

CHAPTER VII: ISLAND OF LEGEND

"We're only going on a picnic. Do you really need all that stuff?"

"Yes, I really do," Tifa replied, putting a large folded blanket down on top of the food basket, which stood next to the drink cooler, the diaper bag, the stroller, and various other baby items of indeterminate nature, at least to Reeve. "Unless you'd like to come back here and get anything I've forgotten."

"Well, it's not like we're going that far," he replied.

"Even a picnic isn't that simple when you have a baby," Elmyra added. She picked up the cooler and held it out for him. "Here, make yourself useful."

"So I see," Reeve responded, taking hold of the item.

Tifa opened up the stroller, then lifted up Zangan and put him in it. She then stood up and looked around, her hands on her hips.

"Okay, I think that's everything," she proclaimed.

"Let us be off then," Reeve said.

Tifa picked up the food basket and slung the handle over her shoulder. Elmyra scooped up the rest of the stuff, giving Reeve his fair share of it on top of what he already had.

They left Cloud and Tifa's house and headed west toward the lake. Reeve looked up at the nearly cloudless sky above them as they walked. It was another beautiful day though he had heard there might be some rain later on in the evening. Which was fine with him. They should be long done with their little excursion by then, and they hadn't had much rain lately anyway.

The picnic had been Elmyra's idea, though Reeve thought it a good one. Work was hectic, had been for quite some time. Ifalna was still a growing city. The meetings with engineers and businessmen seemed never ending. There was also the growing concern about the problem of the Cetra babies, if you could call it a problem exactly. Well, the babies themselves weren't the problem, it was people's reaction to them. He had kept a close eye on the Church of Humanity. Though Gilan's rhetoric seemed to have increased of late, he still seemed reasonably tame. Reeve was kind of surprised by that actually. He had thought if anything would set the man off, human's having Cetra children would do the trick. Was the man just waiting for the right moment, or had he perhaps taken Reeve's little 'talk' with him to heart?

Even so, it wasn't just Gilan. There were other people talking too. Reeve figured it was understandable considering the circumstances. He was asking questions himself, but no one had any answers. Unfortunately, as the Mayor, everyone seemed to expect him to provide them.

And he wasn't the only one feeling the tension. Cloud and Aeris being gone was upsetting to all of them, especially after what had happened to Tifa, and the possibility that they might be walking right into a trap. Tifa tried to put up a brave front, but he knew it was bothering her, maybe even more than he and Aeris mother. Although Reeve had gone with them on their last few adventures he hadn't been in it from the beginning. He had been on the sidelines at first. Well, he controlled Cait, but that wasn't the same as being there. Elmyra of course, had always been on the sidelines. Tifa hadn't. She had always been there, on the front lines. She was the one who was least used to this. She tried to hide it behind her smile and small talk, but he had known her long enough now to know it was bothering her a lot more than she let on.

That was why he was glad when Elmyra had suggested this. A picnic might be a good way for them to forget about their troubles, at least for a little while.

They reached the lake a short time thereafter. Things had changed quite bit since the first time they had laid eyes on it. The surrounding forest was gone, replaced by a rapidly growing city. The shell house was gone too, to make room for a bigger entrance to the city below. Other entrances had been cut into the ground as well since then, but this was still the main pedestrian thoroughfare to the underground portion of the city. They stopped on a grassy enclosure by the shore and Elmyra set the blanket on the ground while Tifa lifted Zangan out of the stroller so he could play in the grass. Reeve sat down on the blanket, looking thoughtfully out over the water. It was calm and placid, the surface mirror smooth. The water was crystal clear, so much so he could still see the bottom far out into it. Some things hadn't changed. That was just the way it looked the first time he had seen it through Cait's eyes.

He glanced over at his two companions. Elmyra was taking the food out of the basket, while Tifa was playing with Zangan. Neither one of them seemed concerned with their proximity to the lake, the proximity to the place where Aeris had been laid to rest.

It was good in a way. Aeris was alive, after all. There was nothing significant about this place anymore. What had happened to her had happened a long time ago and had long since been corrected. Maybe they were past that now.

Still, he couldn't help but feel a pang of...something in the pit of his stomach looking out over that water. He'd felt it every time he'd been here, but he had to admit it was fainter now. They'd moved on, and with good reason. He wasn't sure if Elmyra even knew what had happened here. She hadn't been here, and he didn't know how many of the details she had been told, or even wanted to know. Still, he knew they all weren't completely over it. All of them at one time or another had made a pilgrimage to the underground lake, to the gazebo where Aeris had actually been slain. It was still there, almost like a shrine now, and they had made it into sort of a semi annual thing. Even Aeris went there, and strangely enough, it seemed like she was the one who had been least affected by her own death. All of them went there, that is, except Tifa. He wasn't sure if anyone else had ever noticed, but it hadn't slipped by him that whenever they had gone, she had always come up with some excuse not to accompany them. He didn't think it was coincidence.

"Hey Elmyra, want me to tell you your fortune?"

Elmyra looked up from what she was doing.

"Are you still doing that stuff?" she asked.

"Yes indeed," he said, taking out his cards and placing them on the blanket in front of him.

She looked at him for moment.

"If you wish," she said finally.

Reeve settled himself in front of the cards, dealing them out slowly. He hadn't done this in a long time. He had always enjoyed it, even if his predictions had not always been all that accurate. Even so, quite a few of them had come out surprisingly close to the truth. Enough for him to half belief there might be something to it. Yet mostly he just did it for fun, and to see if he could get it right.

"Hmm," he said slowly, pondering the cards. "It seems you've got a handle on a stressful situation, so trust your instincts. Watch for hot tips from friends. You can make gil the same way they did."

Reeve looked at the cards. He never really thought about what they were telling him, just blurted out what they said to him. It was more fun that way, but it didn't always make a great deal of sense. He'd certainly got the first part right, at least.

Elmyra was too polite to question it.

"Why thank you dear," was all she said.

Reeve picked up the cards and started shuffling them, turning to look at Tifa.

"Your turn," he announced.

Tifa glanced over at him.

"No thank you," she said.

Reeve looked disappointed.

"Awww, c'mon," he cajoled. "It's just for fun."

"I don't want to."

"Why not?" he asked.

He looked at her, but she turned away without replying.

"I'll do you anyway," he said.

She turned to look back at him again.

"I said *no*!"

He lifted his head, looking at her curiously. He saw Elmyra give her the same look. Tifa returned the look for a moment, then turned away, looking embarrassed.

Reeve gave Elmyra a puzzled look, but she just shrugged her shoulders. The ex Shinra employee got up and walked over to Tifa. He didn't know what was wrong, but it was obvious there was more to this than her just being upset about Cloud being gone. She was sitting on the grass by the lake. Zangan was playing nearby. Reeve parked himself beside her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She just looked out over the lake.

"Nothing," she finally said but both of them knew she was lying.

Reeve waited for her to spill it but she remained silent.

"Look," he prodded. "I know my fortunes aren't all that accurate..."

She shifted her head in his direction.

"No," she said. "I'm glad they're not very good."

He looked at her for a moment, surprised, and yes, a little bit hurt. He hadn't expected her to agree with him, even if it was true.

"Why do you say that?" he said, a bit defensively. They aren't *that* bad, are they?

She glanced over at Elmyra, then at him again. She just looked at him, as if trying to convey her meaning without saying anything, as if he was missing something obvious. Eventually she must have realized that wasn't going to work.

"Do I have to remind you that you were the one, speaking through Cait Sith," she said slowly, "that said that Cloud and Aeris were made for one another? Remember, at the Temple of the Ancients?"

He just stood there looking at her for a moment. Damn, he had forgotten all about that! How could he have? No wonder, no wonder she didn't care for his fortunes. Shit.

"Well, I had forgotten," he admitted. Tifa had been right there at the time too. He hadn't even thought about her. It had just seemed like Cloud and Aeris would make a good pair. That's what the cards had said so that's what he had said. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm as glad as you are that that one was wrong."

Tifa gave him a rueful smile to tell him there were no hard feelings.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know it was just a fortune and didn't mean anything, but I'm really not in the mood to hear anymore."

Reeve nodded. In spite of her words, it was obvious that particular fortune must have had an effect on her. She'd certainly remembered it well enough!

"Ahh, don't worry about it," he said. "It's no big deal. I would probably feel the same way if I were you."

She seemed to accept this, but said nothing further and an awkward silence fell. If she remembered it that well it must have bothered her a lot. Now Cloud and Aeris were off together, with her left behind. He had thought she was only upset with the fact that Cloud was gone. He hadn't thought she might be jealous. Was she, even after all this time?

Was he, for that matter? The truth was he hadn't really thought about Cloud and Aeris being together. He had known they had liked each other, which was probably why he had come up with that prediction to begin with. He wasn't really sure what to think. It was different for him and Aeris. Cloud and Tifa were married. He and Aeris were...well, he wasn't even sure. They had gone plenty of places together. They were a common item. They had even kissed a few times, but it hadn't gotten beyond that point. He knew he was in love with Aeris and he knew she cared for him but he couldn't say for sure if she loved him. She had after all, turned down his marriage proposal, and though he supposed she had had a good reason, at least for her, that still hadn't taken the sting out of it. He couldn't help but think that maybe deep down inside she just didn't really care for him the way her cared for her and was just afraid to admit it to him for fear of hurting him.

Geez, and he had come here to forget about his troubles.

He looked at Tifa again but she was still looking at water, apparently lost in thought.

Seemed like a drastic change in subject was in order.

"Do you think that..." he began when he was suddenly interrupted by the beeping of a PHS.

He pulled out the PHS and held it to his ear.

"Reeve here."

"Reeve, it's Cid. We've got a problem."

"A problem?"

That caught Tifa's attention.

"Yeah, the Slipstream is down. We've crash-landed on one of the islands."

"Is everyone okay?" Reeve asked immediately.

"What's happened?" Tifa asked. Elmyra, realizing something was going on, came over as well.

Reeve held up his hand.

"Well, probably," Cid responded.

"Probably? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Cloud and Aeris are gone. They rode off on a gold chocobo," Cid relied. "We were trying to follow them when the Slipstream was attacked by some sort of aircraft, though it wasn't like any aircraft I'd seen before. It could turn on a dime, much faster than anything I'd ever seen, faster than I'd thought possible. It attacked us and damaged the Slipstream. It's messed up pretty bad. I've already called Shera and she's going to be coming in on the Tiny Bronco with some of my men to repair it but I don't know how long that's gonna take. Meanwhile I have no idea where Cloud and Aeris went. They disappeared going east out into the ocean. There's no way to follow them. I tried getting in touch with them with the PHS but no luck."

"What's happening?" Tifa said, more incessantly.

"How did they manage to end up on a gold chocobo in the first place?" Reeve questioned.

"It just showed up," Cid replied. "Cloud was suspicious but Aeris didn't seem to think anything of it. After what happened, I suspect Cloud might have been right. I think they may be walking right into a trap, just like Tifa said."

"Great," Reeve muttered. He looked at Tifa, almost hesitant to tell her, but she had to know. He explained to her and Elmyra what Cid had just told him. Tifa's face paled.

"So what should we do?" Reeve asked.

"I don't think there's much you can do," Cid replied. "I'll get the men here and we'll try to get the Slipstream repaired as quickly as possible. Then I guess we'll have to search for Cloud and Aeris."

Reeve was silent for a long moment. He didn't like this development at all.

"All right, let us know right away if there are any further developments."

"Of course," Cid replied.

He hung up the PHS and saw Tifa staring at him, but she didn't say anything.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

For a moment she still didn't reply.

"I have to go there," she said finally.

"They don't know where Cloud and Aeris are," Reeve told her. "The Slipstream needs to be repaired. They can't search until it's fixed."

"They can use the Bronco," he replied.

"The Bronco doesn't have the range of the Slipstream," Reeve said. "It doesn't carry enough fuel to search very far out to sea."

"I don't care," she replied. "I have to do something! Call Shera and tell her I want to go with her."

"We don't even know where to begin looking," Reeve countered. "We have no idea where they went. A search could take weeks. You didn't want to leave Zangan, remember?"

"This is different," she replied. "I've got a bad feeling about it. They're not just searching now, they've gone missing. I have to find them. I don't want to leave Zangan, but...but I have to do what I have to do. Elmyra, you can watch him, right?"

"Of course dear."

"We don't have any idea where they went," Reeve persisted. "We wouldn't even know where to begin to look."

"I don't care!" Tifa said angrily. "Now call Shera or I'll do it myself!"

Reeve pulled out the PHS once more.

"I'm not going to call Shera," he said. "She needs to get to the island as soon as possible to begin repairs on the Slipstream. I'll call my secretary and have her get in touch with the airport to prepare a helicopter. Being Mayor has its perks. I'm coming with you."

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"I hope Cid is all right."

Cloud looked back, but all he could see was ocean. The island was far behind them now, out of sight. They had seen the dogfight, and the Slipstream go down, smoke trailing behind it, but by then they were too far away to see if the plane had landed in one piece or not. Cloud had tried to use the PHS to contact Cid, but the device hadn't worked. They were far out to sea now. Either they were out of the things range, or it was being jammed somehow.

"I hope so too," Cloud replied, looking back to watch the yellow airship that flew not far off to their left. Like Cid, he had never seen anything like it before. It made no sound except for a low humming, more felt than heard. It moved through the air effortlessly.

"Looks like they've decided to provide us with an escort," Cloud observed. "Still think this isn't a trap?"

Aeris glanced behind them as well.

"The ship might not have anything to do with the chocobo, or might have been following it," she replied.

Cloud thought that assessment overly optimistic, but decided arguing the point would be fruitless.

"Where do you think it's taking us?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "Have you heard of any land out here?"

"No," she replied.

There was no land in sight, but Cloud had noticed that the bird had been turning slowly northward as they went and was now traveling in what Cloud thought was a more northeasterly direction.

"You don't think you can get it to turn around?" he asked.

"How do you suggest I do that?" she asked.

Cloud shrugged. He had never heard of a chocobo that had a mind of it's own like this. Either they went where you told them, or they didn't let you ride them in the first place.

"I don't know, talk to it?" he suggested.

She turned to glance back at him.

"Do you really think that would work?" she said skeptically.

"No, probably not," he ended lamely.

He didn't know what else to suggest. They certainly couldn't get off. They were dependent on the chocobo to get them to land. He was afraid if they tried to get the bird to go in another direction by force it might throw them off. Right now, if they were headed into a trap, it seemed the better option.

They were definitely heading in a northerly direction now.

Of course, the egg thing might stop to pick them up if they fell off, or were tossed off. He glanced over at it. It still held its position some distance away. Could Aeris be right? Could the chocobo and the airship be unrelated? If the chocobo was supposed to take them into a trap, then why send the airship as well, to deter any pursuers? And if they were unrelated, then why did the airship seem content to just follow them at the moment?

Some time later a dark band of land hove up into view ahead of them. Slowly as the approached they began to make out details, and soon they could both see the white line of the shoreline backed by tall cliffs towering up into the sky.

Cloud leaned forward and touched Aeris on the back. He recognized the land ahead, should have thought of it sooner, actually. It was the only land mass he knew of so far out here.

"I know where we're headed," he said. "That's Round Island."

Round Island, the legendary place where they'd found the Knights of the Round material. He had almost forgotten about its existence. They had only found it by pure luck the first time. There had been no one there that time, or rather, they had seen no sign of anyone. It wasn't like they had searched the entire island. The mountainous terrain would have made that nearly impossible. In any case, it had been years since they had been here. Someone could have come in that time.

They were much closer to the beach now, would reach it in just a short time. The mountains loomed up above them, their brown peaks exposed to the sun, but the lower slopes were tree covered, offering a good chance at concealment, even from above...

"Get ready to jump off," he told Aeris.

"If it's taking us to the Cetra Sage, I don't think that would be a good idea," Aeris said.

"We don't know if it is," Cloud responded. "We don't even know if the Cetra Sage is real or not yet. We can't take the chance. If it's a trap we'll be riding right into it. If it is the Cetra Sage who sent the chocobo we'll find him without the bird. He's got to be on the island somewhere, right?"

Aeris did not reply for a moment, then gave a curt nod of her head.

They had reached the beach now, but the chocobo did not slow down. It raced across the sand then up into the forest. It was following no path that their eyes could detect, yet it leaped up the slopes of the mountain as easily as it had crossed the water.

Though the chocobo was moving easily through the underbrush, the tree-less forest had slowed it down a bit. Enough for Cloud to think they could safely jump off.

"Now!" Cloud said.

They leapt off the chocobo, falling and the ground and rolling for a moment. Cloud felt branches tear along his arms, and the fall was jarring, but he got to his feet unhurt except for a few scraps. He turned to help Aeris.

"Are you all right?" he said.

She stood up beside him, looking a bit shaken but otherwise intact. She nodded.

The bird looked back at them, let out a loud wark, then ran on, quickly disappearing into the trees.

Cloud looked up and saw the yellow airship hovering nearby through the canopy.

"This way!" he said.

He led Aeris upward, into a denser cluster of trees, where they were shielded from the eyes of those above.

"Where are we going?" Aeris asked.

"Don't know for sure," Cloud replied. "Just away from here."

"Who do you think is in that airship?" she questioned.

"I haven't the faintest idea. Whoever they are, hopefully, we've throw a kink into their plans."

"And what exactly is our plan?"

Cloud looked up again. He couldn't see the airship anymore, nor hear the low humming sound it made. They appeared to have lost it, for now at least.

"Again, I don't know for sure," he replied. "We're not in the best situation. We have no food or supplies, and there isn't a handy town nearby where we can get those things. That yellow airship may be gone, but it's obvious from what they did to the Slipstream that they're hostile. We know they want you for something, apparently alive or they could have blown us right off that chocobo. So we know they probably won't try to kill us out of hand. Still, that doesn't help us all that much. We know we have no friends to help us, and no way to contact anyone. I'm assuming our enemy, whoever they may be, has some sort of base here. I guess we'll attempt to find that and maybe be able to figure out what they're planning. The chocobo was taking us up the mountain. This whole island is an extinct volcano. In the center is a forest that fills in the old crater. The chocobo seemed to be headed in that direction, so I guess that's the way we'll go too."

He finished, looking at her. He knew that didn't sound like much of a plan, but he had nothing else to suggest.

They continued climbing. Cloud wasn't sure how long. Eventually they came up out of the trees. Cloud looked around, but saw no sign of the airship that had been following them. He looked back behind them and saw they had climbed surprisingly high. The beach was far below, and when he looked ahead, he saw that they didn't have much farther to go to the top. The ground was much steeper here, however, and the going became tougher. The sun was fading into the west when they finally reached the top of the ridge. They stopped there to rest a moment, then looked down into the caldera in front of them. It was filled with a lush forest. They could see clear across the island from here, but Cloud could see no sign of habitation, no sign that they weren't alone. Not knowing what to expect, they started to make their way down to the forest below.

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"She's here."

Yonsin nodded and looked at the three people who had just entered his chamber, waiting for the man who had spoken to continue.

"She's somewhere on the island, but we don't know where."

Yonsin looked at them for a moment.

"What, did she escape somehow?" he questioned, sounding not at all pleased.

"Well, not exactly, " the man replied. "We never actually captured her in the first place."

Yonsin just stared at the man.

"When we arrived at the island, she rode off on a gold chocobo," the only female in the group spoke up.

"A gold chocobo," Yonsin repeated.

"Yes," the woman continued. "She was at the goblin island, just as you said she would be, but when we arrived her and one of her friends were on a gold chocobo. They rode off into the ocean. Her other friend tried to follow in their airship but we shot it down. We couldn't risk shooting at the chocobo for fear of hitting her. The strange part is, they came here, to this island. We thought maybe you..."

Yonsin shook his head. A gold chocobo had certainly not been part of his plan.

"I know nothing of it," he said.

"So what do you want us to do?" the man who hadn't said anything before asked.

"Do?" Yonsin replied, staring at them. "I want you to find her! Bring her here, just as we had planned. This doesn't change anything."

"But where did she get the gold chocobo from, and why did it bring her here? the woman asked.

"I don't know," Yonsin replied. "Let me worry about that. It doesn't matter to you. All you have to do is find her, understand?"

"Yes."

"All right then," he gave them a pointed look. "The sooner the better."

They took the hint and filed out of the room. As they were leaving another man entered and walked past them. He stopped in front of Yonsin but neither one spoke until the three were gone.

"I see you finally made it back Grem. Do you find Marlek?"

"Indeed I did," Grem replied. "He was in the city of the Ancients, talking to one of Aeris friends."

Grem wasn't sure, but he thought the normally stoic Yonsin's face paled at that.

"What did he tell them?" Yonsin questioned.

"I don't know," Grem replied. "I wasn't standing right next to them. It wasn't much. He didn't have time before I killed him."

"You what?" Yonsin said, and this time his face definitely registered surprise. For some reason Grem found that quite satisfying.

"You heard me," Grem replied.

"You fool!" Yonsin snapped. "If the others find out..."

"No one is going to find out," Grem said. "Marlek ran off because he didn't agree with what we were doing. No one knew where he went and they're not going to find the body."

"We all agreed before this all started that no Cetra would die," Yonsin said.

"So what did you want me to do, let him tell her everything?" Grem said, and edged in his voice. "I had to stop him somehow. I couldn't exactly just walk up to him and ask him politely to shut up."

"What about the other one?"

"What other one?"

"The one he was talking to. Did you kill her too?"

"No. I wasn't that close. She chased me but I got away. I didn't want to kill her too because I knew that would draw attention to us from the humans. Maybe I should have..."

"Maybe you shouldn't have killed anyone."

"What choice did I have?" Grem countered. He waited patiently for Yonsin to give him an alternative. When none was forthcoming he continued.

"You know if your plan comes to fruition a lot more people will die."

"Maybe," Yonsin replied.

"There's no maybe about it," Grem answered. "You know the humans aren't just going to sit by and let us do as we wish. There's going to be a confrontation eventually. That's why you built the amplifier in the first place now wasn't it? So that the young Cetra get guidance from us instead of the humans, so they're not contaminated with human ideas."

"Yes, yes, I know the plan as well as you do," Yonsin replied. "And you know that it isn't going to happen in a day. It's going to be years before we are ready. That's why we can't draw attention to ourselves now!"

"It can't be helped," Grem shot back. "We had to stop Marlek or he would have done exactly that! Just like we have to get that half breed Aeris out of the way before we use the amplifier. If you would have just let me kill her..."

"You know the others would never accept that," Yonsin told him. "They don't want any Cetra deaths."

"Yet that's exactly what they got," Grem stated. "Now instead of just the girl, there are others dead. And who knows what else may happen? I heard how well the 'kidnapping' went. Now she's loose, *here*, with one of her friends. I told you you couldn't trust the others to do anything right for you."

Yonsin didn't say anything, just glared at Grem, who seemed to be taking great delight in seeing his carefully laid plan fall apart.

"There have always been risks involved," he said. "We both know that. Unexpected things always happen, we just have to be able to adjust to them. The girl is here, that might be to our advantage. At least we don't have to go hunting for her."

She's isolated, she can't contact her friends. Human communication devices won't work here. There is only one human with her. She can't hide from us forever. It shouldn't be a difficult matter to find her."

"That's if she doesn't use that gold chocobo of hers to leave," Grem said.

"Yes, there is that," Yonsin mused, "That troubles me a great deal. Where did that chocobo come from?"

"Maybe they had it on their aircraft?" Grem suggested.

"No," Yonsin countered. "That ship wasn't designed to carry cargo. I suppose they could have fit one on board if they really needed to but my intelligence would have alerted me of that."

"Maybe your intelligence didn't know about it," Grem observed. "Maybe your intelligence isn't as intelligent as you think."

Again Yonsin gave him a look. He didn't really care all that much for Grem. The man was too arrogant for his own good. Even so, Grem was his most avid supporter, and also his most effective agent. Neither one of them might like each other all that much but they both needed each other, Yonsin to advance his cause and Grem to advance his standing among the others. Politics did indeed make strange bedfellows.

"And maybe someone here is helping her," he suggested.

A slight uprising of Grem's brow was his only indication of surprise.

"You think one of the others sent her the gold chocobo?"

"Well, who else could it have been?" Yonsin retorted. "There aren't all that many of them. They came here, didn't they? You think that's a coincidence? Why else would they come here unless they were looking for us."

"I don't know. They came here once before and they weren't looking for us. Maybe it really is a coincidence."

"And the gold chocobo appearing at such a convenient time? Was that coincidence too?"

"It does seem to be a bit much to ask of coincidence," Grem admitted.

"So where else does that leave us?" Yonsin asked. "Surely you don't think the Cetra Sage summoned it?"

Grem smiled grimly.

"I don't believe in old wives tales," he said dismissively. "Marlek didn't have much time to talk, but he might have said something about the island before I took care of the problem."

"True," Yonsin admitted, making it obvious he wasn't pleased with that idea at all. Still, he didn't know which was worse, Aeris friends finding out about their presence or one of their own working against them. It was bad enough what Marlek had done. If the others turned against the plan it would be a disaster.

"Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do about it either way at the moment," Yonsin continued. "We can only forge ahead and keep our eyes open. If there is someone among us working against us hopefully we can sniff them out. In the meantime we still have to find the girl. I'm putting you in charge of that. The others may not be as incompetent as you think but I know they won't pursue the issue with quite the verve you will. Find her and bring her here, and remember, if the others find out you've killed her, they'll be hell to pay."

Grem looked at Yonsin for a moment, then nodded and turned away. As he walked toward the exit a smile played upon his lips. He found the wording of Yonsin's command very intriguing. He hadn't actually said not to kill her, only that it would be very bad if the others found out. He would do what he thought was necessary, and if the girl happened to come to a bad end, well, he'd merely have to make sure the others never discovered that fact.