

CHAPTER III: THE CHOCOBO SAGE

Elena's face was puffy when she opened the door, her eyes red and her cheeks stained with tears. Reno held out the box of tissues he had had the prescience to bring along.

"Thought you might need these," he commented.

She took them without a word and turned away. He walked in as she sat down on a chair by the counter of her and Vincent's new Weapons Shop. The floor around the chair was already littered with tissues.

"So what happened?" Reno questioned.

"I..." Elena began, seemingly barely able to speak. "And then he...and then...Lucrecia...and she wanted him to go but I didn't...but he wanted to even though he said he really didn't and then he did," she sputtered.

Reno hopped up and sat on the counter beside her.

"Well, that certainly clears things up," he muttered. It was pretty much what he had gotten over the phone. She wasn't listening, but instead crying again. "All right, take your time and we can talk when you regain your ability to speak in coherent sentences."

Reno waited, trying to hide his impatience, as Elena continued to sniffle. Reno had to hand it to Vincent. Whatever his transgression, he had sure outdone himself this time. He knew Elena was the flighty emotional type, but he'd never seen her in this kind of shape before.

He had often wondered why Tseng had picked Elena when he had been out of commission and they had needed another warm body. She certainly didn't seem like the Turk type. In fact, he could think of few people he'd have been less inclined to pick if taken at face value. He knew Elena liked Tseng, but he had never gotten the impression that her feelings were ever returned in any way. Tseng was a consummate professional and would never have let emotions get in the way of his choosing someone to be a Turk, but Reno couldn't help but wonder if Elena's feeling for Tseng had influenced him just this once.

Still, after working all this time with her, he had to admit she did have her good qualities. She was a hard worker when she wasn't blabbing, and she had been more than willing to put her life on the line for them. Hard as it might be to believe, she had always made good decisions when the chips were down. No matter what his personal feelings were she was one of them now. Reno didn't consider himself a particularly moral person. In fact, he tended toward the opposite end of the spectrum, but he did have his own moral compass, tilted as it might be, and at the top of his list was loyalty to his fellow Turks.

Which was why he was here, waiting for Elena to speak, although he thought of himself as pretty much the last person anyone would want to open up to, without once making fun of her. At least, not out loud.

Finally Elena seemed to calm down enough to speak. Haltingly she told Reno what had happened earlier, about how Lucrecia had suddenly appeared as if out of nowhere spouting about some miracle cure, and how Vincent had just gone along with her, in spite of Elena's denouncements that it was a very bad idea.

"So let me get this straight, she offered him a possible cure for this Chaos monster inside him, a chance for him to be normal again, and you were angry that he agreed?" Reno said when she was done.

"Well yeah," Elena replied hesitantly. "But I already told you I didn't believe her."

"But you have no proof she's lying," he pointed out.

"And he had no proof she wasn't," Elena responded. "In any case, he didn't have to go running off with her like that at the drop of a hat while just ignoring the way I felt about it."

"He just ignored you? He didn't say anything to you at all?"

Elena pulled another tissue out of the box.

"He told me he couldn't talk to me when I was like this."

"Like what?" Reno questioned.

"Like this!" Elena said. "All upset and everything. He said I was just being jealous."

"Are you?"

"No, yes...I don't know," she clarified.

Reno looked at her for a moment. She saw his look and turned away from him.

"I should have known you'd take his side," she said miserably.

"I'm not taking sides," Reno said. No matter how much he might think Elena was overreacting, he knew telling her that wouldn't help at all. She was just starting to calm down a little. The last thing he needed was to say the wrong thing and set her off all over again. "But c'mon Elena. You realize what she was offering don't you? A chance to be human? Even if it's some kind of wild goose chase, don't you think Vincent should at least check it out?"

"I don't know," Elena said. "I didn't say he *couldn't* check it out. It was just so sudden, you know? I mean, c'mon, the stores opening tomorrow. I thought things were going pretty well, and now this? I thought we were done with all this crap. I thought we could settle down now and have nice peaceful lives together. But no, Lucrecia has to show up and throw the whole thing in an uproar."

She saw the look Reno was giving her.

"All right, I realize I'm being irrational," she admitted. "But it was all just so sudden. I didn't get a chance to think. Sure, I'd like Vincent to be normal again, just the thought of it gives me chills of excitement, but I don't know. Maybe it's because I'm jealous, maybe I'm just being pessimistic, but I don't think she can do it. After all he and I have gone through, can you blame me?"

"No, I guess not," Reno admitted. "I guess I can see you flying off the handle, but now that you're had time to think about it, how do you feel now?"

She took a moment to blow her nose.

"I don't know," she replied. "I still don't like the idea of him running off with her. With the timing and all, I can't help but think she did this on purpose. She knew I couldn't go with him."

"How could she have known that?" Reno said skeptically.

"I don't know," she repeated. "It wasn't like she couldn't have found out that we were opening the Weapons shop tomorrow. It was in all the papers."

"So she waited all this time just to lure Vincent away by himself," Reno said. "To what purpose, to steal him back?"

"I don't know," she repeated yet one more time. "It's possible isn't it?"

Reno sighed.

"Sure, anything's possible," he conceded. "Look, I know Vincent was pining over Lucrecia all these years, and yes he must have loved her very much, but they had a chance to work things out after we all resurrected Aeris. I still can't believe I had a hand in that..."

"Me neither," Elena muttered. She hadn't been anxious to bring back Aeris at all, but she hadn't had a chance to think about it at the time, and even now it still seemed a better choice than having that nutcase Sephiroth running around loose.

"Anyway, you know what happened," Reno continued. "They had time afterwards to spend together. You know it didn't work out for them. Things had changed between them, right? Not surprising really, after all, Lucrecia was now thirty years older and Vincent hadn't aged at all. That's a big stumbling block right there if you ask me."

"Age doesn't make any difference at all," Elena disagreed. "They *loved* each other."

"With the emphasis on past tense," Reno noted. "Look, what I'm trying to say is they had their chance to get back together and it didn't work out. Vincent did his atonement or whatever the hell he needed to. They were over each other, so what's the big deal? You think she suddenly changed her mind after all this time?"

"Well, it's possible," she said defensively.

"Like I said, anything's possible," Reno replied. "Okay, even if that's true, even if she came back for Vincent, what makes you think *he'd* be interested now? It's not like he's still pining for her."

"Yeah but..." Elena said. She shook her head.

"The way I figure it is, he'll go with her until he finds out this whole thing ain't gonna work, and then he'll come wandering back to you," Reno said.

Elena looked up at him.

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course," he replied. "I told ya, they already had their shot. It's over between them. But if it'll make you feel better, I'll send someone over to Nibelheim to check out the situation."

"Oh thank you Reno!" Elena said gratefully.

"Yeah, yeah, don't get too excited about it," he said quickly, holding up his hands. "Don't think I'm doing it out of the goodness of my heart, I'll make you make up for it in paperwork."

"That's okay, you're a true friend."

"Whatever," he grumbled. "Just don't let it get around."

"I'll make sure it stays our little secret," she told him.

"Yeah, and we know how good you are at keeping secrets."

She gave him a look.

"I'll keep this one," she promised.

"All right then." He looked her up and down. She looked much better than she had when he first walked in the door, well enough that he thought a little kidding wouldn't bother her. "It's all your own fault anyway," he continued. "Didn't I tell you never to get involved with a vampire?"

"He's *not* a vampire!" Elena defended him.

"So you've said before," Reno replied. He got up, looking at her closely. "I don't know though. Is that a bite mark I see on your neck there? Or is that just Vincent's idea of a hickey?"

Elena pushed him away.

"There is nothing on my neck!" she insisted, rubbing it with her hand. "You are so *bad*."

Reno grinned.

"Yeah, I know. So, you feel better now?"

"Yes much," she said, nodding vigorously.

"Good," he replied. "There's enough weird things going on today without you cracking up on us."

"Oh, what do you mean?" she questioned.

Reno told her about the young man who had barged into their office right before he had left to come here.

"He called Yuffie his bride?" Elena exclaimed, her eyes widening.

"Uh huh," Reno said. "Apparently they had known each other as kids, but when the war came his family moved away from Wutai, up into the mountains somewhere, supposedly. Before he left they promised they'd meet again and get married. Apparently they were only about five or six when this happened but he seems to have taken it very seriously."

"That's unbelievable," Elena stated. "Surely he doesn't expect Yuffie to hold to a promise like that?"

"Seems so," Reno said matter-of-factly.

Elena stopped suddenly and looked at him.

"How do you feel about that?" she questioned.

Reno shrugged.

"It's got nothing to do with me," he said.

"Oh you are so full of it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I know you've got the hots for Yuffie."

Reno's eyebrows went up.

"I do *not* have the hots for Yuffie," he denied categorically.

"Yeah right," she replied. "As if it wasn't *obvious*."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"C'mon," she cajoled. "You can't fool me. I've seen you two together plenty of times. There's got to be something to it."

"You see us together because she's a pest and follows me around all the time," he replied. "It's not me who has the hots for her, it's the other way around."

"Yeah, and you feel nothing at all," Elena said sarcastically. "You've gone on dates with her."

"So what? I've gone on dates with lots of woman."

"No, it's more than that," Elena insisted. "Tell me, how many other women have you dated more than once in the last six months?"

"I don't know," he said slowly.

"How many?"

"I told you, I'm not sure. Plenty."

"One, two, five?" she prodded.

"I am *not* going to get sucked into this conversation," he announced.

She looked at him for a moment.

"Fine, but don't think I'm not on to you."

He didn't bother to give her a response.

"So where is he now?" she questioned. "I can hardly wait to see what Yuffie has to say about this."

"I sent him off to Ifalnia," Reno told her. "Yuffie's there for Cloud's kid's birthday."

"Zangan," she told him.

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, I was tempted to go along with him just to see the look on her face."

Elena smiled. She had to admit that should be quite an interesting meeting.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't," she said.

"All right," he said, looking around for a moment. "It's not gonna do you any good sitting around here. Too many reminders of fang boy. C'mon, let's blow this joint."

She looked at him for a moment.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm treating Rude and Lai Li out to dinner," he said. "You might as well join us and we'll make it a foursome."

"You're treating them? Reno is treating? How'd that happen?"

"I lost a bet," he replied.

She looked at him. He waved his hand.

"It's a long story. C'mon, I'll tell you on the way."

Cloud woke up and rubbed his eyes. He sat up. Light was streaming in through the curtains. He glanced over at the clock on the mantle. Not even eight o'clock yet. A little early for him to be up, actually. He looked over and saw the bed next to him was empty. He pulled the covers off and got up.

Most everyone was still asleep, though he could hear some sounds from the kitchen. Not hard to guess who was in there. He had to pick his way through the bodies of those sacked out on the living room floor to reach the kitchen. He smiled. Seeing everyone here, he couldn't help but be reminded of old times, with all of them gathered together chasing after Sephiroth. It had been wild but fun, and they got together so rarely of late.

Tifa was indeed cooking in the kitchen. Aeris was there too, setting the table in preparation for breakfast.

"You two the only one's up?" he asked.

"Apparently," Aeris replied. "It is a little early. I'm sure the smell of food will rouse most."

"Don't get up, don't eat," Tifa proclaimed.

Cloud sat down at the table and rested his arms on it.

"That's good enough for me," he said. He looked at Aeris. "So, you think we'll get any useful information about the Cetra Sage from the Chocobo Sage?"

Aeris lifted her shoulders.

"I don't know," she replied. "I certainly hope so. It's really the only clue we've got."

"True," he muttered. The Chocobo Sage. The absent minded little man in the mountains. He had almost forgotten the man existed.

"So, is Elmyra going to look after Zangan?" he asked, turning toward Tifa this time.

She had her back to him. She hesitated for a moment.

"I'm not going," she said finally.

"Huh?" Cloud and Aeris both said.

Tifa turned around.

"I'm not going," she repeated. "I think it would be better if I stay here with Zangan."

Cloud saw the troubled look on her face. She was obviously still bothered by what had happened yesterday. Still, no harm had come of it and he seriously doubted if anything else would happen. Whoever, or whatever, had done it had gotten their point across.

"Aww c'mon Teef," he said. "We're not going to be gone long. Just a quick run to the Chocobo Sage's and back. Shouldn't be more than an hour or two. I don't think anything's going to happen in that time."

"No, I'd rather not leave," she said, slowly shaking her head.

"But we might need you," he tried again.

"I don't care," Tifa cut him off, making it pretty plain that she had made up her mind. "I'm staying."

Cloud just looked at her for a moment. He opened his mouth again but then abruptly closed it. He could see from the look in her eye that arguing would be pointless. Sometimes she could be as stubborn as Aeris.

"Why don't you bring him with us?" Aeris suggested.

Cloud nodded toward Aeris.

"Yeah, why not?" he said, suddenly brightening.

Tifa looked at them for a moment.

"It might be dangerous," she said eventually.

"Dangerous? Tifa, it's the Chocobo Sage!"

"We've been to other places we thought were safe and didn't quite turn out that way now haven't we?" she pointed out. "Didn't you just say you might need me? Well, why would you if it's so safe? What, you need someone to make lunch?"

Cloud gave her a look.

"It's not about your cooking, or your fighting skills for that matter, that we want you along," he said. "You're a part of the team."

"Yes," Aeris agreed. "You never know who's going to contribute something important. We want you to come along."

Tifa looked suddenly embarrassed. She turned away.

"Thank you," she said. "I didn't mean to make this a 'let's praise Tifa' thing. I wasn't fishing for compliments. It's no big deal. You're only going to be gone a little while, and you can fill me in when you get back. I'm sure if I have any 'sage' comments to make, I'll be able to do it then."

Cloud drummed his fingers on the table.

"If you really want," he said. "But I still don't see why you just don't bring Zangan along. If you think it's dangerous you can both stay in the Slipstream the whole time. I'm sure you'll be safe there."

"I don't know," Tifa replied. "I'd just rather...not."

"All right, if you wish," Cloud gave in. He was disappointed, though he wasn't really sure why. She was right, they'd only be gone for a little while and they could fill her in when she got back. It wasn't like the *needed* her there.

"Breakfast is ready," Tifa announced.

About an hour later breakfast was finished. The others had gotten up, or been prodded, and now everyone's stomach was full and Tifa was clearing off the table. There had been much discussion about the Chocobo and Cetra Sage during the meal, but no great revelations came from it. They weren't going to learn anything new until they stood in front of the Chocobo Sage himself.

Cid stood up and stretched.

"Well, we ready to get this show on the road?" he asked.

Cloud grabbed hold of Tifa's hand as they all headed for the front door.

"We shouldn't be too long," he told her. "No more than a couple of hours."

Tifa nodded.

"Be careful."

"I will." He kissed her.

The others filed out the door. Barret, who was last, took a look at them before exiting.

"Better get going," Tifa said. "Or they'll leave you behind."

"You sure you won't change your mind?" he tried one last time.

She shook her head.

"You sound like we won't be seeing each other for days."

"Yeah, well," he replied, not really sure what to say. "All right, I'll get going. Be back soon."

"Bye," she said.

They kissed again, then he walked out the door. He started down the street, after the others who were far ahead by now. He glanced back but couldn't see anything but the front of their small cottage. They had moved to Ifalnia a few months after the battle with Wisteria. After the bar had been destroyed in Kalm, they really hadn't had anything to keep them there, and Cloud felt Tifa would be more comfortable near her friend Aeris. Their house was on the surface, not far from the old entrance to the city below. The city on the surface was now larger than below ground. Even so it wasn't that far a walk to the new airport.

Shortly afterward they found themselves aboard the Slipstream.

"Are you sure you can find this guy?" Barret questioned as he buckled himself in.

"It has been a long time, hasn't it?" Cid commented. "We'll just have to see."

In minutes they were in the air. Cid banked the plane to the north. The Chocobo Sage's little cabin hadn't been all that far from Ifalna. Hopefully it would only take them minutes to get there, that was, if the guy was even still alive, Cid thought ruefully. As far as he knew, no one had been to visit the man since they had. No one had seen him nor hair of him. But as far as he knew, no one had before they had run into him on their quest either. For all they knew, he could still be there wandering around in his little cabin perfectly happy with only a chocobo or two to talk to.

Cid only had to hunt for a little while. They came over the crest of a snow covered peak and saw a cabin nestled in a small clearing in the snow below. Cid brought the Slipstream down on the edge of the cleared area.

"All right, that was easy," Red proclaimed as they disembarked.

"Let's just hope he knows something," Cloud commented.

"Let's just hope he's even here," Yuffie said rather pessimistically.

It was obvious right from the get go that someone was there. A thin line of smoke curled up from the chimney, before being dispersed by the winds blowing down from the mountains. Cloud looked around slowly as they approached the cabin. It had been a long time since they had last been here, but it seemed as if nothing had changed.

And indeed, everything inside the cabin was the same as well, the only difference being the chocobo in the small stable was black this time. The Sage stood by the fire with his back toward them, wearing the same floppy hat he had on the last time they had seen him.

"Hello, Mr. Sage," Aeris called out.

The Chocobo Sage turned around. He looked exactly the same as he had, small jolly eyes framed by white hair and beard. He squinted at them for a moment.

"Well, visitors," he muttered. "I haven't seen anyone in here in...in...well, I don't know how long it's been. Last spring I would think. That nice gentlemen came in with more supplies. Hmm, or was that the spring before..."

"We need some information about the Cetra Sage," Barret said bluntly.

"But wait, I forget my manners," the Sage went on as if he hadn't heard. "Understandable since it's been so long since I've had guests. Or at least, I think it has. Come, come in. Sit down and make yourselves at home."

The others looked around at the sparsely furnished room. There was no place to sit.

"That's all right, we're quite comfortable the way we are," Aeris reassured him. "We need to know if you've ever heard of the Cetra Sage."

"Cetra Sage eh? Cetra Sage...I have heard that before..."

"You have? Where?" Yuffie cut in.

"It was...it was...well, I'm not sure actually. Who did you say you were again?"

"We didn't," Barret said impatiently. "We're Avalanche, and we need to find the Cetra Sage."

"An avalanche did you say? We haven't had one of them here in years. I remember the last time we had one. Came down out of the mountains in the west. Nearly buried the cabin. Spent days digging out."

"No, not an avalanche," Barret said. "We're Avalanche. It's the name of our group. That's not important though. What we really need to know is how to find the Cetra Sage."

"What's that? The name of your group? Well, if that don't beat all. What a strange name. What a strange name indeed."

He seemed to ponder this for some time.

"Well, do you know anything about the Cetra Sage or not?" Barret said impatiently.

"Young people, always in a rush. I suppose it's always been that way though. You get older you realize life isn't going to pass you by if you sit back and relax for a bit. You may even see something you would have missed in all your running here and there."

"We're sorry if we appear a bit rushed, but it is very important to us," Cloud stated.

"Yes, yes," the Sage said, nodding. "Everything is rush rush and important important. That's another thing with young people. Everything is so important. What you don't seem to realize is that whatever you do or don't get done today, the sun will still rise tomorrow."

"That's all well and good," Barret said, beginning to sound rather exasperated. They had all forgotten just how much the Chocobo Sage's mind could wander. "There's no rush, it's not that important, take your time. Just tell us what you know."

"About what?" the Sage questioned innocently.

Barret's hands shook.

"About the Cetra Sage," Cid spoke up.

"Ah yes, the Cetra Sage. I have heard that somewhere..."

"You already told us that," Yuffie exclaimed.

"Oh, have I? Well, if I already told you, then why are you asking me again?"

"Grrrr!" Yuffie growled.

"Yuffie, calm down," Aeris said. "You know he's a little absent minded."

"A little?" she exclaimed, obviously in no mood to calm down. "He's a doddering old fool! He's even worse than last time. We're never going to get any useful information out of him!"

"Yuffie!" Aeris chastised.

"What?" Yuffie proclaimed. "You know it's true! Ask anyone!"

"Yuffie, if you can't say anything useful, why don't you just stay out of it?" Cid interjected.

"Don't tell me what to do!" Yuffie exclaimed. "You think you can get him to talk? Admit it, you're as impatient about this as I am!"

"Maybe so, but I don't think insulting him is going to help the situation," Cid responded.

"Yeah Yuffie, lay off," Barret added.

"Oh so now you're all picking on me because I had the courage to say what you were all thinking?"

"We were not all thinking that," Red said.

"Oh no, you were thinking the man is a tower of intellect, right?"

"It doesn't matter what I think," Red stated. "The fact of the matter is this man may be our only chance to find the Cetra Sage."

"Well, then it doesn't look like we're going to find him, now are we?" Yuffie shot back.

"Oh Yuffie, just shut up!" Barret snapped.

"Shut up yourself!"

"All right, that's it!" Aeris suddenly shouted. "Everyone *out*!"

They all stopped and looked at her.

"You heard me. Go! Out! All of you!" she exclaimed, pointing at the door.

"Geez Aeris, you..." Yuffie began.

Aeris pinned her with a look.

"Go!"

They all looked at one another for a moment.

"Fine," Yuffie muttered. "You want to stay in here all day and bang your head on the wall be my guest. Good luck to you."

She walked out the door. One by one the others filed out as well. Cloud came up to the door last and closed it. He walked back over to Aeris. She looked at him for a moment but said nothing to him, instead turned back to the Sage.

"I apologize for the rudeness of my friends," she said. "But it is very important information we are seeking and some of them are a little big...high strung."

The Sage just looked at her with a bemused expression.

"No need to apologize," he said, sounding not in the least bit offended. Cloud wasn't even sure he realized he had been insulted. "Your friends had to go?"

"Yes, they had to go," Aeris agreed.

"Young people. Always in such a rush. I suppose that's the way it will always be. Did you come here to buy something?"

"No, actually we came to ask you about the Cetra Sage," Aeris said patiently.

"Ah yes, I haven't heard that name in a long time."

"So you have heard it before," she said.

"Yes, I do remember something...something long ago. I don't think...Have we been introduced?"

And so it went on. The Chocobo Sage rambling about this and that, and Aeris, with seemingly infinite patience, constantly leading him back to the question of the Cetra Sage. Cloud wasn't sure how long they talked. There was no clock in the room, but it seemed like hours. For a long time Aeris didn't seem to be getting anywhere, and Cloud soon lost interest in the conversation. After a while, in fact, he started to think that maybe Yuffie was right, but Aeris refused to give up. Cloud left her too it, it being obvious that she was the only one here with the patience to handle this. After a while, he walked over to the black chocobo and started to pet it. It seemed very friendly.

He wasn't sure how long the conversation went on as just an indistinct murmur in the background, but when he tuned back in, it seemed that Aeris had made some progress.

"The eastern islands?" she said.

Cloud walked back over to them.

"In the east," the Sage said. "It was long ago. He might not even be there anymore. Things change. People move on. But he was there, on the eastern island."

Aeris looked up when she saw Cloud come up beside her.

"See, he does know something," she said. "He says the Cetra Sage can be found on one of the eastern islands."

"That helps," Cloud said. "But there are a lot of islands. Can't he narrow it down a bit for us?"

"I've been trying," she said.

She looked at the Sage again.

"Which eastern island?" she questioned. "What do you remember about it?"

"It was to the east," he said. "That's all I know. Ask the goblins. Maybe they know more."

"The goblins?"

"The goblins," the Sage repeated. "They know the area. They live on those islands. They should know."

"We met goblins once when we were chasing Sephiroth," Cloud said.

"You did?"

"Yeah, don't you remem..." Cloud shut his mouth, realizing it had happened after Aeris had been killed. "It was on one of the eastern islands too. Not sure which one, but maybe someone will remember. Cid might."

"You don't remember anything else?" Aeris asked the Sage.

"I remember lots of things," he told her. "What did you have in mind?"

Aeris turned back to Cloud.

"I don't know if he knows more, and I don't know how long it would take to get more out of him."

"No, this is good," Cloud said. "This is as good as we can hope for, I think. It's not perfect, but it's a starting point, and I think most of us would be more willing to search the entire eastern sea than try to get any more information out of him."

Aeris nodded.

"Well, thank you very much Mr. Sage," she said. "It was a pleasure talking to you, but we really have to go."

"Sorry to hear that," the Sage replied. "Drop in any time and we can have another chat."

"I would love to," Aeris said. They walked over to the door.

"Goodbye" Aeris called out.

"Bye. Come again soon!"

They stepped outside. Cloud let out a sigh of relief.

"It was a pleasure talking to you?" he said.

Aeris nudged him.

"It wasn't that bad," she said.

"Tell that to the others," he said. He could see them standing by the Slipstream. As soon as Cloud and Aeris had emerged, that had started over.

"So, did you learn anything?" Reeve asked.

"He's on one of the eastern islands," Aeris said.

"You mean you actually got some information out of him?" Cid questioned.

"Yes," Aeris replied. "He wasn't that bad."

"Coulda fooled me," Cid commented.

"The eastern islands?" Red said slowly.

"Yeah, it was the best we could do," Cloud replied.

"That narrows it down some, but it's still a lot of ground to cover," Red observed.

"Yeah, what say we go onboard and plot our strategy on the way back."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Cid said.

They reboarded the aircraft and soon were winging their way back to Ifalna.

"So what do we do now?" Barret questioned as the Slipstream sliced through the air.

"I guess we have to hunt through the eastern islands," Cloud said. "The Chocobo Sage said something about goblins knowing where the Cetra Sage might be. We met some goblins on one of the eastern islands when we were chasing Sephiroth. Anyone remember where that was?"

"I do," Red said. "But you must remember that goblins are indigenous to most of the eastern islands. That's not really that good a clue."

"Well it's a lot better than we had to go on before, now isn't it?" Cloud pointed out.

"Oh yes indeed," Red agreed. "Still, unless we get lucky, it might take a while to find any goblins who know this Sage and are willing to part with the information. It doesn't sound like it's going to be something that gets done in a day. It might be a long drawn out search."

None of them seemed all that happy with the prospect.

"I'm afraid I can't be away from Ifalna for any extended period of time," Reeve said apologetically. "We're still working on a some major building projects, and I've got to be there to oversee. Also, since the whole Cetra baby thing, the Church of Humanity has been making noises again."

The others looked at him.

"It's not that bad," he reassured them. "Gilan has been careful not to directly criticize Aeris, or speak openly against the Cetra, but he still needs to be kept an eye on. I don't think it would be wise for me to be gone right now. I'm sorry, but if you're just looking for the Sage, you probably don't need me anyway. I'll send Cait with you and if you find the Sage or discover something important, I can always come meet you."

"I understand," Cloud said. Sometimes it was hard to remember that they weren't the carefree people that they used to be when Avalanche was first formed. Most of them were well respected people who had important jobs. They couldn't just all run off at the drop of a hat anymore.

"I'm afraid I'm in pretty much the same boat," Barret spoke up. "I've just got too much work at Corel. But like Reeve said, if anything important comes up, I'm just a call away."

Red lifted his head.

"Same here," the red beast said. "Being Protector of the canyon can be a full time job."

Cloud looked at all the dejected faces.

"It's all right," he said. "You're right. It's not important. At least, not yet. It's not going to take all of us to search. Cid, what about you?"

Cid shrugged.

"Shera can take care of things in Rocket Town, though she might not be all that happy about it. But you're going to need a pilot, right?"

"I'm afraid so," Cloud said. He looked at Aeris.

"I'm going," she told him before he could say anything.

"I kinda thought so," Cloud replied. He looked at Yuffie.

Sounds kinda boring, but I guess I'm in," shes stated.

"I'm sure Tifa won't want to leave Zangan," Cloud continued. "Looks like it's just us and Cid then, unless we can convince Vincent to come along."

"He and Elena are opening a store, remember?" Aeris reminded him. '

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that," Cloud admitted. "I guess he's out to then."

Damn, it seemed a shame somehow that so many of them couldn't come along, but that was life.

Cloud sat back in his chair. Nothing anyone could do about it. Maybe they'd get lucky and find the Sage soon. You never knew.

Already Ifalnia was in sight in front of them. Cid brought the plane down without incidence and they retraced their path back to Cloud and Tifa's house. As they approached Tifa came out to greet them.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"Not too bad," Cloud said, slipping his arms around her and kissing her. "We think the Cetra Sage might be somewhere on one of the eastern islands."

"That doesn't sound all that exact to me," she commented. "C'mon inside. Yuffie," she continued, turning toward the young ninja. "There's someone here who's very interested in meeting you."