try to make your life better, or walk away, walk away from everyone that loves you because of some stubborn insistence that you must 'atone' for your sins. No one gives a shit whether you 'atone' or not, because the fact is, no one blames you for what happened in your life except yourself, and that's the only person who has to learn how to forgive you, not the gods, not any of us, and certainly not Lucrecia."

Reno stopped, catching his breath, surprised at himself for blurting that all out. He couldn't help it though, when it was so obvious to him that what Vincent was doing was just stupid, surprised also that Vincent was still standing in front of him, had stood there impassively throughout his tirade without comment. He did comment now, however.

"What difference does it make to you what I do anyway?"

"It doesn't," Reno retorted. "I don't give a shit what you do. I'm just thinking of Elena. I don't understand why, but she's in love with you. Yeah, I may be a ruthless cold bastard myself sometimes but I've grown kind of fond of her, to tell you the truth, and I don't want to see her get hurt. I told her a long time ago she was crazy to fall for someone like you but she's as stubborn as you are, and she didn't listen. If you ever tell her I told you this I'll kill you but she's my friend and I want her to be happy, and that means that whether I like it or not I gotta stand out here trying to talk a moron like you out of doing something you'll regret for the rest of your life. You've made mistakes in the past, we all have, but every blunder you've ever made will pale in comparison if you walk away now."

He was done. He'd said his peace. Just the fact that Vincent hadn't already walked away gave him hope that maybe a little of what he had said had sunk in. Vincent's expression hadn't changed, he couldn't tell anything from that. Not a surprise really. Vincent was human now but he that hadn't changed him completely. The legendary Vincent stoicism remained intact.

"Are you quite done?"

And the legendary Vincent stubbornness it seemed, Reno thought with an inward sigh.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess I am," he replied in a disgusted voice.

Vincent turned without another word and strode away. Reno just stood behind him, his arms folded across his chest, shaking his head.

"Stupid ass," he muttered.

If Vincent heard the comment, he gave no sign, just continued walking down the road. His mind had been made up, a short time ago, when he had been standing alone in his room. He was certain he was right. Certain that his path was correct. Though he tried mightily to dismiss them, he had to admit that Reno's words left him a bit less certain than he had been. He found his feet more and more reluctant to advance with each step he took, his pace slowing just a short distance down the street until he was barely making progress. He turned to look behind him but Reno was gone.

Was he deceiving himself? He had gone so long without any hope and each time he had let himself have any it had been dashed. Would this time be any different?

He didn't know. He didn't know what to think anymore. It was all so damn confusing. Why did life have to be such a damn mess?

He didn't know. He didn't know what to think, what to do. He didn't know which direction to go. Nothing was simple, not even the difference between right and wrong. He was lost, might always have been, with nothing to hold on to, nothing to cling to.

Nothing... except perhaps one person.

Elena...

~*~

Reno stepped into the house, slamming the door behind him, not in the least interested in concealing his irritation. The others were gathered in the living room, most of them standing around Elena, who was sitting in a chair in the middle of the room, crying her eyes out. Shera stood behind the chair Elena sat on, her arm draped over the younger girl's shoulders, trying to console her. Red sat on the floor at her feet, his tail twitching furiously. Rude and Lai Li sat on a nearby couch, both of them looking at Elena with concern written on their faces. Yuffie stood off to the side, her feet shifting back and forth nervously and looking as if she wished she were anywhere else but here. She turned to look at Reno as he strolled in.

"Reno, talk to Elena!" she exclaimed, running over to him. "She came downstairs just now crying like a baby and we haven't been able to get a coherent word out of her. Find out what the hell is going on!"

"Vincent Valentine," Reno snorted. "That's what's going on."

Yuffie gave him a strange look but didn't ask anymore questions, instead grabbing his arm and pulling him over to Elena, as if he had some magic words that he could say that would instantly make everything all better.

As if.

Reno eventually found himself standing in front of Elena, who did not look up at him. She was sitting in the chair, her face buried in her hands. Reno glanced up and saw the others looking at him, obviously expecting him to somehow find the words to make her feel better. He took a second to glance over at Yuffie, who was obviously the mastermind behind this brilliant plan.

Thanks a lot, he projected silently to her.

Turning back to Elena he paused, realizing he had no idea what to say to her. Well, he had to come up with something.

"I'm sorry," he said. Lame. Very lame. "I heard you two talking upstairs. I was outside having a cig. I tried to talk him out of leaving, but he's a stubborn bastard, I'll give him that. I..."

What could he say? The guy a loser? You should be glad he left? You're better off without him? There's plenty of other fish in the sea? Somehow, he had a feeling none of those statements would help the situation in the least. He really wished he had kicked the shit out of Vincent when he had a chance, but his talk earlier had just been bravado. He wasn't anymore capable of a fight right now than Vincent was. A fine mess that would have been, two invalids going at it. Might have been worth it though.

"I don't think there's anything I can say that will make you feel better," he said with a sigh. "I don't think anyone can. It stinks but this is just something you have to work through yourself."

He fell silent. There was nothing to say, so maybe it was best if he did just that, said nothing. Talking wasn't going to change anything. All he could offer was lame reassurances. He'll come back. He'll come to his senses. He wasn't sure how she would take that. He didn't believe that himself, much less expect her to.

"Elena."

They all spun around, looking at the door, which still stood open from when Reno had come in. Beside him, Reno could see Yuffie's eyes go as big as dinner plates.

Elena's head shot upright, staring at the man standing in the doorway.

"Vincent!" she cried out.

She bolted out of the seat, nearly bowling Reno over in the process and ran into Vincent's arms. This time he didn't just stand there dispassionately, this time he reached out to her as well, wrapping his arms around her, looking down at her as she sobbed into his chest. Elena was trying to say something, but she was still blubbing and all that came out was some kind of incoherent babble.

"I don't believe it," Reno muttered, which was the only thing spoken for quite some time. Eventually, however, Elena got hold of herself well enough to speak an actual sentence.

"You're back? You're... staying?"

She looked up at them man whose arms she was in. He was looking down at her, his red eyes locked on hers. He nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I'm back to stay. I'm willing to give life a chance. I want to be with you Elena. I want to be with you forever. Will you marry me?"

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It was almost midday when Grem reined in his chocobo and looked down at the plain below him. He had reached the continent just after dawn the day after his encounter with Aeris and her friends. He had stopped for the night to rest on one of the western islands. He had been in no rush. Now he looked ahead. To the right a long chain of large grass covered hills ran, hiding the ocean that he knew stood to the north of him from view. To the left was open plain that also faded into hills, a bit higher than those closer to him, off in the distance. Ahead the hills on the right fell away and he could see a town ahead, the roofs of the buildings outlined in the bright sunlight. Kalm. His first stop on his way to his destination.

He smiled slowly to himself. They were all such fools. The other Cetra and Aeris and her friends. Every one of them, to let him walk away like that. No, to lend him a chocobo so he could ride away no less!

Well, perhaps they weren't all fools. The one human, at least, had wanted to kill him. One out of all of them had had some sense, and yet, when given the opportunity, even he hadn't been able to do it. Pathetic! They were all pathetic fools.

They would live to regret that. The human was right, they should have killed him when they had the chance. He wouldn't give them another opportunity. The other Cetra were defeatists. It was obviously up to him to lead the new Cetra, the Cetra children into the golden age, it was up to him to lead the rise of the new Cetra.

In order to do that, however, the old Cetra had to be removed. Permanently.

And he would start with the half breed.

With the chocobo he could be in Ifalna in a few days. The Cetra wouldn't be there. They would be off somewhere licking their wounds, lamenting the loss of any chance of recapturing their former glory. They wouldn't interfere, and the humans couldn't stop him. They were weak. Even without his materia they wouldn't give him any trouble. And once the humans protecting her were out of the way, Aeris would fall easy prey to his mind attack.

And after her, the other Cetra would be next. They would be a tougher nut to crack, he had to admit. He'd probably need materia for that, as well as the element of surprise. Still, he wasn't worried. He could pick them off one by one and even if he got caught, what would they do, banish him again? He almost had to laugh. Their law prevented them from killing a Cetra, prevented them from killing him even as he was wiping them out!

With that kind of attitude, it was a wonder the Cetra has survived at all. No, it was time for something different, time for a new world order. He didn't have the amplifier anymore. He couldn't teach all the children who now had Cetra blood flowing in their veins, but that didn't mean he could do nothing. He could gather what Cetra children to him that he could. He could take them from their humans parents, or kill the humans if they resisted. He could start with a few and when they were old enough, send them out to teach others. It might not be as efficient as the amplifier might have been, it might not be as fast, but it could still be effective, and with the old Cetra out of the way, the children would be brought up right, would have the will to do what they had to do to survive. No, not just to survive, but to take back the planet from the humans, take back the planet that was rightfully theirs!

Grem spurred the chocobo forward, his eyes fixed on the town in front of him, his mind concentrating on his plans, blocking out all else, not even aware of the sun that shone brightly down upon him, the soft breeze that brought with it the faint smell of the ocean, or the Cetra plague that had entered him through the wound Cloud had given him and even now began to course through his veins.

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Tifa opened her eyes and found herself looking at the back of a seat. She lifted her head, finding she was on the Slipstream. The faint rubble of the engine could be felt through the floor. Cloud sat in the seat next to her.

"Where are we?" she said groggily.

"We just reached the mainland," Cloud told her.

She nodded slowly, then yawned and stretched her arms in the air. She brought them down again and rubbed her shoulder. She was still sore from the battle, in spite of Dalliana's healing powers. She had a feeling it would be a while yet before she was her old self.

After Grem had left they had parted ways with the Cetra. She wasn't sure where they were going to go. Aeris had spoken with them but Tifa hadn't heard what they had said. She had kind of been hoping that the other Cetra would come back to Ifalnia with them. After all, it was Aeris home and they didn't have anywhere else to go, but apparently they still uncomfortable around humans and felt, rightly or wrongly, that it might be best if they kept a low profile for a while, after what they had done with the virus and all. Tifa could understand but she no longer held it against them. Yonsin and Grem had been the ringleaders and they were dead or gone. The others had gone along, yes, and she supposed they still had to shoulder some of the responsibility, but they seemed decent enough, and she knew they would make things right if they could, and who knows, maybe somewhere along the line they would be able to come up with some kind of cure. It was possible.

Even if there was, even if they could stop the virus from spreading, she didn't think it would be able to help those already afflicted. She didn't think they'd be able to turn Zangan human again.

Even so, was it so bad that Zangan was a Cetra? If he was going to be cursed with an affliction, she could think of a lot worse that could happen to him.

The Cetra Sage had gone with the Cetra, saying he wished to study them more, and they had taken him gladly. She suspected he might know more about the Cetra than they did themselves.

The rest of them had piled back into the Slipstream and immediately collapsed from exhaustion. That was the last Tifa remembered.

"How long have we been flying?" she asked.

"A couple of hours," Cloud replied. "Everyone else has been up for a while now, sleepyhead."

Tifa made a face but didn't reply. The battle had taken a lot out of her. She glanced out the window and spotted the chocobo ranch on the ground ahead of them. She noticed suddenly that the plane was descending.

"We're landing?" she asked.

Cloud nodded.

"Why?" She had thought they'd want to get back to their homes so they could all get some real rest.

Cloud hesitated a moment, and she saw a flicker in his eyes.

"Because I asked him to," he replied.

Tifa just looked at him but he said nothing more. Before she could question him further the plane bucked as the wheels hit the ground.

When they came to stop Cid got up and pulled open the door, glancing at those behind him.

"All right, everyone can get out and stretch your legs," he announced.

The plane emptied, the passengers scattering about the field beside the chocobo pen. Cloud strode off toward the farm, away from the others, and Tifa followed. Cloud made his way over to one of the pens, finally stopping when he reached the fence, looking at the birds within.

Tifa came up beside him, eyeing him curiously. She could tell there was something on his mind.

"Cloud?" she prodded.

Instead of answering Cloud rested his arms on the top of the fence. One of the chocobo's strode over to them, eyeing them cautiously, probably wondering if this human had any greens.

"I..." he said slowly, eventually. "I can't go back."

Tifa felt a sudden constriction in her throat.

"Cloud..." she said slowly.

Without looking at her he reached out his hand. She took hold of it.

"I have the Cetra Plague," Cloud said, his voice thick with emotion. "I'm a carrier. I can't go near any Cetra. Children all over the world are being born Cetra, especially in Ifalna. If what the Cetra say is true, then more and more will be born that way. I'm a danger, Tifa, I'm a danger to *all* of them."

"Cloud... please," was all Tifa could manage to say. It was true what he was saying. She knew it of course, had know it all along, but she'd forced this ugly truth into the back of her mind, forced herself not to think about it, not to think what his having the Cetra Plague would do to them.

"You know it's true Tifa," he said, finally turning to look at her. He hesitated a moment, seeing the pain in her eyes, the tears that were beginning to form there. She had such beautiful eyes. He could just stand here and stare into them forever.

He quickly looked away. This was too hard. He couldn't look into her eyes. He knew if he did he wouldn't be able to do this, this thing that he had to do. It wasn't fair!

"Where will you go?" Tifa got out. She could barely talk now. The tears had started to fall, and she made no attempt to stop them. It was all going to come out now. She knew it. There was nothing else they could do. She didn't want him to leave. Oh god how she didn't want him to leave!

"I don't know," he said softly, a hitch in his voice, and she could tell he was having as hard a time saying this as she was hearing it. "The Cetra children are being born all over the world. There's no place I can go that I won't be a danger. No place with people, anyway."

Tifa squeezed his hand tighter, as if she never wanted to let it go, and in truth that was the case. She couldn't believe this. After all they had been through, after all they had done for the planet, after all of that she had always hoped that in the end they'd finally find some peace, that one day they'd be able to live happily ever after. Was that so much to ask for?

It would be bad enough for her, living... living without him, but what of him? He was right, no civilized place would be safe for him. Was he doomed to wander the planet for the rest of his life, alone? Just the thought of it was almost more than she could bear.

She reached out, grabbing him with her other hand.

"I... I'll go with you!"

Cloud swallowed, and it was obvious how strongly those words affected him. He turned toward her again, this time pulling her to him, wrapping her in his arms, holding her as tight as he could.

"You know that's not possible," he replied. "Zangan... Zangan needs you. He'll need you more than ever now, now that... I won't be there. Make sure he doesn't forget me."

"Oh Cloud!" Tifa blurted, sobbing now in his arms. For a long time after that she couldn't speak at all, couldn't get out the words she wanted to say, and so she just stood there in his arms shuddering with sobs, her head buried in his chest. He remained immobile, looking down at her soft chocolate hair, tears falling from his own eyes now as well.

"That'll never happen," she said eventually, when she had gained enough control to speak again, though it was so hard to say, so hard to get out. "He'll never forget his father. I won't let him. I'll tell him all about you, every day. I'll tell him what a hero you were, how you saved the planet, made it safe for him and everyone else."

Cloud lowered his head and buried his face in her hair, feeling its silky softness, letting the smell of her fill his senses, letting himself revel in her, for one last time.

"I love you," he said.

She pulled him closer to her.

"I love you too. I love you so much. I don't want you to leave me! I..."

She couldn't continue. Instead she just shook her head, her body shuddering once more with sobs.

Though it was hard, Cloud knew that it was time. Though he wanted to stand there with her in his arms for the rest of his life, he knew nothing more could be gained from dragging this out further.

Gently he disentangled his arms from her own. She resisted for a moment, then relented, letting her own arms fall to her sides. For a moment he faltered, looking at her, looking at her staring at the ground. She looked so... defeated.

Steeling himself, he turned away. No matter how much he didn't want to do this, they both knew there was no choice.

He walked along the rail toward the stable, Tifa following silently behind, but stopped when she reached the door. She was still crying, her eyes red, and she didn't want to go in in the condition she was in. Cloud gave her hand another squeeze and entered the building. Tifa stood outside, feeling alone and lost. A few minutes later Cloud came out leading a green chocobo. It was the best one they had.

He looked down at Tifa and tried to smile, and failed. Together they walked back to the others, who looked at them curiously when they approached with the chocobo. Their faces grew grim when Cloud explained what he was going to do, but no one was really shocked by the news. They all knew the situation Cloud was in. Still, that didn't make it easier for any of them.

Reeve walked up to stand in front of Cloud.

"I'm sorry it had to end up this way," he said, "but it's still possible someone may be able to find a cure. It's still possible that things might turn out okay for you."

Cloud nodded. He knew Reeve was just being optimistic. He didn't think what the man was saying would ever happen, but what the hell, you never know.

"Thanks," Cloud replied. "I hope so."

They shook hands, then embraced. Cid was next, grabbing hold of Cloud and giving him a bear hug that would have impressed Barret.

"This sucks," he said bluntly. "After all that's happened, you don't deserve this kind of crap. I just wish there was something we could do..."

Cloud nodded, noticing Cid's eyes weren't exactly dry, and a little surprised at seeing the pilot so emotional. It was unlike him, but then again, this was an unusual situation, now wasn't it?

Cloud looked over at Tifa standing silently nearby. He nodded his head toward her.

"Take good care of her, will ya?" he asked.

Cid looked a little surprised at that, but then he nodded.

"Of course."

Cid stepped away. Cloud looked up to see Aeris standing some distance away, just looking at him, and he could see she looked just as upset as Tifa had been.

"Aeris..." he said slowly. She couldn't come near him, she couldn't touch him. He was a danger to her as well as the other Cetra, which just made this parting even harder.

"I'm so so sorry," he heard her say.

Once more he tried to force himself to smile. He wasn't sure this time how well he succeeded.

"It's all right Aeris," he said. "There was nothing you could have done. I guess... I guess it was just meant to happen this way, for whatever reason."

Aeris nodded slowly, but still she felt terrible. She couldn't believe it had come to this. She had always had absolute faith that in the end everything would work out for them, for all of them. All this time she had been expecting some kind of miracle, someone to come forward and say, here it is, here's the cure. First the Cetra, and then the Cetra Sage. She had been sure someone would find a solution, had been sure they'd all get to live happily ever after. Yet here they were, with no Cetra or Cetra Sage to help them, with no one to come and save the day. Was this really how it was meant to end?

"I'm sorry Cloud," she said again, not even sure why. "I'll... I'll never forget you."

Cloud felt his own eyes misting up once again.

"I won't forget you either, Aeris," he said softly, and wasn't even sure if she could hear his response.

He turned away, stood there for a moment to compose himself, then lifted his head and stepped over to the chocobo, mounting it. He turned and looked at his friends.

"Goodbye."

The others nodded, but none of them replied, just looked away. Tifa came up beside him and took his hand. He looked down at her.

"Farewell... my love."

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "Not farewell. Until we meet again. I'll find you again, someday. I swear I will. When... when Zangan is older, when he can take care of himself. I'll come find you, even if I have to search every corner of the entire planet. I'll come and I'll find you, and then we can be together again, together again forever."

He looked down at her, and for the second time he felt tears stinging his own eyes.

"I'll be waiting," he told her.

And with that, without another word, he turned and rode away. Tifa stood there transfixed, watching him ride off, fading away across the plain. She saw him turn once, turn once to look back, then continue on. Long after he was gone, had disappeared over the hills she stood there, unmoving, until Aeris came up beside her and took hold of her hand.

"C'mon Tifa," Aeris said softly. "Let's go home."

THE END