

CHAPTER I: DREAMS & ASHES

SIX MONTHS LATER AND THREE WEEKS AFTER AVALANCHE HAS RETURNED FROM THE SOUTHERN CONTINENT

"Are you sure you want to come?" Vincent asked.

Elena nodded slowly.

"I'm not Yuffie," she replied. "I'm not going to lose my lunch, or dinner, as the case may be, which was excellent by the way, Shera."

"Thanks," Shear replied with a smile. "I couldn't have done it without your help."

"I didn't do anything," Elena replied. "Cooking is not one of my strong suits, just ask Vincent."

Shera looked at Vincent, but he remained silent. He wasn't the most talkative person to begin with, but even if he had been, he wouldn't have been foolish enough to touch that one.

"Well, let's get going then," Cid said.

He walked up to the Slipstream and pulled open the door. Vincent and Elena stepped in. Cid turned to look at Shera.

"Sure you don't want to come along?"

"The way you drive?" she said quickly. "No way. Not unless you want our blessed event to happen right now."

Cid grinned.

"Hey, it might be a good idea. Didn't you tell me you wished the whole thing was over?"

"Yeah, but I'd rather have it happen naturally, and in a hospital, not thirty thousand feet up."

"Hey, I can't think of a better way to come into the world," Cid replied. He leaned forward and kissed her. "Be back in a little while."

He pointed to her stomach.

"And you make sure you behave yourself while I'm gone. No kicking your mother, and don't you dare show your face until I come back."

Shera smiled and Cid turned and stepped into the plane. In a few moments he reappeared in the pilot's seat next to Vincent. Shera stepped back as the engines whined and then ignited. The sound quickly increased to an ear splitting roar, and she had to step back even further. She saw Cid wave to her from the cockpit, and the black jet slowly rose up into the air as she waved back.

"She looks ready to go," Vincent observed. looking down at Shera as she slowly faded away below them.

"Yeah," Cid replied with a grin. "She's due next week, but I think she's gonna drop any minute. Any day now I'm gonna have my own little copilot."

Elena noticed the smug look on Cid's face and couldn't help but smile. This was a side of Cid none of them had ever seen before. The guy was just bursting with pride, and it wasn't over anything that had an engine in it!

"So, how's your rocket doing?" she couldn't help but ask.

"It's getting there," Cid replied, lighting up a cigarette. "A little behind schedule, I have to admit. There's so much going on right now. I never thought the rocket would take a back seat to anything, but, there it is. Hey I can wait. Space isn't going anywhere."

Elena looked over to see Vincent staring at Cid. She could tell he was just as surprised by Cid's newfound perspective as she was.

"So where are we headed?" Vincent asked.

"Just a little shakedown cruise," Cid replied. "Spent the last two weeks putting in a more powerful engine that the boys were working on while I was gone. I was doing some aerobatics yesterday, but I didn't really have much time."

Vincent nodded slowly.

"So where are we headed?" he repeated.

Cid gave him a look.

"I just told ya," he replied.

Vincent glanced back at Elena, who just shrugged. He shook his head and looked at Cid again, but said nothing more.

They flew on in silence. After a while Cid looked ahead.

"Hey," he said. "We're coming up on Cosmo Canyon. Let's give Red a little wake up call."

The Slipstream dropped down until it was skimming just a couple of hundred feet above ground. They could see the red streaked hills surrounding the canyon rapidly approaching. As they came closer Elena could make out the tall hill that backed the canyon, the hill on which Bugenhagen's observatory was perched.

They were right over the canyon now. The ground was very close, and she could see the inhabitants of the town looking up at them and pointing as the aircraft streaked above.

She looked up to see the observatory approaching with breathtaking speed. Cid appeared to be headed right for it.

Elena resisted the urge to say something, although she felt her hands tighten on the arms of her chair. The observatory was only seconds away now, and Cid still hadn't pulled up. Elena gritted her teeth and refused to scream. She could see someone standing by the door in front of the observatory. She couldn't make out his features, but the person just seemed to be staring at the plane, then he suddenly threw himself to the ground.

Cid pulled the stick back. The plane lifted up at the last second. For a moment Elena was sure they wouldn't make it, but then they were past, the observatory already quickly diminishing behind them. She let out a silent sigh of relief.

"Didn't see Red," Cid said with a grin, "But we sure scared the shit out of someone."

"I suppose," Vincent replied.

Cid looked at him with a frown.

"C'mon Mr. serious, lighten up a little. You didn't enjoy that?"

Vincent just shrugged.

Cid looked at Elena.

"Hey, what does Vincent do for fun anyway?" he asked.

Elena thought for a moment.

"Kills people," she replied.

Cid shook his head.

"Great," he muttered. "And they think I'm strange."

The Slipstream banked to the left, heading out over the plain south of Cosmo Canyon. Cid had gained altitude, but now he began to drop back down again as Gongaga appeared ahead of them.

"Planning on terrorizing more innocents?" Elena asked.

Cid grinned.

"If the opportunity presents itself."

The plane banked again, heading straight for Gongaga. It was not far away now. They could see the roofs of some of the homes peeking through the surrounding forest, and the area around the destroyed reactor.

Cid frowned and stared ahead at the reactor. Something was different. A puzzled expression appeared on his face, and then slowly turned to one of shocked surprise as the plane flew closer and he saw that what had suspected from a distance was a reality.

He could tell Vincent and Elena had seen it too, for they were both staring as well, looking ahead at the Mako reactor.

Vincent finally broke the silence.

"They rebuilt it," he said in disbelief.

The Slipstream was right over the reactor now. Below them they could see smoke billowing from a stack on the apparently fully functional reactor below them.

"I don't believe it," Cid muttered.

He dropped down and circled around, all of them looking at the reactor. They just stared at it for a long time.

"They've broken the treaty," Elena said.

Cid nodded. After the fall of Shinra the truth about the dangers of Mako reactors had finally been revealed, and all the cities had signed a treaty forgoing the use of Mako as a power source. It had been one of the few things all the cities had actually agreed upon. None of them had ever thought anyone would break that treaty.

Cid finally recovered from his shock.

"Damn fools," he muttered. "Well, we better get back and report this. I've got a bad feeling about it."

Suddenly the Slipstream rocked underneath them.

"What was that?" Elena cried out.

"Hell if I know!" Cid exclaimed. "Felt like something hit us."

He pulled back on the stick and the Slipstream shot up into the air. Suddenly the plane shuddered once again.

"Damn!" Cid yelled.

He sent the Slipstream into a series of violent maneuvers.

"What's happening?" Elena said, hands tightly gripping the arms of her chair.

"I don't know," Cid replied angrily. "There's nothing on radar, but there's something back there, behind us."

"Another plane?" Elena asked.

The Slipstream dived down suddenly, and Elena felt the bottom drop out of her stomach.

"No," he replied. "At least, I don't think so." He twisted round and looked out the side window.

"It's following us too closely. No pilot could stay on my tail like that. No, it's got to be something else."

"Like what?" Elena said.

"I don't know."

The plane shuddered again, and then dropped like a stone. Cid wrestled with the stick until the jet leveled off again. Elena could see he was having trouble controlling the aircraft.

"Dammit!" he exclaimed. "Something's beating the hell out of us. We've got to get out of here."

He went to turn on the afterburners, but before he could do so he was nearly thrown from his seat as the Slipstream was hit once again. The plane went into a dive once more. Cid immediately recovered and started fighting to pull the plane back up again, but he didn't seem to be having much luck. Elena saw the ground approaching rapidly.

"Cid!" she yelled.

He glanced at her for just a moment, then turned back, the cigarette falling unconcerned from his lips.

"Hang on," he yelled. "We're going down!"

Red looked up as the Slipstream buzzed the observatory. Cid would have been disappointed to know that he was not in the canyon, but stood in a wooded area not far to the south. He watched the plane until it disappeared from view, shaking his head. Undoubtedly he would be hearing a stream of complaints about the wayward pilot when he returned to the canyon.

Red stood on a dirt road winding through the trees, a small house protruding through the forest just ahead. Lately a lot of people from Cosmo Canyon had been settling in this area. The desert lands around the canyon were not well suited for agriculture. As the population of the canyon grew they were becoming more and more dependent on farmers in the more fertile southern regions to provide food. So it was only natural that Red had agreed to investigate immediately when he heard that strange creatures were attacking the people of the region.

There were always reports of attacks out in the forests and wilder regions around the canyon. Though they were far fewer now, many of the monsters that had been created by the Mako reactors still inhabited the less populated areas. These were just dangerous places, normally far away from human habitation, but lately the attacks seemed to be coming with greater and greater frequency in this area. It seemed a disturbing enough trend for Red to look into it.

He walked toward the house. The family had abandoned it after three successive nights of attacks and had fled back to the canyon. He could see another house a little down the road, back the way he had come, but he had seen no sign that that one was inhabited either.

He walked around the back of the house. The family had started to clear the land behind it, but they had not gotten very far in their efforts. The forest nearly surrounded him now.

Red looked around, sniffing the air. He could detect an unpleasant odor. It was not something he had ever smelled before. Something had been here, and fairly recently.

He looked over at the house. It appeared deserted but undamaged. He bent his head and sniffed the ground. He slowly padded out into the cleared field. He looked carefully at the ground. He could see tracks. Large feet, bigger than his own. Four toes, three pointing forward, a fourth one facing back. They covered the entire area. Either the animal had gone back and forth here many times, or there were a lot of them.

His head came up suddenly, his ears perking up. He stared into the forest off to his right. He was sure he had heard something.

Slowly he started in that direction, not taking his eyes off the trees in front of him. Then he felt a light breeze on his face, and the odor suddenly became much stronger.

He hesitated. He could still see no danger, but a sudden feeling of foreboding came over him.

He took a slow step back.

And then the attack came. They burst out of the woods in front of him. Four bird-like creatures, but larger than any bird he had ever seen. Wings too short to fly, but ending instead with rapier-sharp claws. They came at him issuing a screeching cry.

He dodged out of the way of the first beast, slashing with his own claws. He felt them slice into its side, and it gave a squawk of pain and turned away. But then the other three were upon him. He lashed out, scrambling madly to avoid their claws and the raking blows from their feet. He struck again, and got another one, but only with a glancing blow, and he knew he had not done much damage.

He twisted out of the way again as another slashed at him. So far his reflexes had kept him out of danger, but they could not save him forever at these odds, and suddenly he felt the claws of one of the beasts rake across his back.

He jerked around and tore at the bird's head. It quickly retreated. Red turned as two others came at him again. He knew he had been injured pretty badly, but in the heat of battle he hardly even noticed the pain.

He dodged forward and under the claws of one of the birds, slashing up from underneath at its soft underbelly. Blood spurted around him and the animal screamed and fell back, collapsing to the ground.

He felt his back leg knocked out from under him, and he nearly fell to the ground, but somehow managed to keep his balance. He had taken one out, but the other three were clawing at him from all sides now.

Suddenly he spotted a flash of crimson and Nipala flew into the fray. She leaped into the air and landed squarely on the back of one of the beasts. It screamed in protest and jerked back and forth in a desperate attempt to dislodge her, but her

claws were embedded deeply in it's back. She let go with one paw and tore at the back of it's head. With one last gasping cry in fell to the ground.

Nipala leapt off and ran over to Red, who was holding his own against the last two. When one turned to face her, Red charged in and attacked it quickly from the side. With a scream that one went down too. The last one caught Red in the hindquarters with a raking claw as he turning to face it. Then he and Nipala both fell upon it. It stood no chance alone against the two of them. In moments it had joined it's comrades in the great beyond.

Red stood there panting over the body, looking at Nipala, covered with dozens of scrapes and bruises, as well as a long line of claw marks down his back.

"You got here just in time," he said.

They had come together, but had separated to look around shortly before Cid's plane had passed over.

"I can see that," she replied. "Are you all right?"

Red nodded slowly.

"I think so," he replied. "Nothing a couple of days rest won't cure. I think we..."

He stopped and looked up again, staring into the forest. She heard it too. The screeching cry echoed once more around them. And suddenly more of the birds came charging out of the woods. She didn't stop to count how many, she only knew that there were a lot of them.

Red paused for a spit second.

"There's too many of them," he cried.

Even before he finished the statement he was running, with Nipala right behind him. Things were obviously much worse here than he had suspected. Whatever the hell these things were there were way too many of them for just the two of them to handle. They had to get back to Cosmo Canyon.

"With the shell house out of the way, we can widen the entrance and the staircase," Reeve said. "It still won't be large enough to get adequate supplies down here in the long run, but it will do until we finish the tunnel for the second entrance."

Aeris nodded. She, Reeve, Zack and Elmyra stood at the foot of a wide stairway leading to the entrance of a church, looking around them at the streets of Ifalna, the newly renamed city of the Ancients. A city no longer deserted and silent, a city that was now alive with movement and sound, a city come back to life, back from the dead.

Aeris could not help but feel a deep satisfaction when she looked around and saw this. True, the families that had agreed to come here to repopulate the city were humans, not Cetra, but that really didn't make any difference. The ancient home of her people was alive once more, and that was all that mattered. Ever since she was resurrected she had been restless, had felt an unfulfilled need, a need to somehow make a connection with her past, but all this time what had happened here had kept her away. Because she had been scared, had been afraid to return to the place where she died, but now that burden was gone, and she felt a great sense of peace. She felt that now she had finally found her rightful place.

"Whatever you think is best," she said, looking at Reeve. He held a large map in his hands, a map of the city with proposed changes scribbled all over it. She smiled, looking at him. He had been the first to volunteer to come with her when she suggested returning to the city. He proposed that his city management skills learned while with Shinra would prove useful in recruiting citizens and developing the city, not that she needed any convincing. So far, as the new Mayor of Ifalna, his skills had indeed proven invaluable.

She herself had taken no title. Nor did she wish one. She was content just to be here, in the city of her people with her new church.

They walked up the steps and into the church. It was larger than the one she had frequented in Midgar, though other than that quite similar. The modest furnishing were simple and functional. The walls unadorned, but lining them, on each side of the pews, from one end to the other, were rows of flowers.

Elmyra stopped and looked around.

"So this is what you were doing all this time," she said. "Aeris, it's beautiful."

Aeris smiled modestly but did not reply. Zack came up to her and put his hand on her shoulder. He looked around, obviously impressed as well.

"Great job," he said.

"Thank you," she replied softly.

She walked down the center isle, the others following slowly. No, she didn't need a title. She didn't need anything but what was in front of her. For the first time in a long time, she was at peace.

"You are in danger."

Her head jerked up, startled. She looked at the others, but they appeared not to have heard. The voice had been so clear, as if the speaker had been standing right next to her. She would have sworn that was true. She looked around, but there no one else nearby.

The others stopped, seeing the surprised look on her face.

"Are you okay?" Reeve asked.

Aeris did not reply. She had heard voices before, but never with such clarity. Even her mother's voice when she heard it sounded far away.

And there was something else. It had not been her mother's voice, but she recognized it. It was the same voice she had heard in her dream in Mysteele, the one that warned her of the soldiers outside of her and Reeve's room that night.

"Somethings wrong," she said.

Zack looked at her and drew his sword.

They were standing near the front of the church now, not far from the alter. Behind the alter was an alcove leading into another room. And from out of that alcove three figures suddenly sprang.

They ran towards the group. They were clothed in black, their faces hooded, and they each held a long sword in their hand.

Zack stepped forward to meet them. One came straight at him, and their swords struck one another with a clang. The other two ran past Zack towards the others. He slashed at one as he went by, but it narrowly missed, and he barely had time to bring his sword back in front of him to parry a blow from the man attacking him.

Reeve dropped the map he was holding and fumbled for his shotgun. He nearly dropped it, but then brought it up. He let loose a blast at the two coming at him and Aeris. It hit one of them full in the chest. The man stumbled back for a moment, but then ran forward again, sword raised.

Reeve didn't have time to think about it. He fired again and this time the man fell to the ground. The other one turned toward him and slashed viciously, but Reeve dived to the ground and the sword whistled harmlessly above his head. He reached into his pocket and pulled out more shells, scattering some on the floor. He opened up the gun and hastily tried to reload it, but he knew he didn't have time. He looked up as the sword once more slashed at him, this time coming straight down at his head.

His stumbled back and lifted his arms in a useless attempt to ward off the blow, but then sparks flew as the sword was intercepted by the Princess Guard. Aeris turned her rod and struck the man in the leg. He stumbled and Reeve scrambled out of the way.

Zack was forcing his man back, but he couldn't seem to get in a killing blow. The man was good, he had to be to stand against a trained SOLDIEER, but then Zack looked up and noticed the man's face. It was partially hidden in the folds of his hood, but his eyes stood out, and Zack almost cried out in surprise.

He felt the man's sword strike his leg. He stumbled for a moment, then lashed out himself with renewed vigor. He knew his leg was injured, but he didn't have time to even look at it, much less tend to it. All he knew was that it was still functional, and he had to kill this man quickly.

Summoning all his strength and calling on all his training, he attacked viciously. The man continued to retreat, but still Zack's sword could not penetrate his defenses. But then the man reached the front wall. He could retreat no further. He

lunged to the side to try to get out of Zack's range and away from the wall, but Zack had anticipated this. He drove his sword in, and blood flew as it slashed across the man's chest.

The man dropped his sword and stood for a moment, clutching at his chest, but then he fell to the ground. Zack was already turning toward the others.

Reeve had reloaded his gun, but the last man was now attacking Aeris, and he couldn't fire for fear of hitting her. Aeris was slowly retreating towards the wall, her rod expertly blocking the swordsman's attack, but she could not get in any blows of her own.

The man leapt aside as he saw Zack coming, trying to get both of them in front of him. When he did so he became separated from Aeris, and Reeve fired.

The blast struck the man and knocked him back, but, just like the first one, he did not fall. However, he was stunned enough so that he didn't have time to recover before Zack's sword drove into him. With a gurgling cry the man fell to the ground and lay still.

They all stood there for a moment in silence, looking down at the bodies and trying to catch their breath.

Elmyra ran up to Aeris and looked at her. Realizing she was okay she looked down as well.

"Who were they?" she asked.

"I don't know," Aeris replied, still not completely recovered. These men had obviously been here to kill one or more of them. Someone wanted them dead, but who, and why?

She looked at Zack, who was just standing there, a strange expression on his face.

"Why did they try to kill us?"

Zack shook his head slowly.

"I don't know," he replied. "This just doesn't make any sense. But I did notice something, something that disturbs me greatly. These men were Mako infused. I saw the glow in their eyes."

Reeve eyebrows shot up in surprise. So that was why his shotgun blasts had not killed them immediately.

"They were members of SOLDIER?" he said.

Zack shook his head.

"No, they were never in SOLDIER," he replied. He walked over to the first man he had killed and looked down at him.

"I recognize this man," he said. "But not from when I was in SOLDIER. From before that. He used to be a farmer in my hometown. A farmer in Gongaga."

They all looked at him for a long time. Each of them understood what this meant, but were so shocked by the thought of it that they could not bring themselves to say it out loud. It was Elmyra who finally broke the silence.

"Someone is infusing people with Mako again," she said slowly. "Which means they must be using a Mako reactor."

"That's right," Zack agreed, nodding his head slowly. "And this man is from Gongaga..."

Aeris looked at them.

"I don't know what's going on, but I don't like it," she said. "I think we better get in touch with the others."

But even as she spoke the PHS rang. She hastily pulled it out.

"Hello," she started. She listened for a minute, a puzzled expression forming on her face.

"Barret, calm down," she said, her puzzled expression being replaced by a look of concern. "What happened?"

She listened again for a few moments, and then her eyes grew wide and her face went deathly pale.

"Oh God," she said softly. She glanced at the others, and they could tell just by her look that something was very wrong.

She stood there for a moment more, then her hand slowly dropped to her side. Reeve was shocked to see tears in her eyes.

"We've got to go to Kalm," she said. "Immediately."

"Two gin an tonic and a scotch and water, Miss Lockheart" Mikko said.

Tifa nodded and pulled out the bottles, shaking her head. She had long ago given up trying to tell Mikko that it was just Tifa. She mixed the drinks and then slid them onto Mikko's tray, then leaned against the counter as Mikko brought the drinks over to the patrons. Three men dressed in suits and ties. Not that common to see in Kalm, a pretty laid back town, where most people who came in were casually dressed.

Still, business was business. Things had been pretty busy lately, although tonight was a little slow. Still, she didn't mind. It was only thursday, and things had really started to pick up on Friday and the weekends. She was even thinking about hiring some extra help for those days, if she could find someone.

The door opened and a man walked in. He came over to the bar and sat down. Tifa had never seen him before. Most of her customers were regulars, but there were always a few who she did not recognize. The man was dressed in a white shirt and dark pants. He had a briefcase, which he put down beside his bar stool. Another businessman, Tifa guessed, although he did not have a tie on.

"What'll you have?" she asked.

The man hesitated for a moment. He seemed nervous.

"Scotch on the rocks," he said slowly.

Tifa nodded and poured the drink. He took it and gulped some down, then coughed. He didn't look like the type who was into heavy drinking.

She was about to say something when she was interrupted.

"Hey, how 'bout some service over here!"

Tifa frowned and looked over at another table. Two men sat there, one looking at Mikko expectantly. They had come in almost two hours ago, and had been drinking heavily, their conversation becoming more and more boisterous as time went on. She had never seen them before either. It was obvious that they were both quite drunk.

Mikko looked over at Tifa, who gave just the slightest shake of her head. Tifa looked at the men.

"Don't you think you boys have had enough?"

The man turned to look at her.

"Well, hell, no I don't think so," he said. He turned to look at the other man.

"Have you had enough?"

The other looked up at him.

"Most definitely...not," he replied slowly.

The first looked back at Tifa.

She walked around from behind the bar.

"Sorry gentlemen," she said. "But I think it's time for you to go home."

The first man looked at her, not seeming to comprehend.

"I said I want another drink," he said, a hint of anger in his voice.

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Tifa replied calmly.

"Why not?" the man exclaimed. "You're the freaking bartender, aren't you. That's what you're paid to do, serve drinks, so do it!"

Tifa shook her head.

"I think it would be better for all of us if you left now," she said.

"I'll go whenever the hell I please," he said angrily. "Right now I want a drink."

"You heard the lady!"

Tifa turned to see one of her regular customers had stood up and was looking at the man darkly.

"Yeah," a second man said, getting up as well. "Why don't you just take the hint and get the hell out of here."

There was a murmur of approval, and then almost everyone else in the bar stood up as well, even the businessmen who she didn't even know.

The drunken man stood in front of her, hesitating and looking around slowly. Finally he turned toward his friend.

"C'mon," he muttered. "Let's get out this dump. I'm sure there's plenty of other places in town that won't be so picky about what a man drinks."

He grabbed his friend by the shoulder. The second man stood, stumbling a little, and they both exited the bar.

Tifa looked around and smiled as everyone sat down again.

"Thank you all," she said. "The next round's on me."

"Well, we didn't want you to hurt him," one man called out.

Tifa smiled and walked back behind the bar to a chorus of approval. The man who was sitting there was gone. She hadn't even noticed him leave. Ten gil lay on the counter by his empty glass. She shrugged and picked up the money. Not a bad tip, the drink had only been two.

She never noticed the briefcase the man had left at the foot of his stool.

"Do you think she'll like it?" Cloud asked again.

"Of course she'll like it," Barret answered for what seemed like the millionth time. "She'd like it if you got it out of a box of cracker jacks."

Cloud opened the small box and looked at the ring that gleamed inside.

"Can I see it?" Marlene asked.

"Sure," Cloud responded.

He held the box out in front of her. She looked at the ring closely, but did not touch it.

"It's pretty," she said.

"Uh huh," Cloud said.

He closed the box and they continued down the street back toward the bar. Marlene continued to look at Cloud.

"Are you really going to marry Aunt Tifa?" she asked.

Cloud looked down at her and smiled.

"You bet," he replied.

"But you can't say anything to her," Barret admonished. "Not yet. Not until Cloud tells her tonight. Until then it's our little secret, okay?"

She looked at Barret and nodded.

"Yes Daddy," she replied.

Cloud looked down at the ring again. He had wanted Aeris to come help him pick it out, but she was busy right now with other things. She had told him to wait until she could get to Kalm but for some reason he hadn't wanted to, he hadn't wanted to wait. It seemed funny after all the time it had taken them to say they loved one another, now he could hardly wait to ask her to marry him.

He looked at Barret, who seemed immensely pleased with the whole situation. He hadn't thought Barret would be much help picking out a ring, and had in fact thought he would not even be interested, but Barret had agreed immediately when

Cloud asked him to come along, and in fact had been surprisingly helpful. Cloud had forgotten that Barret had done this once before.

"Do you think I'm rushing things?" he asked.

Barret looked at him and frowned.

"Rushing things?" he snorted. "No, I don't think you're rushing things, I think it's about time. I've been waiting a long time for you two to get together. For a while there I thought it was never gonna happen, even though it was obvious you were both crazy about each other. Long time overdue, I say."

Cloud just looked at him skeptically. He didn't think it had been that obvious. Then he shrugged.

The bar was not far ahead of them now. He clasped the ring firmly in his hand and smiled. He couldn't wait until she saw it.

Tifa walked into the kitchen. Things were quiet at the moment, she might as well get some of the dishes done. She took a tray of dirty mugs and placed them in the dishwasher. She stood up and glanced out the window. Dusk was fast approaching, and the houses along the street cast long shadows. She reached over and opened the window, and was rewarded with the feel of a cool breeze on her face. She looked down the road again and saw Cloud, Barret and Marlene walking toward the bar. She saw Cloud look up and she waved.

Mikko had just cleaned off another table when she happened to glance over at the bar and noticed the briefcase on the floor by the bar stool. She walked over and was about to pick it up when she heard someone call for a waitress. She looked over to see one of the three businessmen motioning for her to come over. She hesitated a moment, looking down at the briefcase again. Then she looked back at the table.

"Just a moment," she said, reaching down and lifting the briefcase.

Cloud looked up and saw Tifa waving to him from the window of the bar. He lifted his arm to wave back.

There are certain times in one's life that are forever etched in memory. Certain events that are so profound or earth-shattering that they are burnt into one's brain, never to be removed or forgotten. For Cloud, one of those moments was when Aeris had been killed. He would never forget when Sephiroth's sword had pierced her, or the look in her eyes as the life had faded from them. Nor would he ever forget the image of Tifa waving from the window of the bar, a moment before it exploded in a ball of flame.

For a split second they all just stood there, uncomprehending. Then Cloud found himself running forward.

"No," he found himself saying, over and over. He could see what had happened but he refused to acknowledge it. He refused to believe it was true. It couldn't be happening. It had to be a dream. Please let it be a dream.

He reached the smoldering ruins and scrambled desperately among the broken timbers, searching for some sign of her. Barret ran up beside him, with Marlene not far behind, crying hysterically.

Cloud's hands were shaking uncontrollably as he pushed his way through the wreckage. He could hear shouts as others gathered, but he paid no attention to them. He pushed aside a crumpled piece of the wall, and then he saw her, lying near the twisted ruins of the sink.

He scrambled over and lifted up her head. It fell limply to the side, a jagged wound across her forehead. She was covered with dirt and debris, but he could see other wounds as well. Blood covered the ground beneath her.

"Tifa," he whispered, cradling her head in his arms. He felt for a pulse but his hand shook so violently that he gave up after a moment. He turned toward Barret.

"She's over here!" he called out. "Get some help. We need restore materia, we need a doctor!"

Barret turned and shouted something to the others who had gathered nearby, but Cloud did not hear him. He looked down again at Tifa, and wiped the blood and dirt off of her face. She did not respond. The box that held her ring slipped out of his hand and fell amid the debris, unnoticed.

"Don't die on me," he said softly as tears welled in his eyes. "Please don't die on me."