

CHAPTER V: CONFRONTATION

It was a beautiful day.

The temperature was in the mid seventies. The sky was clear, the bright yellow orb of the sun and a few small innocuous cumulus clouds the only thing marring the slate blue tablet above her head. A refreshing breeze blew from the south, bringing with it the cool scent of trees that made up the bulk of the forest surrounding Ifalna, trees whose type Tifa still could not identify. It was spring, the flowers were in bloom, flowers that seemed to spring up everywhere in this city. It was the kind of day that Tifa used to yearn for in Nibelheim and dream about when she lived in Midgar. The kind of day to lighten the heart, that used to make all her troubles fade away.

Yet try as she might, she couldn't shake the troubled feeling from her heart. Cloud had been gone two days now. He was gone and she had no idea for how long. Off to the eastern islands with Cid, Cait...

...and Aeris.

She shook her head, her hair slapping against her back. Was that it? Was that what was really bothering her? It seemed hard for her to believe she might still be jealous of Aeris after all this time. She and Aeris were best friends, Aeris had been the Maid of Honor at her wedding. She thought of the young Cetra as her sister. Cloud had made his choice. I know he loves me, she thought. He had told her dozens of times. They were married, they had a child. She had no reason to be jealous. No reason at all.

The deep resonant clanging of a faraway bell came to her. The church in the town square, right in the center of above ground Ifalna, was tolling, just as it did every day at noontime. She had gotten used to it in the time they had been here. It was somehow comforting to hear it now.

She was just being silly, but she couldn't help how she felt. She knew Cloud had had feelings for Aeris. He had never told her just how strong those feelings had been, and she had never asked. She still hadn't completely gotten over her natural shyness about such questions, but even so it didn't matter now. He had made his choice. That was in the past.

No, it wasn't about Aeris. Okay, maybe it was a *little* bit about Aeris, but not mostly. It was mostly the fact that he was just away, no matter who he was with. She missed him so much, even when he was home and just went to the store or something. She missed him every minute he was gone. She just loved him so much she wanted to be with him every second of every day.

She wondered if that was normal. Was she being obsessive? Cloud seemed to think it was cute sometimes when she wanted to be with him, but other times she could tell he didn't really want her company. The way he had grown up, he had always been a loner. Sometimes he just didn't want anyone's company. He was always polite about it, but it still hurt a little bit when he pushed her away. It was hard sometimes, but they were different people, and she just had to understand that. He needed his space sometimes and she didn't want to smother him. That would just push him away even more.

She was so wrapped up in her musing that she didn't notice the man walking toward her until he stepped in front of her and she was forced to halt or run into him.

"Tifa Strife?"

She looked at the man without replying. He was older than her, his dark hair graying on the sides. He was staring at her with a piercing gaze. She didn't like the look.

"You're Tifa Strife, aren't you?" he questioned again after her non response.

"Do I know you?" she asked. She had never seen the man before.

"My name is Marlek, but that's not important. I need to talk to you. Your friends are in danger."

He grabbed hold of her arm and started to lead her to the side, toward a narrow alley between two buildings.

She resisted, bringing them to a halt. She had no idea who this man was. She didn't like the look of him, and she'd be damned if she let some strange man pull her into an alley without an explanation.

"Where are we going?" she said sharply. "If you want to talk, tell me here."

He head spun from side to side, his eyes darting up and down the street.

"No, not here," he said. "It's too dangerous. I can't let Yonsin find out I talked to you."

"What do you mean? Who is Yonsin?"

He pulled harder, which just made her more resistant.

"I'll tell you as soon as we're someplace safe!" he exclaimed.

He was nearly dragging her now, but she wasn't about to cooperate without some kind of explanation. Still he was strong. His hand felt like a vice around her wrist.

"You're hurting me," she said.

He immediately let go.

"I'm sorry. But you have to understand, we're both in grave danger. So are your friends. We can't talk here. Come with me. Just into the alley where we're not so noticeable."

She just looked at him for a moment. She felt much better now that he had let her go.

"Please!" he implored.

She didn't think it was a good idea. She didn't trust him, but now that he wasn't holding on to her anymore she felt more in control. If he tried anything funny she could just run away, plus it wasn't like she wasn't capable of defending herself.

She gave a curt nod. Relief flooded his face as he led her quickly into the alley. As soon as they were out of sight from the street she stopped.

"All right, now what is this all about?" she demanded.

"Your friends who are going to search for the Cetra Sage are being led into a trap."

She just stared at him. She had thought he might be just some kind of nut but that obviously wasn't the case. How could he know that they were searching for the Cetra Sage?

"How do you know that?"

"It doesn't matter," he said quickly. "Please just be quiet and listen. The longer we're together the more dangerous it is for both of us. The Cetra Sage is a myth. He doesn't exist. It's just an old legend that Yonsin is using to lure Aeris away from the rest of you."

Tifa didn't know what to think. He certainly sounded sincere but could she believe anything this man was telling her, appearing out of the blue like this?

"Why is he trying to lure Aeris away?" she asked.

"Aeris is the key! He has to get her out of the way or else she'll give it away!"

He was talking so fast now she could hardly understand him.

"Give it away? Give what away?"

"The plan! The whole thing! She'll hear it right away. She'll be able to tell exactly what's going on as soon as Yonsin tries to use...arrrgghh!"

His scream made her take a step back in shock. His hands went up to his head, grabbing hold of it as he crumpled over. He fell down on the floor, writhing in agony, holding his head, although she could see no apparent cause for his pain.

"What's wrong?" she shouted, not knowing what else to say.

He didn't answer, didn't seem to hear her. He just lay on the ground, screaming in pain. Tifa stood there with her heart in her throat. She didn't know the man at all, but she still felt for him. She didn't like to see anyone in that kind of pain. The cries were agonizing, but he didn't seem to be injured. Whatever it was it seemed to be in his head and she didn't know what she could do about it. She bent down beside him, grabbing hold of him, feeling helpless but barely able to stand his cries.

"I don't know what to do!" she shouted. "What can I do to help you?"

He seemed to have heard her. He tried to speak, but all that seemed to come out was incomprehensible groans and cries.

"Please tell me what I can do to help!" she said.

He lashed out, his arms flailing, and one of them struck her across the face. It stung a bit but she ignored it, more concerned with him than herself. Suddenly his whole body stiffened, his eyes bulging and staring up into the air. He gave out one last choking cry, then fell silent.

Tifa still had a hold of him. She stared at him, barely believing what she was seeing. Was he dead? It had almost seemed an accident, as if he had had some kind of seizure, except the timing seemed awfully suspect. There had to be more to it than that. Could it have been some kind of poison?

She looked around, seeing if someone was around who could summon help, late thought it might be. She did see someone. A man standing at the entrance to the alley, but when she looked up at him he turned and disappeared.

She stood up and ran to the end of the alley. She looked down the street and saw the man walking swiftly away. She hadn't gotten a very good look at him. All she could tell was he had dark hair and was wearing a light brown trench coat.

She ran after him. The way he had been looking down the alley made her feel he wasn't just someone who had happened to glance in out of curiosity. Her suspicions were confirmed when he turned around to look behind him again. When he saw her pursuing him, he broke into a run.

She increased her speed, running down the road, heedless of the looks others gave her. At first she gained on him. She had exercised regularly after having Zangan, and had gotten herself back into good shape even though she still felt she wasn't quite back to where had been before having the baby. Still, between regular exercise and the mako that had been infused in her, there weren't many people who could outrun her.

After the initial gain, however, he put on a burst of speed until she was no longer gaining. Perhaps he was one of the few, after all.

As it turned out, she never got the chance to find out. They had been racing down the streets for only a few blocks when he suddenly darted to the side, into a narrow crossroad. When she reached the corner and charged around it she saw the man just a short distance ahead, hauling himself up onto a chocobo.

"Stop!" she yelled, for want of a better idea. He turned back, glancing at her for a moment. They were much closer now. She could see him clearly. He looked about the same age as the man in the alley. Their features were somewhat similar too, shallow chin and narrow eyes. They could almost pass for brothers and for all she knew, that's exactly what they were.

Unfortunately, if that was true, she wasn't going to find out from this man, at least, not anytime soon, for in spite of her shout he turned away and with a flick of the reins the chocobo raced off, its plumage flashing in the sunlight. Tifa just stopped and stared, bending down and resting her hands on her knees, panting. She knew that further pursuit was useless. She might have been able to hold her own against a human but she certainly couldn't catch a chocobo. Especially a golden one.

"Damn," she muttered softly.

There was nothing she could do. There was no way for her to follow. She stood up again and started walking rapidly back to the alley. After a moment she broke out into a run again. The man that had been attacked seemed dead to her, but she hadn't felt for a pulse of anything. Maybe, just maybe he was still alive. He was the only one who could give her any answers now.

It didn't take her long to make it back to the alley. A few minutes at most. She turned down it once more and stopped, looking around slowly.

It was deserted.

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"How much longer we gonna wander around this God forsaken place?"

Cloud shrugged his shoulders at the pilot's question but remained silent. He had to admit he wasn't too pleased to be wandering through the woods for hours either. It was a warm day, and the forest around them stifled the refreshing breeze that blew in off the shore on the beach. He was hot, tired and covered with little fuzzy burrs that clung tenaciously to his shoelaces and lower pant legs, a byproduct of tramping through the bushes. They had been here for hours and had run into a swamp, thorn bushes and spiderwebs, but so far, no goblins.

"Are you sure we're on the right island?" Aeris questioned.

"Sure I'm sure," Cid replied curtly, giving her a look as if it was blasphemy to question his navigational skills. "At least, we're on the one Red pointed out on the map. Now whether that's the one we actually visited before..."

He left the sentence unfinished, though the intent was obvious. If they were in the wrong place, it was Red's fault, not his.

Cloud shook his head. He was pretty sure they were in the right place. It looked like the island they had visited before in their search for materia to fight Sephiroth. He thought he had recognized the lay of the land when they had landed but that time they had run into goblins nearly as soon as they had entered the forest. The place had been crawling with them. Yet here they had been walking for hours and hadn't seen even a hint of one. Still, he trusted both Red's memory and Cid's piloting skills.

"I think we're in the right place," Cloud said simply.

"So where are all the goblins?" Cid questioned.

Cloud shrugged.

"I don't know. Do you think they could have been wiped out?"

"By what, or who?"

"I have no idea," Cloud said. "War, disease, famine? It's been a few years since we've been here. A lot could change."

"They were all over the place last time we came," Cid pointed out.

"I know, but still..." was the best he could reply.

"Maybe they're hiding," Aeris suggested.

"Hiding from what? Us?" Cid said, his face showing he didn't think much of that idea either.

"Why not?" Aeris said.

"They weren't shy about showing their faces last time," Cid replied.

"Yeah, and when they did, we kicked their butts pretty badly," Cloud added. "Maybe they've learned their lesson."

"There were a lot more of us last time," Cid said doubtfully.

"True," Cloud admitted.

"And if they are hiding, what are we going to do?" Cid continued. "How can we let them know we just want to talk this time?"

"I don't know," Cloud said, a bit peevishly. Sometimes being the leader could be a distinct burden. Everyone else was always looking to him to come up with all the answers, and he had no idea what to do. He stopped and looked back at the last member of their party, who was lagging annoyingly behind.

"Cait, get a move on," he chided. "Do you have any suggestions about this?"

The big mog/cat combo stumbled slightly over nothing Cloud could see, then walked rapidly forward, in a straight line, thought teetering slightly back and forth. He seemed to be struggling just to stay on his feet.

Cait's motions weren't lost on the others either.

"Cait, have you been drinking?" Cid said facetiously.

Cait kept walking, right at Cloud. He stumbled again, nearly running right into Cloud, who had to duck out of the way in order not to get trampled.

"What the hey?" he exclaimed.

"Sorry, this is hard!" Cait said.

Cait came to a lurching halt. Cloud just stared at him. It hadn't been Cait's automated voice he had heard, nor Reeve's light tenor. Instead it had been...more feminine.

"Tifa?" Cloud questioned.

Cait giggled. Giggled?

"Yup, it's me," Tifa confirmed.

"What the hell are you doing controlling Cait?" Cid called out, obviously as surprised as Cloud was.

Cait giggled again.

"She has some news for you," they heard Reeve say from the background. "She came over and we figured the best way to contact you was through Cait. She wanted to try her hand at controlling him, so I put him on manual for her."

"This is fun!" Tifa said.

"Fun? You nearly ran me over!" Cloud chided, though the smile on his face said he wasn't serious.

"Sorry! I told you, it's hard!" Tifa replied.

"It does take some getting used to," Reeve agreed.

"How's Zangan?" Cloud asked.

"He's fine," Tifa replied. "Everything is fine back here. Well, sort of."

"What do you mean by that?" Cloud said, his face turning serious.

Tifa related what had happened to her earlier that day. The others listened intently, a crease forming on Cloud's brow when she was done.

"You're not hurt or anything are you?" he questioned when she was done.

"I'm okay," she reassured him.

"And the man you spoke with was gone when you got back to the alley?" Cloud questioned.

"Yeah," Tifa confirmed.

"So he wasn't dead after all?" Cid said.

"Either that or someone removed his body," Tifa said. "I don't know. Like I said, I didn't try to feel his pulse or anything, but I got the distinct impression he was dead."

Cloud frowned. Didn't this throw a monkey wrench into the works? What were they supposed to do now? He knew impressions could very well be wrong. The man might not have been dead, he might have recovered and left, but that really wasn't important. He was gone, dead or alive. The more important question was, had what he told Tifa been the truth?

There was no way to know that, of course. He looked at Aeris.

"What do you think of this?" he questioned. "It's you they seem to be after, for whatever reason. He said you're the key. The key to what?"

"I don't know," Aeris replied slowly. He could tell by the look on her face that there was more she wanted to say. He waited patiently but she remained silent, just stood there as if lost in thought.

"You seem unsure," he prodded.

"Well, I had heard something," she said after a moment. "Not about me being a key, or anything like that, but something else. Tifa, you said the man that was attacked held his head, as if something was attacking him mentally?"

"Yeah, it was like he suddenly had the mother of all migraines," Tifa agreed.

"Hmmm," Aeris said slowly.

"What? What is it?" Cloud said impatiently.

"Remember when we needed the black materia and went to the northern crater?" Aeris said. "You know, right before we took off in Cid's rocket to Grouchoon."

"Oh yeah!" Cloud said suddenly. "That thing in the cavern that attacked you mentally?"

"It does seem quite similar, does it not?" Aeris said.

"So you think it was one of those creatures that attacked him?" Cid said, obviously not buying that idea at all.

"Or something or *someone* with similar power," Reeve interjected.

"But we don't know of anyone who has any kind of power like that, do we?" Tifa tentatively asked.

"Wait a minute, wait just a minute," Cid cut in. "Even if someone did have that kind of power, it only worked on Aeris, remember? It used the lifestream as a weapon. She was the only one who could feel it because she was the only Cetra."

"Exactly," Aeris said.

That seemed to catch all of them by surprise. There was a momentary pause.

"You think the man Tifa talked to was a Cetra?" Cloud said slowly.

"That's my suspicion," Aeris answered. "And there's more."

"There's more!" Cid exclaimed. "Why does there always have to be more? Aren't things complicated enough as it is?"

"I didn't get to talk to my mother much while we were captured by Shinra," Aeris continued. "But she did find time to teach me some things. As you know, all of my powers as a Cetra are restorative in nature. All Cetra were like that, but that wasn't always the case. A long time ago Cetra had just as many offensive powers as defensive, but we gave them up as being too dangerous, but there were rumors that some did not. I don't know much about those kind of powers, but I do know they were more of the mental type than the physical."

It took a few moments for the others to digest this, and when they did, they didn't seem happy about it at all.

"So you're trying to tell us the other man, the man Tifa chased, might have been a Cetra too?" Cid said incredulously.

"It's a possibility," Aeris conceded.

"Damn!" Cid exclaimed. "I thought you were the last one! Then we meet Ellengio, then kids start being born as them. Now you think there's more? For a practically extinct race, they seem to be popping up more than cheap taco stands all of a sudden!"

"Like I said, it's just a possibility," Aeris reiterated. "For all I know, there could be some other perfectly logical explanation."

"Right now it doesn't matter if they're Cetra or not," Reeve cut in reasonably. "The question is, what do we do now?"

"He's right," Tifa agreed. "The man said you were walking into a trap. He said the Cetra Sage was a myth."

Cloud nodded. They could speculate on who these people were all day long and it wouldn't make any difference. Could they be on some kind of wild goose chase? Who was leading them then, and to what end? It seemed they were after Aeris. Why didn't that surprise him at all? It had to have something to do with the fact she was a Cetra, that was obvious enough. It was the only thing that distinguished her from the others. What could she do that they couldn't?

Two things came to mind right away. She could detect other Cetra and she could hear the planet. He didn't see how hearing the planet could matter. On the other hand, Cetra and humans were physiologically exactly the same. If a Cetra wished to conceal themselves there was no way for a human to tell them apart from other humans. Aeris was the only one among them who could tell the difference. Did these people, whoever they were, want her because of that ability?

It made sense, but there were just too many things they didn't know. He didn't even know for sure if the man Tifa talked to was telling the truth. Again, he could speculate all he wanted, but that still didn't show him the path they should follow. If they were walking into a trap, obviously the intelligent thing to do was to turn around and head back to Ifalna with all speed. The problem with that was, they weren't going to get any answers that way.

"You said he took off on a gold chocobo?" Cloud directed his question to Tifa.

"Yes," she replied after a moment.

"There aren't very many of them around," Cloud speculated. Since he and his companions had bred one, proving it could be done, a number of other people had tried. He knew Dio had one at the gold saucer, and had heard of a couple of others. Still, it took a lot of time and gil, and most of the attempts had been failures.

"There can't be more than a handful of them around," he said. "It shouldn't be hard to track down the owners."

"Probably true," Cid agreed. "So are you suggesting we abandon the hunt for the Cetra Sage for now until we check that out?"

Cloud hesitated. It all depended on whether they believed what the man had told Tifa. Was the Cetra Sage a myth? Was this whole thing just a big set up, or was there some truth to it? If it was all a lie, then that meant that Aeris dream was a lie too. Was it possible that someone manipulated her dream somehow?

He looked doubtfully over at the young Cetra. The whole thing smacked of the kind of manipulation Sephiroth and Tarkin had tried to use with him. He didn't want to think there could be someone else out there with that kind of power.

"I don't think we should give up the search for the Cetra Sage," he said slowly.

"Why not?" Tifa asked, obviously displeased. "The man told me you're walking into a trap!"

"We don't know if he was telling the truth," Cloud said.

"I think he was," Tifa said quickly.

Cloud didn't reply for a minute. Tifa was worried about him, that was apparent, which was natural, but he couldn't let that dictate what they did. They had to find the answers. He instinctively knew that hiding back in Ifalna wasn't going to help.

"Even if it's a trap, running isn't going to solve anything," he said. "They'll just try again another time. We have to find out who's behind this."

"So you're just going to go ahead anyway?" Tifa said with a touch of annoyance. "You're going to just walk right into their trap?"

"Forewarned is forearmed," Cloud said.

"Oh that's cute," Tifa replied sarcastically.

"Tifa, I'm sorry, but we have to find out what's going on," Cloud said, somewhat more strongly than he had intended. "We're not going to do that sitting around in Ifalna. We've dealt with things like this before. You know that as well as I do. We'll be careful."

Tifa didn't reply.

"So what about the gold chocobos?" Cid asked. "What'd you bring them up for if you're going to ignore that lead."

"I didn't say we'd ignore it," Cloud replied. "I just said we weren't going to check it out."

"Well who else can?" Cid responded. "Reeve and Tifa can't leave Ifalna for the same reason they couldn't come with us, and everyone else was busy."

"Everyone in Avalanche," Cloud reminded him.

"Well who else..." Cid began, then looked at Cloud sharply. "Oh shit, you're not thinkin' what I think you're thinkin' are ya?"

"Depends on what you think I'm thinking," Cloud replied. "If you're thinking I think checking out the owners of the gold chocobos might be right down the alley of the Turks, you'd be right."

Cid sighed.

"That's what I was afraid of," he said.

"Would they do it?" Tifa asked.

"Of course they'll do it," Cid said. "As long as we pay them enough."

"They'll do it," Cloud agreed. "Reeve, can you get in touch with them for us?"

"I'll make the arrangements," Reeve responded.

"Sheesh. Cetra, Turks, what next?" Cid muttered.

"It's not a big deal," Aeris said. "After all, the Turks are going to be off following another lead. It's not like they're going to be with us."

"True," Cid replied, brightening a bit.

"Do you really think continuing is a good idea?" Tifa said plaintively.

"I'm sorry Teef," Cloud said. "But it's all we've got to go on right now."

"All right," Tifa sighed. It was obvious she wasn't too happy about it, and that made Cloud feel bad, but what could he do?

"I've got to go feed Zangan," Tifa continued. "Be careful, okay?"

"We will," Cloud reassured her.

"I guess that's about it from this end," Reeve spoke up. "I'm going to put Cait back on auto. You take care of yourself too Aeris."

"I will," she replied.

"All right," Reeve acknowledged. "You can contact us through Cait if you find out anything or anything happens. Good luck."

"Thanks," Cloud said.

Cait stood there for a moment, then looked around suddenly. When he spoke again, it was with his usual automated voice.

"Which way should we go from here?"

"I don't know," Cloud said, looking around. It took a moment for him to return to the problem at hand. "Let's try over that way," he suggested, pointing to a large hill protruding above the treetops to the north. "We might be able to get a view of the surrounding area from up there."

"Sounds like as good a direction as any," Cid said.

They started off through the forest once more. Cloud kept his eyes open and his hand close to the hilt of his sword. If they really were heading into a trap, he was going to be ready. Perhaps, knowing what they were walking into, they could turn the tables on their unknown antagonists.

"Do you think there's any connection between what happened to Tifa and the fact that there don't seem to be any goblins around?" Aeris pondered.

"You mean like, our mysterious opponents got rid of them or something?"

"Yeah, or something like that," Aeris answered. "Some kind of connection."

"Why would they do that?" Cid questioned.

"I have no idea," Aeris replied.

"There's no way to know," Cloud stated. "They could all be dead. They could have moved away. They could all be having a barbecue down by the beach. We can guess all we want and it won't do any good."

Cid gave him a sour look.

"All right, all right, there's no need to get crabby about it."

"I'm not being crabby, I just...all right, I guess I am," Cloud admitted. "Sorry, I'm just tired of all this guessing. I just wish there was one fact about this that we knew for certain was the truth!"

They were walking uphill through a closely spaced stand of trees. Cloud wasn't really paying attention to where they were going, he was just trying to lead them up to the top. The ground was covered with a thick layer of dead leaves and underbrush. Aeris looked down at it suddenly as they walked.

"The ground seems a little..." she began.

Suddenly the earth gave way beneath them.

Cloud swung his arms wildly as he found himself falling, but there was nothing nearby to cling to except for Aeris, and she was falling just as much as he was. They tumbled downward for a moment, then Cloud let out a grunt as he hit the ground, with Aeris landing on top of him.

It took a moment for him to reorient himself, then he looked up the sides of a steep pit to see blue sky shimmering through the leaves of the trees above the sides of the pit, whose opening stood about ten feet above them. A moment later perhaps a dozen small humanoids appeared at the top, looking down at them and holding long wicked looking spears in their hands.

Cid had come to a stop in a sitting position against the wall of the pit. He looked up for a moment, then reached into his pocket and took out a cigarette to replace the one that had dropped from his lips in the fall. As he flicked his lighter open he turned to look at Cloud.

"Fact number one," he said succinctly. "The goblins are still here."