

CHAPTER VIII: CLOSE CALL

"Are you all right?"

Vincent sat in a chair staring out the window in his room. His hands rested on his stomach, his hair hung down around his face, almost obscuring it. He had been sitting there all day, looking out the window, hardly moving at all. What she could see of his face was pale, but that was nothing new for Vincent, who 'white as a ghost' was a normal state for. Still, it almost seemed now as if he had taken on a grayish hue which looked even less healthy than he normally did.

He didn't reply, didn't even stir to acknowledge she was there. Even though it had only been a few days the drug was taking its toll on him. She had asked him about it but all he said was he was feeling a bit under the weather. She knew it was more than that. He had thrown up in the bathroom this morning. He hadn't said anything but she had heard him. When he did move it seemed to be with half-hearted effort. He hadn't eaten more than a few bites in the last two days.

She could offer no reassurances. This type of thing had never been tried on anyone before. She didn't know if he would improve after a while, remain the same, or get worse. She didn't know if his body would acclimate to the drug. She wanted to tell him to hang in there for a little while longer and things would improve, but she didn't know if that was true or not. She had nothing concrete to tell him. She had seen no change in the level of alien cells in him yet. That was natural, it had only been a few days and that could take weeks to see. All she could offer was bland and baseless reassurances and she knew he of all people wouldn't be interested in that sort of thing.

"I'm making some coffee. Would you like some?"

Again he did not reply. Lucrecia prevented herself from sighing. No matter how much she wanted him to snap out of it she knew it wasn't her choice. She couldn't know what he was going through. She would just have to be patient with him. After all, this had all been her idea, now hadn't it?

She didn't want to see him so unhappy. That hadn't been the point of all this. She was trying to make him better, not worse, but there was nothing for it. She had to take the long view that in the end this would all be worthwhile, even though she had no definite proof that was true.

She took a deep breath. He was in a bad mood and what she was going to do wasn't going to help it any, but there was no sense in beating around the bush.

"I have to take some blood," she said, her voice tentative, trying to gauge his reaction. She felt like his life was miserable and it was her fault.

He still did not speak. His face remained impassive. She knew he had heard her, yet for a long time he didn't react at all, as if he wasn't going to. Finally, after she was about to repeat herself, he lifted up his arm, pulling up his sleeve to expose his elbow without even looking at her.

She took out her needle and inserted it in his arm. He didn't flinch, didn't move at all. Nor did he look at her, just continued to stare out the window. It was impossible to determine what he was thinking.

Finished, she withdrew the needle and applied a band aid. He let his arm sink to the armrest of the chair, but did not pull his shirt sleeve down. She stood there for a moment, but when he said nothing and she could think of nothing to say herself, she walked away, back down to the lab.

It had only been a few days, but if he continued like this it was going to drive her crazy. She would have been happier with some kind of reaction, any kind, even if he screamed in horror whenever she produced a needle. Or at least she thought she would. Anything would be better than this silent stoicism, with no hint at all at what he was thinking or feeling, but that was Vincent for you. She imagined he had been the same way when Hojo had been experimenting on him. Perhaps it was some kind of survival mechanism. When everything became too painful, just shut it out.

Still, it might have been fine to use with Hojo but she didn't like it at all. She wasn't his enemy. He could talk to her, tell her how he was feeling. She thought there had been more between them than that.

That was the point though. There had been, a long time ago, but no more. It was like he had said when they had talked, there was no going back. They couldn't be the people they were before all this happened. Too much had changed, including themselves.

She stained and prepared the sample, then sat down at her microscope to take a look. It was painstaking work, but there was nothing else she could do. She hadn't found a way to automate the counts yet.

After about an hour glued to the microscope she sat back and rubbed her eyes, then she got up and walked back upstairs. Vincent sat exactly where she had left him, still staring out the window as if it had only been a few minutes ago that she had taken the blood. His sleeve was still rolled up.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

No response. By now that hardly surprised her.

"I just did the count," she told him. "The alien DNA structure is down two percent."

She paused for a moment, but he still did not move. "From the studies I did, any drop of more than one percent should be considered significant," she continued.

Slowly his head turned so that he was looking right at her. She had thought that might get his attention, but even so she was jolted by even this slow movement from him after remaining motionless for so long, but she got over it quickly. She couldn't help but let a grin form on her face, half from finally getting a reaction from him and half from what she was about to say.

"I think it might be working!"

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"I can't believe we haven't found anything yet," Cloud stated, sounding very unhappy about it.

He and Aeris stood beneath the trees somewhere in the bottom of the caldera that made up the bulk of Round Island. They had been searching for two days now and had found no sign of their adversaries, no sign of any habitation at all in fact, not even a single footprint.

"Well, it's a pretty big island," Aeris said philosophically, lifting her head to look around slowly, though neither of them could see very far through the trees.

"A lot bigger than I thought," Cloud said gloomily.

They didn't have forever. They came with no supplies. They had holed up in the cave where Cloud had found the Knights of the Round materia, had made that their base of operations, so to speak. He was tired and dirty and longed for a shower and a clean and comfortable bed to sleep on. And a nice thick steak. They had found a number of fruit and nut bearing trees and bushes. A spring flowing down from the mountains provided them with water, but Cloud was already sick of fruit. Nuts and berries prevented them from starving but provided little else. He yearned for some real food.

He had thought when they first arrived it would be a simple matter to find whoever it was that was after them, but they had seen nothing. Even then he still hadn't been too concerned. The island wasn't that big. It wouldn't take long to search it.

Or so he had thought. Once they had actually started trudging the length of it he realized it wasn't small after all. Now he wasn't sure how long it would take them. Now that he thought about it it seemed likely their adversaries base might not be right out in the open. It could very well be hidden somewhere, even underground. It was even slightly possible their mysterious enemy might not even have a base here at all, if Aeris suspicion that the chocobo hadn't been sent by them was true. They could just be searching a deserted island, and then where would they be? They had no way to get off the island, unless that gold chocobo made a reappearance. They had no way to call for help or communicate with their friends, who had no idea where they were. Ironically, it seemed their enemy, whoever it may be, was their only means of escape from the island.

They had seen the egg airship a few times since their arrival. Most of the time it was far away, but occasionally it passed more closely, once or twice going almost right over their heads. The forest was thick here, however, and they had hidden from it easily. Cloud was sure they hadn't been spotted. He had tried to spy on it sometimes, to see where it came from or where it went, but the trees around them that concealed them so well by the same token made it difficult for him to see the ship. It seemed to appear out of nowhere and fade away in random directions.

"What's that over there?" Aeris said suddenly.

Cloud looked in the direction she was pointing, but all he saw was the deep green of the forest around them.

"Where?"

"Right there. What, are you blind?"

Cloud stared in the direction she was pointing but still saw nothing.

"This way," Aeris said, walking off in the direction she had pointed.

Cloud followed right behind, still looking ahead. At first he still had no idea what she was looking at, but suddenly, as if of its own accord, the shape of a building resolved itself out of the trees in front of them. He hadn't seen it because it was covered with plant growth. For a moment he felt excitement well up inside him. Was this the enemy base? Had they not been able to see it because it was camouflaged?

Aeris was walking rapidly toward the structure, right out in the open.

"Aeris, I see it. Hold on," he said, bringing her to a halt.

"What is it?"

"Don't be in such a rush. It might be dangerous," he said slowly.

"Dangerous? Don't worry, I'll be careful," she replied.

She continued forward. Cloud was about to admonish her for being so careless, but stopped before he spoke. He had a better look at what was in front of them now, and he realized there was more than one building there. In fact there were quite a few, but upon closer inspection he saw that the buildings weren't camouflaged at all, instead they were overgrown. It wasn't a secret base that stood in front of them, it was some kind of ancient ruin.

The buildings stood around the perimeter of a circular area. Cloud saw that the center was paved with small colored tiles, forming some kind of mosaic pattern. The vegetation had grown up in between the stones, forcing them apart in places and obscuring them entirely in others. Some of the stones were missing altogether. Whatever pattern they may have once made, if any, had long been obscured.

Of the buildings themselves there seemed to be little left. It seemed like there were four of them, one on each cardinal point of the compass. Whatever shape they may have taken was lost now, for all that remained was one or two crumbling walls. Both they and the rubble surrounding them were almost completely overgrown, and it was no wonder they hadn't been able to see the place from any distance.

"I wonder what this was?" Cloud said slowly.

Aeris had walked into the center of the plaza and was looking around slowly.

"There were Cetra buildings," she proclaimed.

Cloud nodded slowly. He didn't doubt her, though he had no idea how she had come to such a conclusion, whether it was some kind of markings on the walls or just the feel of the place. The only impression he got from the structures was that they were old, immensely old.

"Can you tell anything else about them?" Cloud asked.

Aeris stood there for a moment, staring off into space. Then she shook her head.

"Those who dwelt here are long gone."

Cloud didn't reply. There was nothing else around, no sign of their enemy. It was obviously just chance that they had stumbled upon this place. He walked over to one wall to inspect it, not really looking for anything in particular, but somewhat awed by the ancient feel of the place. He wondered just how old this place was. Ifalna, in its original state, had been old, but had been in much better condition than this place. Perhaps the fact that it had been underground had something to do with that but he didn't think so. The shell houses were above ground and they too, had been in better condition. This place was older than that. Much older.

He pulled the vegetation aside. The wall looked to be made of ordinary stone. He looked closer, inspecting it carefully, but he could see no sign of any glow, a sure sign of Cetra construction. Perhaps it was just too faint to see in the bright sunlight, or perhaps these walls had been built before the Cetra had discovered that particular secret. In any case, he could see nothing unusual about them.

He turned to walk back to Aeris, who was standing by another wall, when his foot got caught between two uprooted stone tiles. He stumbled and fell.

"Oww," he muttered, looking at his hand to see he had cut it on a sharp stone. He looked up at Aeris, but she didn't look amused, as he knew some of his other friends might have, instead she looked concerned.

"Are you all right?" she questioned, stepping over to him.

He pulled himself to his feet, more embarrassed than hurt.

"Yeah, it's just a scratch," he said. "There's nothing here. Let's get on with our sear...."

He stopped suddenly, staring up into the sky at the yellow airship that was moving slowly toward them above the trees.

"Run!" he exclaimed.

He grabbed hold of Aeris arm and pulled her toward the forest, muttering a curse to himself. His stumble had distracted them for just a moment, and it was just their luck the airship would show up at that very moment. They were in the center of the ancient plaza, out in the open. He was certain they had been seen.

He glanced back, and saw that the ship was almost right above them now. He saw that his fears were not unfounded, for they had obviously been spotted. He looked ahead again, putting on a burst of speed, practically dragging Aeris behind him. The forest was only a short distance away, the brush thick. If they could reach it, there was a good chance they could make good on an escape. The airship was above them, but it didn't seem to be doing much. He knew they wanted Aeris alive, if they didn't they would have finished them off when they were on the chocobo. If they couldn't be fired upon, he didn't see that there was much they could do unless they landed. Perhaps he and Aeris could make good on their escape in the time that took. It might be the only advantage they had.

A flash of bluish light suddenly filled the air around him. For a moment his head spun, disorienting him so that he barely managed to stay on his feet. After a few seconds, however, the feeling passed. Aeris had not fared so well, however. As soon as the light hit them, she had fallen to the ground.

"Aeris!" he exclaimed, immediately bending down and grabbing hold of her.

She was unresponsive. For a moment he felt panic rising up inside him. Had he underestimated his enemies? Had they decided it would be easier to kill her than to capture her? What had that blue light been? It had seemed like some kind of materia attack, but if so it was unlike any he had experienced before.

He glanced up again. The ship was dropping down now toward the plaza. It seemed obvious to Cloud its intention was to land.

He scooped Aeris up in his arms and continued to run. He didn't have time to figure it out now, he didn't even have time to check her condition. He didn't know why the attack had affected her so badly and him almost not at all. He had to get out of here, he would figure it all out when he got to a safe place.

He reached the forest and plunged in. He took one more look back and saw the airship had landed before the jungle surrounding him obscured the view.

He ran on as best he could. He wasn't in the clear yet. Though it would be difficult to spot him in the tangled vegetation it was not impossible. The brush was thick about him, making progress difficult, but that would affect both he and his pursuers, so it was neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. The fact that he had to carry Aeris, however, was a distinct disadvantage. It slowed him down considerably, and would make it easy for anyone following him to catch him if they spotted him, but there was little he could do about that. He certainly wasn't going to abandon her.

He turned and headed off in a different direction. They had seen where he entered the forest. Traveling in a straight line was too obvious. He paused for a moment every so often to listen. At first he heard nothing, but after a while, when he had thought he may have gotten away, when he stopped and listened he heard the sound of someone moving through the jungle somewhere behind him.

He changed direction again, trying to walk as quietly as possible, which wasn't all that quiet to begin with. Dead leaves crunched underfoot, and branches brushed against his body as he passed through. There was no trails here, no quiet way to go. He couldn't tell how far behind him his pursuers were, he couldn't tell if it was better to stop and try to hide or to keep going.

Eventually, when he thought he had put enough distance between himself and those behind him, he did stop, crouching down behind the trunk of a large tree surrounded by dense vegetation, someone would have to be right on top of him to see him.

Aeris stirred in his arms, and he realized with relief that she was alive. He looked down at her. Her face was pale, but after a moment her green eyes fluttered open and she looked at him.

"What happened?" she said slowly.

"Shhhh!" he warned, hearing movement.

They both remained still. Aeris was still in his arms, and he didn't want to put her down for fear of making noise. He could feel the warmth of her body against his own. The sounds went on for a long time, coming close enough to make Cloud nervous of discovery, but eventually they moved off. Even so, they remained still for a while longer listening to see if anyone returned.

"I'm not sure what happened," Cloud said finally convinced they were safe. "Some kind of materia attack, I think. Are you all right?"

Aeris hesitated a moment, then nodded. Cloud let her slide out of his arms. She stood up, but still seemed a bit shaky. Cloud took her hand to steady her and she gave him a grateful look in return.

"If you hadn't been with me they've have caught me for sure," she said.

"No problem," he said modestly. "I think I was just lucky. It made me a little dizzy but that was all. Perhaps it just didn't hit me as squarely as you, whatever it was."

They started off once more, Cloud leading the way, walking cautiously and stopping every so often to look around and listen. A while later they heard the hum of the airship above them and stopped, fearing they had been found once again, but the sound soon faded away without them seeing anything.

Eventually they made it back to the sanctuary of the materia cave. Aeris stumbled slightly as they entered, apparently still feeling the effects of whatever they had been attacked by.

Cloud helped her over to a cool sandy spot where she could sit down.

"Thank you," she said, looking up at him and smiling. "I guess you're still my bodyguard."

Cloud smiled in return, but the smile soon faded. Reminding him of that also reminded him of how he had failed, even though he realized now there wasn't really much he could have done about it. Still, it did bring back memories he wasn't all that fond of recalling.

For a long time he didn't say anything at all.

"Aeris..." he finally said slowly.

"Yes?"

"I've always kind of wondered something," he said somewhat tentatively. He wasn't sure she wanted to bring up these memories anymore than he. "About what happened back then."

He looked at her, but she just sat there waiting patiently for him to continue. She didn't seem to be bothered.

"Why did you leave us?" he finally asked, sitting down beside her. "Why did you go to face Sephiroth by yourself?"

Aeris just sat there for a moment before answering.

"I didn't go to face Sephiroth," she eventually said. "I went to pray for Holy. I thought I could stop Sephiroth that way. I thought it was the *only* way."

"But why did you go by yourself?" Cloud questioned. "Why didn't you tell us? We traveled all that way together, all of us as a team. We were there for each other, to watch each other's back, and then you run off on your own..."

Aeris looked at him for a moment, somewhat surprised. It was obvious what she had done had affected him more than she thought, even after all this time. She could tell by the tone of his voice he was troubled by her actions.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just thought I could end it by myself, without risking anyone else, without anyone else getting hurt. You all became too important to me. I didn't want to see anything happen to any of you."

"And we didn't want anything to happen you either," Cloud replied.

She looked at him and smiled.

"I know," she said, taking his hand. He immediately jerked it back away from her. She looked at him in surprise, but then saw the look of pain on his face as he looked at his hand. She remembered that was hand he had cut when he fell.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't realize your hand still hurt. Here, let me see it."

"It's just a scratch," Cloud said slowly, and it was, but it still hurt. In fact, it hurt a lot more now than it had before. He hadn't really thought of it because of all that had happened them, but now he realized it was throbbing. It was just a little cut, however, and he had just assumed it was nothing.

"It's not really that bad," he continued, but Aeris just looked out him, holding out her own hand.

Giving in, he let her take his hand again, and this time she held it much more gingerly. Cloud was right, it wasn't a large cut, and it didn't appear very deep, but it had a reddish tinge around the edges that Aeris didn't like the look of.

She closed her eyes, concentrating. A moment later a feeling of contentment stole over her and she felt the refreshing cool breeze that was the trademark of her healing power wash over her. Cloud felt it too, and waited expectantly for the pain to subside.

Only it didn't.

Aeris opened her eyes again. They both looked down at the cut on Cloud's hand, which looked completely unchanged. Aeris frowned.

"I don't understand," she said slowly.

It didn't work. The cut was still open, the same as before. She could still see the pain in Cloud's eyes, but how could that be? Her powers *always* worked.

"Let me try again," she said.

She repeated the process, this time concentrating fiercely, but again to no avail.

"It can't be," she stated, obviously upset.

"It's all right," Cloud reassured her.

"No it's not," she countered. "It's just a little cut. It should work. Have I lost my abilities?"

Cloud didn't reply. Perhaps that bluish light had had a more profound and subtle effect on her than just knocking her unconscious. Was that what she was thinking?

"I'm sure you haven't lost your abilities," he reassured her. "It's probably just some weird fluke thing."

Aeris did not seem at all appeased by his reassurance. She looked around, as if looking for something else to test herself with, but they had no other injuries.

"You don't know that," she said finally, sounding more upset than ever. "You don't know what that did to me. They're Cetra Cloud. I can feel it."

Cloud looked at her in surprise. She hadn't said anything like that before.

"Are you sure?"

"I felt it before, when I first awoke," she admitted. "Whoever was pursuing us, they weren't that far away. I could feel a Cetra presence. I'm sure of it."

Cloud didn't reply for some time. If she had felt them, it was a lucky thing they hadn't felt her, perhaps because she was half human. He nodded slowly.

"Even so, it doesn't really change anything," he said eventually.

"It's my own people, and they're after me, and I don't know why," Aeris continued. "I don't understand Cloud. What have I done to them?"

Cloud just looked at her for a moment. She seemed truly shaken, not at all like the Aeris he knew, who seemed to take just about any occurrence, no matter how odd, in stride. Now she seemed almost to be in tears.

"It's okay," he said, putting his good hand on her shoulder. "It's not you. You've done nothing wrong Aeris. I don't know what's going on either, but I'm sure we'll find out. I'm sure there's some logical explanation."

"They're doing something bad," Aeris told him. "I don't know what, but its bad. I just know it."

He couldn't argue with her. Even without any special sense it was obvious these people were up to no good. If they really were Cetra, where did they come from? Or had they been here all the time, hiding? Whoever they were they had obviously deliberately concealed themselves from human society all this time. He wondered how many of them there were. Could there be another underground city here on the island, like Ifalna, only might this one be populated? He couldn't imagine a whole city of Cetra being here. hiding for so long. He suspected it was only a few, but of course he had no proof.

Right now that wasn't important. He had to get Aeris to pull herself together.

"Even if they are, we'll straighten it all out. If some of them are up to no good, we'll stop them, but even if some are, that doesn't mean they all are."

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "It seems like every time we find some people of my race they're plotting something. What if my powers are gone for good?"

"We don't even know for sure if they're gone at all," Cloud responded.

"But what if they are?" she exclaimed. "My ability to heal people is part of me. It's part of what makes me what I am. What am I without that?"

"Aeris, calm down," he said, pulling her closer to him. "It's okay, you haven't lost your powers."

"But how do you know?"

"I just *do*, okay?"

She looked at him for a moment, then, to his surprise, rested her head on his chest.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know I'm not usually like this. I'm just...scared I guess. Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. My healing powers are so much a part of me that I don't know what I'd do if I lost them. When I went to pray for Holy I was scared too, a little. I knew it was dangerous, but I guess I really didn't believe Sephiroth would find me, so it wasn't that bad. I know it might sound strange that I'm more afraid of losing my powers than dying, but that's the way it is."

"No, that's okay, I understand," Cloud told her. "I know what its like to lose a part of yourself, to not know who you are, to know something is missing."

Aeris nodded her head but did not reply. He looked down at her. For some reason he was reminded of when they'd first met, his abrupt fall into the middle of her church, and her life. He remembered seeing her face, the first thing he saw when he awoke. Those big green eyes. She had seemed so childlike at times, and at others more mature than anyone he had ever known. She had been an enigma. Still was, in fact. She had been so fragile and yet at times so strong. There had been a sadness about her, even though she tried to put up a cheerful front. She had been like a breath of fresh air in the stagnant slums of Midgar, her and her flowers. She was bright, cheerful, sympathetic.

And beautiful.

That gave him pause. Why was he thinking that? She *was* beautiful, there was no denying that, and there was an attraction between them, or had been. There was no denying that either. He felt suddenly guilty. Still, he didn't know why. He was holding Aeris because she had been distressed, because she was afraid and he wanted to comfort her. It was nothing more than that.

Wasn't it?

He shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. Aeris lifted her head and looked at him.

"You all right now?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Okay, I guess we better get on our way then," he said. "They're probably still searching for us and might come back to this area. It might be best if we headed back to the cave. We'll continue searching tomorrow."

Warily they made their way back to the cave. They saw no more sign of their pursuers, and by the time they reached the cave the tension had eased and Aeris seemed to be in much better spirits. Cloud, however, didn't feel much better at all. In fact, he felt worse. His hand still throbbed, and, if anything, the pain had increased. Beyond that, it seemed to be

spreading. Before it had only been his hand that hurt, now the pain had crawled up to his elbow. He assumed that wasn't a good sign. Nevertheless, he didn't say anything to Aeris. He didn't want to worry her, especially if there was nothing she could do about it. He was disappointed, to say the least, that her healing powers hadn't worked. It was a random cut, and he didn't see how it could have anything to do with their pursuers, but somehow he thought their might be some connection. It seemed more than coincidence that they were being chased by the Cetra and Aeris' Cetra powers hadn't worked. She could very well be right in her presumption that the strange blue light had done something to her, hopefully temporarily, but of course he wasn't going to say that to her.

At any rate, as the day progressed he began to feel worse and worse. By the time night fell the pain radiated up his entire arm and he felt feverish. By then he was starting to get really worried. He wasn't sure what the problem was. It seemed like some kind of infection, but he didn't think infections traveled that fast. Poison perhaps? He had cut his hand on a rock. What kind of poison could possibly be there? Whatever it was, it was obviously serious. There was no doctor here, and with Aeris' powers on the fritz and no materia, the situation could become bleak very quickly.

"Are you all right?" Aeris asked. He saw she was looking at him closely. "You look pale."

He decided there was no point in concealing it any longer. It was obvious this wasn't going to go away on its own, not anytime soon, anyway. She was going to find out one way or another.

"No," he said. He explained how his arm felt and she immediately came over to him, filled with concern. She inspected his arm. The cut seemed to be healing normally enough, but there were faint red streaks running up his arm and it was swollen and painful even under Aeris' light touch.

"You should have said something sooner," she admonished.

"Well, I didn't want to worry you," Cloud responded. "Especially since there's nothing you can do."

He hadn't really wanted to remind her of that, but she seemed unfazed, more concerned with him now than herself.

"Just because I can't use my healing power doesn't mean I can't do *anything*," she said. "I know a few things about healing besides that, you know. There are some common herbs that can be used to reduce pain and swelling. I'll go out and see if I can find some."

Cloud was not at all thrilled with the idea of her wandering around outside. Of course it was his sword arm that was injured, just his luck. Right now he knew he would be useless in a fight.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" he queried.

"Don't worry, I'll be careful."

In spite of her words he did worry, but it wasn't all that long before she returned, arms laden with greenery. There was a trickle of water near the back of the cave, and she sat down beside that, washing the plants and then mashing some up with a rock and mixing them. Eventually she came over to him and applied her poultice to his arm. To his surprise and great relief, the pain lessened immediately. He looked up at her.

"That's much better, thank you." He hadn't known she'd had such talents. He supposed it made sense that he didn't, after all between her healing powers and their materia she had never had to resort to such mundane healing techniques.

"It's getting late," Aeris said, sitting down wearily beside him. "Get some rest. I'm not sure how much that will help but hopefully you'll feel better in the morning."

Cloud tried to make himself comfortable. Now that she had mentioned it, he did feel bone tired.

"Yes mother," he said.

Aeris looked at him and smiled, but said nothing. She laid herself down just a short distance away. In spite of the fact that the pain had lessened, his mind was still filled with worry. The herbs Aeris had applied to his arm helped, but that didn't guarantee they would cure him. They had yet to find out anything about their pursuers except that they were Cetra. They were still alone and cut off from all contact with the outside world, with little food and water. Things didn't look good at all. Nevertheless, he felt sleep overcoming him, and he didn't fight it. Hopefully, as Aeris had said, things would be better in the morning.