

CHAPTER V: REEVE THE DRAGONSLAYER

Reeve couldn't help but stare at the odd looking house in front of them. Even though he had seen it before, when Cait had come through here, he still couldn't get used to it. The weird shell like shape, with the strange spires and points that seemed to serve no useful or aesthetic purpose. Was this really architecture, or was it the actual remains of some ancient living creature?

There was something eerie about the City of the Ancients, something otherworldly. But he supposed that shouldn't be surprising. After all, it had been built by beings that were not quite human.

Red stood nearby, looking around and sniffing the air. They had been following the trail off and on all day, but for some reason it had become difficult to follow. Though Red knew they were close the scent no longer seemed as strong. Something about the city seemed to be interfering with his senses. There was something about the whole region that was not quite right.

Aeris had left late yesterday morning, and they had arrived here last night. They had seen no sign of their quarry so far, nor Danneko either.

Reeve found himself thinking a lot about Aeris since she had gone. She had promised to be back later today, and he kept looking around, hoping to spot her. Red was good company but he wasn't much of a conservationist. He missed Aeris' sympathetic ear.

They passed by the house and continued down the trail. At least they hadn't run into anything they had to fight, he thought thankfully. Without Aeris, Red would be pretty much on his own.

They walked on for some time, eventually reaching a crossroad, with the trail leading off in four different directions. Red stood in the middle for some time, nose to the ground. It was obvious he was unsure of which way to go.

Eventually he turned and headed off to the north. They were soon surrounded by huge mushroom like plants and tall thin leafless trees that seemed to reach up far into the sky. Even the plants that grew here were different from any they had seen before.

After a short time they came to a clearing below the trees. Ahead was another of those shell houses, and in front of it a small lake. The very lake, Reeve knew, where they had laid Aeris' body to rest.

As they approached they saw something else. Crouching at the edge of the lake, slowly lapping up water, was the one they sought.

They could see her quite clearly, for they were not very far away. She was almost identical to Red, except perhaps a little smaller and she had a shock of blond hair in the middle of her short mane.

For a moment they stood there looking at her.

Before they could say anything she sensed their presense, for she suddenly looked up. Reeve could see the look of surprise on her face when she saw them. They stood staring at one another for a moment, then she turned and bolted away.

"Hey wait!" Reeve called out. Red said nothing, but suddenly took off after her. Reeve hesitated a moment, then followed. He ran as fast as he could, but even if he hadn't been out of shape, there was no way he could keep up with his four footed friend. In minutes both Red and his quarry were lost from sight.

Reeve ran on in the direction Red had gone, hoping to catch up somehow, though he thought it unlikely. Still, it seemed better than just standing there doing nothing.

They had run off the trail into the woods. Now Reeve found himself surrounded by the strange flora of the forest. The ground was broken and uneven, full of shallow vales and low hills, preventing him from seeing very far in any direction. The dark green mushroom like plants grew here almost as tall as his head, and the thin trees closed in over him, cutting off the sunlight and leaving the forest floor dim and more eerie than ever.

He hadn't gone far before he had to stop and catch his breath. He stood there for a minute, listening carefully. He caught no sound to indicate Red was nearby, but he did hear a strange buzzing noise.

He looked toward the source of the sound. It was coming from the trees to his left. At first he could see nothing but a glimpse of movement through the foliage. Then a large insect like creature suddenly hovered into view.

Reeve turned and ran.

He ran up a low hill, directly away from the creature. The buzzing noise did not diminish. In fact it grew louder, more incessant. He glanced back to see the beast pursuing him.

"Red, help!" he shouted. He redoubled his speed, racing over the hill and down the other side. The buzzing sound seemed to fill the air around him now, and he could feel the wind from the beat of its wings. He risked a look behind him once more. It was directly behind him now, looming over him, its great gossamer wings seemed to fill the sky, and he could see its green bulbous eyes.

His foot caught on a protruding root, and he tumbled to the earth.

The ground sloped steeply downward here. He slid out of control down the hill, smashing through the greenery, and coming to rest when his back banged roughly against a tree trunk.

He looked up. The thing was coming straight at him.

With a cry he scrambled out of the way. He dove into some nearby shrubs. The branches clawed at him, but he paid no heed. The beast was right over his head again. The buzzing rang in his ears and the beating of the wings drummed above him. He covered his head with his hands and cowered down.

His knee banged sharply against something. He glanced down to see a large branch half buried in the soil beside him.

With sudden resolve he grabbed the branch and wrenched it out of the ground. Then he turned and swung blindly with all his might.

Whether guided by luck or the beating of the creature's wings, the blow struck home. The branch hit the beast in the middle of its abdomen. It twisted backward and fell to the ground, and suddenly the incessant buzzing stopped.

But just for a moment. Apparently he had only stunned the creature. For suddenly the buzzing began again as it once more beat its wings in preparation for launching itself back into the air.

But it never got the chance. Before it could move Reeve was on top of it, smashing down with the branch. Again and again he lashed out furiously, bringing the club down with all his might, until both he and the ground around him were spattered with green ichorous blood.

Finally he stopped and stood looking down at the remains of the creature, panting. There was not much left to look at.

He looked up to see Red walking slowly toward him.

"I did it," he exclaimed, grinning foolishly. "I killed it!"

Red did not reply, just walked over to him, staring at him curiously. Reeve looked down to see that he was covered with dirt, sweat and green blood.

"You certainly did," Red observed.

Reeve dropped the branch and looked at the creature once again.

"What was this thing anyway?" he asked.

Red tilted his head and looked at the remains.

"Hard to say at this point," he replied. "It looks like one of the giant dragonflies of the northern continent. They used to be quite abundant around here until the plant whose nectar they live on became scarce. Now they are rarely seen."

Reeve looked at him, his grin fading.

"Nectar?" he repeated. "You mean..."

"That's right," Red said, nodding. "The creature is a herbivore. It's completely harmless."

Reeve stood there for a moment, just looking back and forth between Red and the creature.

"Well, why was it chasing me then?" he exclaimed.

Red shrugged.

"I don't know," he replied. "Perhaps it was just curious. This isn't a region where humans are frequently seen. One thing for sure, we're never going to know now."

They stood there in silence for a moment.

"I guess you didn't catch her," Reeve stated, suddenly very anxious to change the subject.

Red shook his head.

"No," he said. "I lost her in the woods."

He had been hot on her trail when he had heard Reeve call out for help, but he didn't think it would be a good idea to mention that.

"At least we know we're close," he said optimistically.

"Ummm," Reeve said. Though Red didn't say anything, he had a feeling he might have made yet another mistake.

Red looked at him.

"Well, you can't go wandering around like that. No offense but you stink. I'm sure it's uncomfortable for you and giving off that stench she'll smell you a mile away. Let's go get you cleaned up."

Reeve nodded. Even his poor excuse for a nose found the odor he was emitting unpleasant. He followed Red slowly back through the woods.

"Why do you think she ran?" he asked suddenly.

Red had been pondering that himself.

"I don't know," he replied. "She must have seen me, we were not far away. She had to realize that we are of the same species. Yet she ran from us as if she were afraid to meet me. I don't understand it."

"Perhaps she thought we were with Danneko?" Reeve suggested.

Red shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said slowly. "After I chased her into the woods she looked back a couple of times. It was obvious that we had left you far behind, as we would have any human. Even if Danneko had been with us, he would not have been able to keep up. She must have known this, but even when I called out to her, she did not slow. Even when it was obvious that I was her only pursuer she kept right on going. I don't know the reasoning behind it, but it was clear that she was not only running away from Danneko, but she was running from me as well."

~*~

"They must have camped here," Reno stated. They stood in a shallow bowl of land beneath the trees just north of Rocket Town. They had picked up the trail again just an hour ago. It had been difficult to find, and for a while Reno was afraid that they had lost it completely.

The grass was beaten down around them, and it was obvious to even an inexperienced eye that someone has spent some time here.

"How far ahead do you think they are?" Rude questioned.

"Hard to say," Reno replied. It had taken them longer than he had expected to get back on track, and now it was late afternoon. Their quarry had at least half a days start. They had their work cut out for them if they expected to catch up.

"Hey what's that?" Yuffie said.

He turned to see her walking toward a small cluster of trees. He could see some kind of object beneath them.

"Looks like they left something behind," she stated.

He took a couple of steps in her direction, looking at the object. It was partially hidden in the grass, but he could see it looked like some kind of wooden box, or chest.

"Yuffie, wait," he called out.

She didn't even glance toward him.

He pulled out his nightstick. Just as she bent down over the box she suddenly found herself encased in a pyramid of glowing yellow light.

She turned and looked at Reno angrily.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" she spat out, banging fiercely on the pyramid.

He didn't answer her, but turned and nodded for Rude to come over. Rude walked up beside Yuffie and stooped down by the box.

"That's mine," Yuffie exclaimed. "I saw it first. If you creeps think you're going to take it from me, you've got another think coming!"

Rude ignored her as well. He knelt down beside the box and inspected it carefully. He turned to look at Reno.

"Yeah, it's wired all right," he said.

"What?" Yuffie said.

Rude produced a pouch from his suit pocket. He removed a small set of wire cutters from it. Reaching carefully beneath the box, he clipped a small white wire that ran along the side of it. Then he got up and picked up the box. He flipped open the lid and showed it to Yuffie. Except for the small bomb inside, it was empty.

Reno released the pyramid and walked over to them.

"Looks like the Swordsman decided to leave a little present behind for anyone who might be following," he commented.

Reno looked at Yuffie, but she just turned away. He smiled to himself. He hadn't expected a thank you. Just the fact that for once she didn't have any smart ass remarks was satisfaction enough.

He circled around the clearing, looking carefully at the ground.

"C'mon," he said finally, pointing to the west. "The trail leads off in this direction."

He started off, Rude right behind him. Yuffie came next, already walking as if nothing had happened at all. Elena followed, with Vincent bringing up the rear.

Elena slowed down until Vincent was walking next to her. She had been surprised when he had told them he was coming with them, and pleased in spite of herself. But she hadn't shown it. She was determined this time to not read too much into what he was doing.

She glanced over at him. He hadn't said more than two words to her today, not that that was anything unusual. A couple of times he had appeared to be about to say something, but he had not spoken.

He looked up and saw her looking at him. For a moment she saw a hint of a smile on his face, that smile that she hadn't seen in quite some time. Her smile, she thought. But then it vanished. Still, he did not turn away, but continued to look at her thoughtfully.

"Why did you become a Turk?" he asked.

Not at all what she had been expecting. She thought for a moment before answering.

"I don't know," she said. "The Turks were always considered an elite organization in Shinra. It was a step up in my career if I could join them."

"You should quit," he said.

"What?" she exclaimed.

"You're not cut out to be a Turk. You're not cold blooded enough."

She looked at him angrily.

"Did you come with us just so you could insult me?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"Not many people would take that as an insult," he replied with a smile. "And it was not meant as one. You didn't want to work with AVALANCHE because of what they did in Midgar. Now Reno tells me you've been upset since our conversation in the Gold Saucer."

It wasn't much of a conversation, she thought ruefully.

"Reno is a jerk," she said. "It's none of his business."

"But it is," Vincent replied. "He is the leader of the Turks now, and everything you do is his business. That's part of being a Turk. That's what it's all about. To be a Turk means obeying without question, no matter what is asked of you. You can't afford the luxury of emotions. You know the Turks creed."

"No excuses, no regrets," she recited.

"It takes a certain type of person to live up to that," he continued. "I don't think you are that type of person. That's not you, and that shouldn't be taken as an insult. On the contrary, it gives me hope for you."

"What do you mean?" she asked, more confused than ever.

"Being a Turk carries a lot of prestige, I admit," he said. "But you have to give up too much. I don't want you to end up like Reno and Rude, or even worse, like me."

"I don't think you're so bad," she replied quickly. "Or Reno or Rude either for that matter."

"But you don't know me very well," he answered. "I took the Turks credo to heart, and by doing so lost my own. I was the epitome of a Turk. Even before what Hojo did to me. He didn't change me that much. The foundation was already there long before I met him. I lived and breathed that creed until..."

He paused for a moment. She could tell the memories were painful.

"Until," he forced himself to continue, "the one time in my life that I did let my emotions take control, and it ended up destroying both of us. I'll never let that happen again!"

She felt a strong desire to reach out to him, to take his hand, but she wouldn't let herself.

"But you weren't to blame for that," she said. "It was Hojo."

"Was it?" he said, the words sounding almost like an accusation. "Did Hojo change me, or did he just enhance what was already there? No, I didn't come with you to insult you, I came to warn you. This organization will take you and use you until there is nothing left inside you, and then it will discard you. And I would do the same. My advice would be to turn around right now and get as far away from all of us as you possibly can, as quickly as you can."

He fell silent, and now when he looked at her there was no sign of a smile on his lips. She looked at his eyes and they bore into her.

She turned away hastily. She knew how he could use his eyes much like a weapon. She was not about to attempt to stand up to that. But she didn't need to look at him to talk.

"I don't think..." she began, but was interrupted by a cry from Yuffie.

"Hey, what's that?"

They had come out of the woods and were crossing the road that led north from Rocket Town toward the coast. They all looked at Yuffie's call. Reno saw something glinting in the grass beside the road. He hurried over, but Yuffie just stood over the item without touching it until the others came up beside her.

Reno stood there for a moment, then reached down and picked up the long metal pole. They all recognized it immediately.

"Aeris' rod," Vincent said grimly.

~*~

The flap to her tent opened and a young man stepped in. Aeris recognized him as the boy who had stood up for her last night. He had a plate of food in his hands.

Altim looked at Aeris and said nothing for a moment. He had thought her beautiful last night in the dark, but now that he saw her in the light of day he realized that he had underestimated her loveliness. He had never seen a woman so stunning.

She looked at him curiously and he realized he was staring at her.

He turned hastily away, his face reddening.

"I...I brought you some food" he stammered, quite unnecessarily.

"Thank you," she replied, smiling faintly. "And thank you also for helping me last night. That was very brave."

He shrugged and did not reply. This was not turning out anything like he had planned when he had bribed the cook to let him bring her the food. He had a dozen witty lines that he had rehearsed before walking into her tent, but he couldn't think of a single one of them now. He felt like he was coming across as a complete idiot, and he had to resist the urge to run back out of the tent in embarrassment.

But he couldn't leave. If he did he wouldn't be able to see those soft green eyes looking at him innocently.

"What were you doing out there?" he finally managed to say. "All alone in the dark."

"I was on my way to rejoin my friends," she replied, still apparently not seeming to understand that there was any danger involved in it at all.

"But didn't you realize how dangerous that was?" he couldn't help but ask.

She smiled at him again, and his heart skipped a beat.

"It's very kind of you to be concerned about me," she said. "But I'll be fine."

He shook his head.

"How can you say that?" he questioned. "You know what almost happened to you. You know what kind of people you've been captured by. I won't hurt you, but I've a feeling I might be the exception. I don't know what they will do to you."

And I don't know whether I can do anything about it, he thought. He had stood up to one man, but he couldn't fight the whole camp. He had no idea what the Swordsman had in mind for her.

"Zack wouldn't hurt me," she said, as if divining his thoughts.

"So you did call him that last night," Altim said. "You do know him."

"Yes," she replied. "From a very long time ago. But all this time, I thought he was dead." she ended with a note of sadness in her voice.

"You don't seem like the type who would have been friends," Altim said.

Aeris had no answer to that. Zack had not said a word to her last night, just told his men to bring her back to camp. They had put her in this tent, and she hadn't seen him since. Hardly enough time to form any opinions about his personality, but she could tell he had changed, perhaps drastically. She had picked up from bits and pieces from the others that he was called the Swordsman now, and had given up or forgotten the name Zack. In any case it was hardly likely the Zack she knew would be in charge of this rough band of thieves.

Suddenly the tent flap was pushed aside again, and the object of their conversation walked in.

He looked at Altim and nodded his head toward the exit. With one last glance at Aeris, Altim put her food down and walked out.

Zack turned and they looked at each other for a long time without saying anything. The coal black hair, the deep blue mako eyes, the chiseled features, were all the same. Not quite as well groomed, she thought, looking at the dark stubble covering his chin and the unkempt appearance of his clothing, but it was still him.

"Zack," she said.

He looked at her curiously.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Don't you know?" she responded.

"Don't play games with me," he said, with a hint of anger. He took a step toward her, menace apparent in his eyes, but she returned his gaze unflinching.

He took another step forward, until he was right beside her, looking down at her coldly.

"Aren't you afraid of me?" he asked.

She looked up at him with no sign of fear in her eyes.

"Should I be?"

"I am the Swordsman," he stated grimly. He let his eyes run the length of her body. "I kill any man who stands in my way and take any woman I desire. You should be very much afraid of me."

Still she did not flinch.

"You are Zack of Gongaga," she replied, looking straight at him. "You are kind and gentle and never treated anyone you knew with anything but generosity and respect."

He stared at her without saying anything, but she did not turn away.

He took a step back.

"Who are you?" he asked again, but this time without menace.

"My name is Aeris. Aeris Gainsborough. You don't remember me?"

He folded his arms across his chest.

"I remember something..." he said slowly.

She looked at him sympathetically.

"Zack, what happened to you? Cloud told me you were dead."

"Cloud?"

"Yes, Cloud Strife. He was your best friend. You don't remember him either?"

"No," he replied. "I don't remember anything that happened to me before I was shot."

He looked up at her again.

"But you do, don't you?"

She nodded.

"It was Shinra. You and Cloud were caught in an ambush. You were shot several times. He thought you were dead."

Zack looked at her thoughtfully.

"Shinra, huh," he mused.

Suddenly he brought his hands up to his head.

"What's wrong?" Aeris said immediately.

He didn't answer. He leaned forward, and for a moment she thought he was going to fall. Instead he dropped down to one knee, clutching his head, obviously in extreme pain.

Aeris knelt down beside him and took hold of his arm. Suddenly she was very sure of what was wrong with him.

"You're having the same headaches as Cloud," she said slowly.

He jerked his arm away from her and staggered to his feet.

"I don't...need...any help!" he spat out through clenched teeth. He stood there for a long time, shivering in pain. She watched him, but she did not try to comfort him again. Eventually the pain seemed to subside.

"It appears we have a lot to talk about," he said after he had regained control of himself. "But I don't have time now. We've lingered here too long. I've got to get these people moving again. We've got to get to Nibelheim. But don't worry, I'm sure we'll have time for many long chats."

He turned to leave but she came up beside him.

"What are you planning on doing with me?" she asked. "I have some friends who need my help."

He turned to look at her one more time. There was no kindness in his eyes.

"You are the Swordsman's prisoner. You will remain with us as long as it is my whim that you do, and I've a feeling it will be my whim for quite some time to come. I'm afraid it is unlikely you will ever see your friends again."

Then he turned and walked swiftly out of the tent.

~*~

Tifa looked around slowly as they walked into Nibelheim. Neither one of them had been back here since they had beaten Sephiroth. Neither one of them had wanted to come back here to a town full of strangers.

But as she walked along she realized that was not true. All around them people were going about their business. A man wearing an apron stood out in front of a bakery, a table of his wares in front of him. She could smell the scent of fresh baked bread as they approached. Across the street two children were playing with a rubber ball. And down on the street corner ahead of them a young couple stood with their arms wrapped around one another. These people were not the strangers. It was their town now.

It was she and Cloud who were the strangers.

This was not their hometown anymore. It had been taken away from them by Shinra.

She didn't want to be here. She would have preferred to camp out in the wilderness. But Cloud had insisted on coming into town. She had tried to talk him out of it, but he had turned a deaf ear. He had never shown any interest in wanting to return here before.

Then again, this wasn't exactly the first odd thing he had done lately.

They walked into the Inn. She didn't recognize the man at the front desk, of course. Cloud walked over and got them rooms.

Separate rooms.

She said nothing. She would not have protested had he gotten just one. Was he still worried that he would do her harm? They had slept just a few feet apart in their sleeping bags on the road, and he had not seemed worried then.

They walked up to their rooms and stowed their gear. Her room had a view out the back of the Inn, looking out over the forest with just a glimpse of the Nibel mountains to the right. She was grateful for that. She didn't want to be able to look out and see the town.

She sat down on the bed and stared at the wall. She had been happy when Cloud had acquiesced to her going with him, but it had not lasted. He had hardly said anything since then, just a few words here and there, spoken gruffly and without humor. She had tried to be cheerful, tried to say things to raise their spirits, but the words had sounded hollow. Eventually they had both lapsed into silence.

Perhaps it was just Nibelheim, she thought.

She slowly eased herself down until she was stretched out on the bed, suddenly realizing just how tired she was. They had been walking all day, and had taken few breaks.

Things would be better tomorrow. They would leave Nibelheim, hopefully for good. She never wanted to come back here again. This town held too many painful memories.

~*~

She woke up, blinking in the dark. For a moment she didn't know where she was. She glanced out the window and saw the dark line of the Nibel mountains in the moonlight.

She rubbed her eyes and sat up. She must have been even more exhausted than she thought. She obviously had fallen asleep, evidently for quite some time.

Slowly she stood up, her stomach rumbling. She must have slept right through dinner. Why hadn't Cloud woken her? She turned on the light and stood for a moment as her eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness. How long had she slept?

She stepped over to the door between their adjoining rooms. She hadn't locked hers...

It opened easily in her hand. She looked in but it was dark.

"Cloud?" she said, but received no answer. She stepped into the room and looked around.

It was empty.

Something had to be wrong. He wouldn't just wander off into the night without her. He wouldn't just leave her there.

Would he?

Perhaps he had decided, in spite of her pleas, that he was better off going on alone.

She looked around the room, suddenly filled with fear that that was exactly what he had done. She turned on the light and went swiftly over to a large cabinet and opened it up. Relieved, she saw that his gear was still there.

He wouldn't leave without that.

She looked around. There was one thing that was missing.

His sword.

She left the room and walked down the stairs and out of the Inn. It must have been late, for the streets were quiet. The stores and houses around them dark and shuttered. Besides the Inn, the only light she saw was coming from the old Shinra mansion.

She looked around slowly, but saw no sign of Cloud. In fact, there was no sign of anyone. The streets were deserted.

She caught a glimpse of what had been her house, and she quickly turned away. She did not want to see that. She did not want to be here at all. Where could Cloud have gone?

Slowly she found herself walking toward the old Shinra mansion. She didn't know why she chose this building. Perhaps because it was the only one that showed any sign of activity. Perhaps it was because of all that had happened to them there in the past. If there were any secrets left in Nibelheim, it seemed likely she would find them there.

As she approached she saw that the front door was open, light streaming out. She walked up to the entrance and looked in. Though brightly lit, the room in front of her was deserted.

She walked in and stopped for a minute, listening carefully, but she heard nothing. She went up the stairway and turned to the right. If he was here he was almost absurdly in the basement. Everything that that ever happened here seemed to take place down there.

She stepped into the next room and stopped suddenly in horror. A body lay on the floor in front of her, his gleaming white lab coat stained with crimson.

At first she turned away, not wanting to look. But she knew she had to see.

Steeling herself, she turned back to look at the body once more. She knelt down and saw the gaping wound across his chest. A wound that could easily have been caused by a large sword.

"Cloud," she whispered, a knot tightening in her stomach. Could he have done such a thing?

She stood up again and moved on. She reached the stairs that led down into the basement. Slowly she walked down the rickety spiral stairway. At the bottom she reached a long narrow corridor. She could see the entrance to the library ahead. But off to the right, opposite the door where they had found Vincent so long ago, another door stood open. A door she had never seen before.

She walked slowly over to it, and as she did she saw that it had been concealed in the wall. She stopped in front of it and looked in. The room wasn't very big. It appeared to have some kind of laboratory equipment in it. There was no one in it.

She stepped into the room. There was a couple of large pieces of equipment here, but she no idea what their use might be. Just one thing caught her eye. At the far end of the room was a large container. The top was off, and some kind of fog seemed to be flowing slowly out of it. On the container itself were the words:

'DANGER: Liquid Nitrogen'

And below that: 'Cryogenic Chamber. Keep at -100 degrees at all times'

She slowly walked over to the container. When her feet came in contact with the fog it felt icy. She leaned over and looked inside.

It was empty.

She looked around, but saw nothing more of interest, or that she would understand. She walked out of the room, back into the corridor outside. The door to the library was open. As she approached she saw that there were red stains on the floor inside.

She stopped at the entrance, again listening carefully, and again, heard no sound.

She stepped into the room. She stopped immediately. This time she did not turn away. She had been prepared.

There were six bodies scattered around the room. Five men and one female. All wearing bloodied lab coats, all marked with the same evil wound as the man upstairs.

She heard a moan beside her and jumped back, her heart suddenly racing.

Cloud sat on the floor next to a bookcase, so quiet she hadn't even noticed him. He was not looking at her. His head was bowed, his knees drawn up with his sword resting on them.

It took a moment for her to get over the surprise. Then she knelt down beside him.

"Cloud, how could you..."

He suddenly looked up at her with tortured eyes.

"I...I didn't do it," he stammered. "I swear. I came down here and they were all dead. All of them. I don't remember doing anything. Tifa, I don't. I couldn't have done this"

He bowed his head again, his voice choked with anguish.

She slowly reached out and put her arms around him. His sword slid off his knees and clattered to the floor unnoticed. He turned toward her and grabbed hold of her, sobbing openly and squeezing her tight like he had that night he had nearly killed her.

"Help me Tifa," he said, his voice nearly failing him. "Please help me."

She remained unmoving in his embrace, letting him take comfort from her just being there. She felt that this was one time where no words would be adequate. She felt tears welling in her own eyes and knew it was useless to try to stifle them.

What if he truly was going insane?