

CHAPTER VIII: AERIS DILEMMA

"I've brought you some soup. I know how bland hospital food can be."

Tifa sat up in her bed and took the soup from Elmyra.

"Thank you," she said, placing it on a small table beside her bed.

Elmyra looked at her expectantly, but Tifa just sat in her bed, avoiding eye contact.

"Tifa, you have to eat," Elmyra admonished. "You have to get your strength back."

Tifa nodded, still not looking at her.

"I know," she said. "I just don't have much of an appetite."

Elmyra nodded slowly and sat down on the bed beside her.

"I know you're worried about Cloud," she said, reaching out and patting Tifa on the knee. "But we both know how capable he is of taking care of himself. I'm sure he'll be fine."

Tifa looked up at her with a concerned expression.

"I just..." she began. "I just don't know what to think. Is it true, about Cosmo Canyon? I hear some of the nurses talking. There are rumors that it was overrun by some kind of monsters."

Elmyra frowned. She had hoped Tifa had not heard about that.

"Well, you can't believe everything you hear," she said optimistically.

"That's just it," Tifa replied. "I haven't heard anything. Cloud hasn't contacted me at all, and when I tried to get through to him on the PHS, all I got was static."

"I know," Elmyra replied. "I haven't heard from Aeris either."

Tifa looked up at her once more. She had almost forgotten that Elmyra had someone to worry about as well. She had never really thought about that. She found it hard not being with Cloud, not being there to share the danger with him. Just these few days seemed almost more than she could stand. But Elmyra had been doing this most of her life. Even when Aeris was young Tseng and the Turks had been after her. Elmyra must have constantly been worried. Tifa wondered how she could stand it, all these years, always waiting, always not knowing.

"I'm sorry," Tifa said. "I've been so worried about Cloud, I didn't even think that you would be worried about Aeris as well. And poor Red too, if something has happened to Cosmo Canyon. I hope he's all right."

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Elmyra repeated. "They always seem to be getting themselves in trouble, but they always manage to find a way out of it, now don't they?"

Tifa nodded slowly but did not reply. It was just so frustrating! Usually when they were in trouble she was with them. She was used to being there, to sharing the danger. She wasn't used to just sitting on the sidelines, knowing she couldn't help, just waiting for some word. She felt so helpless, and she hated that feeling.

The worst part of it was, she felt fine. The doctors had told her not even to get out of bed for at least two more days. She knew she was still weak, but she didn't feel that weak. She wanted to get up, she wanted to get going, and in fact she had gotten out of bed a couple of times when no one was around with no ill effects. She had never been so frustrated in her life.

In spite of Elmyra's presence, she felt lonely and left out.

But there was just nothing she could do about it at the moment. Even if she were well enough to travel, and even she realized that she wasn't, she had no transportation. By the time she got something and reached Cosmo Canyon, or wherever the others were, it would probably all be over. No matter how much she disliked it, she would just have to get used to the idea that she was going to be a spectator for quite some time on this one.

She looked down at her hand, at the ring Cloud had given her. It was beautiful. Perfect really. She hadn't really looked at it that closely when he had given it to her, she had been so caught up in the moment. But she had looked at it a lot since, and

the more she inspected it, the more she liked it. She was surprised, to tell the truth, that he had picked out such a beautiful ring. She would never have thought he had it in him.

He damn well better come back to her now.

She looked up at Elmyra again, who returned her gaze with a maternal look and once more glanced over at the soup.

"All right," Tifa conceded, shifting over so she was in front of the table and picking up the spoon. "I guess I can manage to eat some."

"Nanaki."

Red looked up at the sound of the voice. He and Barret stood near a tent set up in a small valley deep in the mountains northwest of Cosmo Canyon. A narrow trail led down the face of the mountain to the east. A man stood at the head of it.

"Some of your friends have returned," the man called out.

Red nodded and he and Barret walked toward the trail, but they hadn't taken more than a few steps when five chocobos appeared coming up the path. Red immediately spotted Ellengio on the lead bird.

Red stopped at the chocobo's trotted forward. They rode up to Red and Barret and the riders quickly dismounted.

"Glad to see you again," Red said, "But I hardly expected you to return so quickly."

"It kinda surprised us too," Cid commented.

Ellengio stepped forward and quickly explained their plan.

"So that's it," Ellengio finished. "But we don't know how we are going to get past all the monsters between here and Gongaga. The plain east of the canyon is open and full of the creatures. Is there another way?"

Red nodded slowly.

"There are trails through the mountains west of Cosmo Canyon," he said. "But they are little known, narrow and dangerous. No one uses them much because of that and the fact that it will take you much longer to go that way than across the plain."

"How much longer?" Vincent asked.

"That will depend on you, of course," Red replied. "But it normally takes four days to get to the plains of Gongaga on foot that way, where you could do it in half the time along the coast."

Cid looked at Ellengio for an opinion.

"A lot could happen in four days," he said.

Ellengio nodded in agreement.

"Still, it appears we have no choice," he replied. "I don't see any way we could make it across the plains without being spotted. It's the only way."

"The trail is rugged and mountainous," Red added. "There's no way you could take the chocobo's."

"Too bad we don't have mountain chocobo's," Elena mused.

Vincent nodded.

"Unfortunately they are rather rare."

Ellengio said nothing.

"But isn't it possible these trails are being watched too?" Cid questioned.

"Yes it is," Red said thoughtfully. "I'm not saying there is no danger involved at all. But the trails lead deep into the mountains, and are little known. It's likely that if they are being watched, they are being watched only at the trail heads, which are not far from Cosmo Canyon. And as it is, Barret and I were planning a little attack that I think will take their attention away from the trials for at least a short while."

"When is this attack supposed to take place?" Ellengio questioned.

"Within the hour," Red replied. "C'mon, I'll fill you in on the details."

Almost an hour later Red lay hugging the mountainside, flanked by Barret and Nipala, and looking down on a large group of men and monsters in a narrow valley below them. Barret inspected them curiously. Almost all of them were digging in the side of the mountain. Even some of the monsters seemed to be participating.

"What the hell are they doing?" Barret questioned.

"Mining," Red replied.

"Mining for what?" Barret questioned.

"Raw materia," Red responded.

Barret looked at him in surprise.

"Materia?" he said. "I didn't know there was any materia in these hills."

"It's a well kept secret," Red replied. "The Elders knew Shinra would place a lot of pressure on us if they found out. We didn't want to have anything to do with that."

"Well, looks like somebody found out," Barret observed.

Red did not reply, just crouched there looking down at those below. When Cosmo Canyon had been attacked many had been killed, but some who had been left behind had survived, and it now seemed they were being pressed into service by their enemy. He could see several people digging down below that he recognized.

There had been a lot to do since the fall of Cosmo Canyon. Gathering the survivors together, finding food and shelter and organizing in the hills. Red had not had a lot of time to spend on personal feelings, on thinking about what had happened. In fact, he had deliberately tried to crowd it out of his mind. He had felt heartbreaking sadness when he and Nipala had walked down that last slope and out of the canyon, but not any anger. But now, seeing those people, his people, down there being forced to work the mines, most of them elderly or very young, some of them with obvious wounds and struggling just to stay on their feet, filled him with sudden fury.

"Are we ready?" he asked.

"You just have to give the word," Barret replied.

"Then let's do it."

Barret turned and waved his arm. A moment later fifty men, all of the canyon guards who still had the ability to fight, burst over the ridge and raced down into the valley below.

Barret and Nipala held back, letting the guards surge ahead. Barret laid down covering fire for them, blasting into the largest pockets of resistance. Nipala did the same, only she hit their enemy with spells from materia. The plan had called for Red to stay back and use his materia as well, but he found himself running forward, right at the head of the guards, straight into the ranks of their enemy. Caught by surprise, their foes fell back at first. Some of them scattered, running off immediately. But one large group held together. Barret hadn't been sure what kind of organization this mixture of men and monsters would have, but it seemed that someone who knew at least the rudiments of battle tactics was in charge. Barret knew they were outnumbered, but what counting on the element of surprise to tip the odds in their favor. But if as large a group as this appeared to be were to hold together, it could cause serious problems.

He looked over and pointed it out to Nipala, but he needn't have bothered. She was watching Red as he battled down below, and now he was running right at the group in question.

"What the hell has gotten into him?" Barret muttered.

He ran down the slope a bit to get a better shot at the enemies ahead of Red. He noticed Nipala come up right beside him.

"Damn cat's gonna get himself killed," he shouted.

Nipala did not reply but sent a blast of lightning into the group of defenders.

Red was nearly on top of them now. They had situated themselves near a large group of boulders next to the area they had been mining. The boulders provided cover and left only limited access to their position. Suddenly Red stopped and reared

back. Light seemed to flash around him, and then a huge ball of flame streaked down out of the sky and slammed down on their enemies in front of him.

The earth shook from the shock wave, and Barret nearly lost his balance. When he recovered and looked down again, he saw that their foes position had been destroyed. Most of those in front of Red were now dead or dying, and those that still had the strength to remain on their feet were fleeing rapidly back toward the canyon. With the collapse of that pocket of resistance their foes were routed, almost all of them retreating. In a few minutes the valley floor was clear.

Barret and Nipala ran down the slope and stopped beside Red, who was sitting beside a large boulder panting heavily.

"Nice work," Barret muttered. "For a minute there I thought you had your heart set on dying bravely in battle. I should have known better."

Red did not reply for a moment, still catching his breath. Then he looked up and Barret could see a strange gleam in his eye.

"It had occurred to me," Red replied. "I really don't know what came over me. I don't think I've ever been so furious in my life."

He looked over as some of the guards walked by with the now freed workers.

"I just wish we could have done more damage."

"It's the best we could hope for with the force we have," Barret replied. "And anyway, this may hurt them more than you think. Not only have we interrupted their flow of materia, but we've also removed some of the labor force they had working on it. Plus they'll have to commit a larger number of troops to protect this site when they try to mine here again. Which I assume they will do. They were undermanned this time, but they probably won't make that mistake again. We'll have to choose a different target next time. Something they won't expect."

Red nodded.

"I'll leave that decision up to you," he responded.

Barret looked around.

"All right, we better get out of here as fast as possible. We've done all the damage we could, and we know we can't stand against them in a pitched battle. Time to fade back into the hills. They've got to get all the materia they're harvesting back to Gongaga. Maybe we can hit that caravan next time."

Red shook his head.

"I don't think they intend to bring the materia they've mined back to Gongaga," he said.

Barret frowned

"Then what do you think they plan on doing with it?" he asked.

Red said nothing but motioned for them to follow him. He walked back up the slope until they were almost back to their original position. Then he turned and pointed to the east.

"Do you see the observatory?" he asked.

Barret nodded. He could barely make it out in the distance.

"Yeah."

"Do you see anything behind it?"

Barret squinted and stared for a long time.

"I'm not sure," he eventually replied. "Looks like they're building something."

"Indeed they are," Red agreed. "And it's my guess that it is another Mako reactor."

Barret whistled without looking at Red.

"Damn," he muttered.

Red turned and stared at the mountains to the west.

"Do you think what we've done will give Ellengio the cover he needed?"

Barret followed his gaze.

"I hope so," he said. "I think so. We've done what we can. The rest is up to them."

Red nodded, his gaze turning once more back to Cosmo Canyon. The fact that they were mining here told him that their enemy was not going to abandon Cosmo Canyon just because they had failed to find the Crystal materia. It was beginning to look like the canyon would not be free until Jenova was destroyed. He would do what he could to harass their enemy, but their battles were a minor part of the war. Their hope was with Ellengio and the others. It was up to them to stop Jenova. They were the ones who were going to fight the real battle.

"Come in. It's so good to see you again," Shera exclaimed.

Aeris smiled and walked in. She sat down while Shera went over to the sink and opened a cabinet.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked.

"Thank you," Aeris replied. "We found Cid."

Shera paused for a moment to look at her, relief flooding her face.

"Oh thank God," she said. "For some reason I was afraid he'd really gotten himself into some trouble this time..."

She stopped when she saw the look on Aeris face.

"Where is he?"

Aeris explained to her what had happened, and where Cid had gone.

Shera remained silent for a long time after she was done. Then she slowly turned and took down some cups. She placed one in front of Aeris.

"I see," she said slowly as she filled the teapot with water.

Aeris looked at her sympathetically.

"I'm sure he'll be back soon," she said.

Shera looked down at her belly.

"He'd better," she replied. "It's just...I don't know. I guess I'm being selfish. He's out there trying to save the world. How can I complain about that? But I need him too. And it's not just me anymore. The baby is going to need him as well. I just don't know what I'd do if something...if something happened to him."

She reached up and adjusted her glasses.

"I mean, I keep thinking, why him? Why does it always have to be Cid who takes risks, who's life seems to constantly be in danger. All of Avalanche, you've given so much already. When is it going to be someone else's turn? When do you get to say, hey, I've done enough. It's time for someone else to take over, it's time for someone else to take the risks. You've all worked so hard so that others could live in peace. When is it your turn?"

Aeris sat there thoughtfully. This was something she had asked herself many times in the past. But she knew life didn't work that way. This wasn't something you took turns at. There would always be some that would take up arms against the evils of the world, and some who wouldn't. That was just the way it was. They were just doing what they had to do. What was the right thing to do.

Shera turned on the burner and placed the pot on it, then came to sit down beside Aeris, easing herself slowly down into the chair.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't mean to sound pessimistic. I know Cid can take care of himself. It's just that it seems there's so much more at stake now. Tell me, where are the others? How is Tifa? And what about Red? He must feel horrible."

"Tifa's doing better," Aeris replied. "And yes, Red is taking what happened at Cosmo Canyon hard. Barret stayed with him to help him lead the resistance. We sent Yuffie to try to get some help from Wutai. Vincent, Elena and Rude went with Cid. Cloud, Zack and Reeve are with me."

"They're here?" Shera said in surprise. "Where are they? Why didn't they come with you?"

"They're in town gathering supplies and making arrangements for transportation. They'll be here soon. " she replied. "I just needed to get away from them for a little while."

Shera looked at her closely.

"Why's that?" she questioned.

Aeris rested her chin on her hand.

"I'm not really sure," she replied. She looked at Shera and saw she was returning her gaze with a thoughtful expression. She thought she could see just a hint of skepticism.

"All right, I guess I do know," she admitted. She told Shera what had happened with Reeve the other night. Shera looked at her in surprise for a moment.

"Have you spoken to him since?" she asked.

"No," Aeris replied. "He's avoided me like the plague ever since. He won't even look at me. I wanted to talk to him about it, but we haven't really been alone since it happened. It certainly isn't something I want to discuss in front of the others, especially Zack."

Shera sat there for a moment nodding her head slowly. Then she smiled.

"What?" Aeris said.

"I just can't picture Reeve doing something like that," Shera responded. "He's always seemed rather shy to me. I had no idea."

"I was kind of shocked myself," Aeris replied.

"But you weren't mad."

"Of course I wasn't mad," Aeris replied. "But he never gave me a chance to say that. He never gave me a chance to say how I felt."

Shera gave her a probing look.

"How did you feel?"

Aeris didn't reply, for suddenly they were interrupted by the whistle of the teapot. Shera got up and poured them both some tea. Then she sat down again and looked at Aeris expectantly.

"I'm not exactly sure," Aeris said. "He's a very special person. He doesn't seem to realize himself how special. He's kind and..."

She was interrupted again, this time by a knock on the door. Shera got up and opened it up to see Reeve standing there. He glanced inside, but looked immediately at Shera when he saw Aeris sitting at the table.

"Well, hello Reeve," Shera said cheerfully. "Aeris told me you were on your way. Come in and sit down. I've just made some tea. Would you like some?"

Reeve shook his head.

"No thanks," he said. "Actually, I've got some supplies that have to be stored away. I really should take care of them before.."

"Nonsense," Shera interrupted. "You must be tired from the trip here. Aeris has told me everything that happened to you. Come, sit down and relax for a little while. The supplies can wait."

She guided Reeve over to a chair and practically forced him down into it.

"If you don't want tea, would you like something else to drink?"

Reeve shook his head. He was directly opposite Aeris now. He could hardly avoid looking at her.

"Well, okay, then just relax for a while. Cloud and Zack are not back yet and Aeris is here all alone. I'm sure she'd like some company. I'm afraid I just have too much to do right now to be much of a hostess. I'll be back in a bit. You two make yourselves at home."

Shera gave Aeris a quick wink, then walked away before Reeve could protest. He turned toward Shera as she vanished from the room, but he didn't have time to say anything. He turned around again slowly and his gaze dropped to the center of the table.

"Reeve," Aeris said slowly.

He did not look up.

"Reeve, please," she said. "I'm not mad at you."

Finally he lifted his head.

"I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," she replied. "I told you, I'm not mad."

He sat there pondering that for a moment, then looked at her thoughtfully.

"I really don't know what came over me," he said finally. "I've never done anything like that before. You're really not mad?"

"I'm really not mad."

Reeve sat there looking at her. She gave him a reassuring smile. They fell silent once more, but Aeris still felt uncomfortable. She looked at Reeve and could tell he felt the same way. There was more to it than this, much more.

She was about to speak again when Reeve beat her to it.

"If you weren't mad," he said slowly, "then...how did you feel?"

This time it was Aeris turn to look down at the table. That was just what Shera had asked. In fact, it was something she had asked herself over and over ever since it had happened. She lifted her head again to see Reeve looking at her intently.

"You're a very special person, Reeve," she said very deliberately. "This just is not a good time. After all that's happened, after all the trouble I've caused, I've got enough on my mind right now. There's so much going on that's much more important than our personal feelings. I think it would be best if we concentrate on those things. I just can't handle any more than that right now."

She looked at him, almost a pleading look in her eyes. She wanted him to understand.

"You haven't caused any trouble," he said.

She smiled.

"Thank you, but do you understand how I feel?"

He paused for a moment, then nodded and smiled himself.

"Of course. You're right. After all you've gone through lately this could not have helped. The last thing I want is for my kiss to cause you more of a burden."

"What kiss?"

They both turned to see Zack standing in the doorway.

Reeve stood up.

"Were you listening to us?" he said, rather sharply.

"I walked up to the door, it was slightly ajar. I couldn't help but overhear," Zack replied defensively, looking back and forth from one to the other. "What kiss?"

"The other night I was upset," Aeris said. "I was distraught after finding out why Jenova had returned, that it was my fault. Reeve was just trying to make me feel better."

Zack walked in until he stood by the table looking down at her.

"Make you feel better?" he said. "You make someone feel better with kinds words, with a reassuring pat on the back, not with a kiss."

"Zack, please don't try to make it into something it wasn't," she responded. "It was harmless."

"Was it?" he questioned. "It doesn't sound harmless to me. When did this happen? In your room at Nibelheim? What was he doing in there?"

"I wasn't doing anything," Reeve said quickly.

Zack's head snapped around toward him.

"You weren't doing anything?" he repeated. "It doesn't sound that way to me. If you weren't doing anything how did you end up kissing her?"

"Zack, stop, you're being ridiculous," Aeris said with just a hint of anger. This was exactly what she had not wanted to happen.

Zack turned back toward her once more, anger plain on his face now.

"Am I?" he snapped. "I'm not the one sneaking around putting the moves on you."

"It wasn't like that," Reeve protested.

Aeris grabbed hold of Zack's arm.

"You are being ridiculous," she said sharply. "Reeve's right. It wasn't like that. And even if it was, it's none of your business."

Zack made like he was going to jerk his arm away, but then seemed to think better of it.

"You said I was important to you," he said.

"You are," she replied. "But it's not that simple. Things have changed since I knew you."

"Because of him?" Zack said accusingly.

"No," she replied. "Well, yes. He's part of it. But there's more to it than that. I've changed. I'm not a sixteen year old girl anymore."

"So you're saying you're outgrown me?" Zack replied.

"No, I'm not saying that either," she replied, her eyes suddenly moist with tears. "Please can we just discuss this another time? I'm not ready for this right now. After all that's happened I don't think I can deal with it."

"I think this is a good..." Zack stopped as another person appeared in the doorway. They all turned as Cloud walked through the open door, a puzzled expression on his face.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Nothing," they all snapped in unison.

Aeris turned and fled from the room. Reeve gave Zack a dark look and slowly walked out the front entrance. Zack just stood in the middle of the room with his arms folded, brooding.

Cloud slowly came up next to him.

"What was that all about?"

Zack just shook his head slowly.

Cloud waited patiently, and for a moment Zack opened his mouth to speak, but then he shut it again. He looked at Cloud sharply.

"Reeve and I have gotten the supplies we need. Have you decided on a destination?"

It was obvious Cloud had missed something, but it was also obvious that his friend did not want to discuss it at the present time. He decided not to push.

"Yeah," he replied. "Let's head east to Junon."

"Any particular reason?" Zack queried.

"Not really," Cloud replied. "I was thinking maybe we could contact the Mayor there and ask if they could send help to Cosmo Canyon. They have the manpower and I don't think Red sent anyone there to ask."

"I believe the reason he didn't send anyone was because he thought it unlikely they would agree," Zack commented.

"That's true," Cloud replied. "But I suppose it wouldn't hurt to try, and from there we can go on to Fort Condor. They're farther away, but they might be able to help as well."

Zack thought for a moment, then nodded.

"I suppose it's as good a plan as any. I thought we would head north. That'll get us farthest away fastest."

"It's also the most obvious direction to go," Cloud replied.

"You may be right," Zack agreed. "I think Reeve went out to organize the supplies. Can you do me a favor and give him a hand. I have to take care of something."

"Sure," Cloud replied. He had known Zack a long time, and even though his friend had changed, there were still some things about him that were exactly the same. Cloud knew by the look in Zack's eye that he would not be able to pry any information about what had just happened out of his friend. But Reeve, on the other hand, might be an easier nut to crack.

He walked back out the front door. Zack stood there for a moment. He looked at the front door, then towards the back of the house, down the hallway that Aeris had fled. He had not meant to upset her. He didn't even know why he had said the things he said. He hadn't really thought about it at all, it had just come out. And the worst part of it, he realized now, was that she was absolutely right.

He paused for a moment longer, then with sudden resolve walked down the hallway. Halfway down it a door suddenly opened in front of him. Shera came out and nearly ran right into him. She looked at him in surprise, the look quickly turning to one of disapproval.

"Aeris wants to be alone right now," she said.

"I need to talk to her," he replied. "It'll just take a minute."

"I think you're already said your piece," Shera responded, blocking his way.

"Please," Zack said.

"It's all right, Shera," Aeris suddenly stood in the doorway behind the older woman. "You can let him in."

Shera cast one more doubtful glance at Zack, then shrugged and walked past him. Aeris turned back into the room. Zack followed and closed the door softly behind him.

"I'm sorry," he said, turning to face her. She sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at the ground.

He walked over until he was right beside her. She looked up at him.

"May I sit down?" he asked.

She nodded and he took a seat beside her.

"You're right. I had no right to speak to you like that. It's just that..."

He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts.

"For the past few years I've lived with a band of outlaws. In a group like that only the strong survive. The only thing that counted all that time was strength. Physical strength and strength of will. If you wanted something you took it, and you better be prepared to fight for it. Aeris, I wasn't shy about taking what I wanted."

"But you're not living like that anymore," she pointed out.

"I know," he replied. "But before that there was nothing. As far as I can remember, that's the only way I've ever lived. I understand it's not like that now, but sometimes it's hard. I get mad and my instincts take over. The Swordsman is still a big part of me. He's not going to go away in a day. It'll take some time. It's not easy to change."

She looked up at him now, and there was no hint of reproach in her eyes.

"I know things are different now," he said, looking at her carefully. "I understand how what we had could seem not to mean much to you anymore. But it means a lot to me."

"Zack, I..." she began, but he interrupted.

"It means a lot to me because I remember it. Aeris, everything I had is lost to me. My past, my hometown, my family. I can't picture any of it. I don't remember the streets of Gongaga. I can't see the faces of my family. My mother and father are strangers to me. You're my only link. You're the only thing that I have left that is real. I'm afraid that if I lost you, there would be nothing left."

Aeris looked at him sympathetically. She reached out and took his hand.

"No matter what happens, I'm not going to disappear," she said.

"I know," he said softly. "I know that. It just seems that...sometimes, I've got just one precious thing left. All those years with the outlaws, it was the thought of you that kept me going. The thought that maybe I would find you again. I don't know how many times I sat in their camp thinking how pointless it all was, what we were doing. I don't know how many times I thought about running away, just chucking it all and heading off into the night. But where would I have gone? What would I have done? I was surviving, but I wasn't alive. And then one night, I saw you in the moonlight, and my world became real again. I had something to live for once more. It's been so long that I had any hope at all. And then when I heard Reeve, I just suddenly felt like it was all going to come crashing down on me. It was stupid, I admit. I have no claim on you. I was just afraid, and I overreacted. I'm sorry."

He looked at her and she smiled.

"It's all right," she said. "Perhaps we all could have handled it a little better. I care about you a great deal, but I just...I just can't think about it right now. With all that's going on with the crystal materia, and my part in the return of Jenova, it's just too much. Can we just put this aside for a little while. At least until this is all over with? It would make me feel a lot better."

Zack continued to gaze into her emerald green eyes, and for a moment she thought he hadn't heard her.

"Yes," he said finally. "I suppose. If it will make you feel better."

"Thank you," she said, looking at him closely. There was no hint of anger in his blue eyes now. He was just sitting there looking at her, his eyes meeting her own, a sort of bemused smile on his face. She had seen that look before, many times. He had often looked at her like that, in the old days.

Was he really that much different?

"So can I trust you?" she asked.

"To do what?"

"To get along with Reeve," she replied. "We're going to have to work together if we are going to have any success at all. The last thing we need is for you two to be at each other's throats."

He smiled.

"All right," he said. "I promise not to run him though. At least, not until Jenova is disposed of and the crystal materia safe. After that, we'll just have to see."

"I'm afraid you won't score many points with me if you decide to run him through even after this is over," she replied.

"All right, I won't run him through," he said, sounding very disappointed. "How bout if I just beat the living daylights out of him."

"Nope," she said, shaking her head.

"Boy, you're no fun at all."

He stood up, letting go of her hand.

"Well, I better go give the others a hand. I've goofed off long enough. You might want to come out and get your gear together. We've got a long road ahead of us tomorrow."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Junon," he replied.

She did not respond, but followed him as he got up and opened the door. He turned back toward her once more.

"How about if I just drop something heavy on his head?"

"Sorry," she said.

"Darn."