

CHAPTER XII: COUNTDOWN

"Let's get married."

"Huh?"

"Let's get married," Cloud repeated.

Tifa looked at him and smiled.

"We're going to," she said.

"No, I mean now."

"Now?" she repeated. They were sitting at the kitchen table at Cid's house. Tifa had just finished helping Shera clean up after dinner. "You mean, right this minute?"

"Uh huh."

She stared at him for a moment.

"You're serious," she said slowly.

Cloud nodded.

"It's been a while, and we never set a date," he pointed out.

"Well, we've been so busy," Tifa replied. She looked at him with interest. This wasn't something she would have expected from him. "Is this because we'll be leaving on Cid's rocket tomorrow?"

Cloud nodded again.

"We don't know what's going to happen after that," he said. "We don't know what kind of dangers we're going to have to face."

Tifa took hold of his hand.

"We've faced dangers before," she said.

"But not like this," Cloud replied, shaking his head. "This is so different from anything else we've done."

She looked at him for a moment, studying his face. She was still a little surprised to hear him talk this way. He had never before expressed doubt. Through all their adventures, it was always Cloud who had the unshakable conviction that they would not only survive, but triumph.

"I just thought it might be better if we got in done now," he continued. "I think if anything is going to happen... I'd rather...well, you know," he ended lamely.

He saw the look she was giving him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm just not used to you talking like this," she replied. "Not that I mind. It's very sweet, actually. But don't you think it would be better to wait, at least until we got back? A wedding takes a lot of planning, you can't just run off and do it on the spur of the moment. Well, you can, but it's just not really the same that way."

Cloud looked thoughtful for a moment. He hadn't really expected her to raise any objections.

"Yeah, you're right," he replied. He got up and walked over to the window, feeling suddenly embarrassed. "I guess it was a stupid idea."

Tifa got up immediately and walked up behind him, slipping her arms around him.

"No, it's not," she said. "It's a wonderful idea, and very romantic."

Cloud slowly turned around until he was facing her.

"You think so?" he said doubtfully.

"Absolutely," she replied and kissed him.

"I'm not so sure," he said slowly.

She kissed him again, a little more leisurely this time.

"Actually, maybe I should have thought of this sooner," he changed his tune.

She smiled and laid her head against his chest. She glanced out the window they stood in front of. She could just make out the tip of Cid's rocket through the trees.

"I can't believe we're actually going to do this," she said.

"Neither can I," Cloud said. They had traveled some out of the way paths on their adventures, but this one would be by far the strangest. "To think that tomorrow at this time we'll be on our way to another planet."

Tifa nodded. It was amazing how much had happened since Barret Wallace had walked into her bar and asked her to join his rebel group.

"I never would have guessed things would turn..."

She stopped suddenly. He looked down at her and saw a pained expression on her face, but it vanished immediately.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She opened her mouth, but didn't speak. She nodded, then slipped out of his arms and started hesitantly towards the door.

"Tifa?"

She brought her hand up to her head.

"I...I'm alright," she said, trying to sound nonchalant, but he could tell she was struggling to speak. She did not turn toward him. "I just need to lie down for a minute. I'll be fine, really."

"Tifa," he said again, walking over to her and taking her arm. It was obvious something was wrong. He turned her around to face him. "What's the matter?"

She took a deep breath. She opened her mouth to speak, then suddenly cried out and shuddered as if she had been struck. She looked at him and all the fight seemed to go out of her.

"It's my head," she said, a note of desperation in her voice. "Some kind of headaches. I've been having them for..."

She cried out. Her knees buckled and she would have fallen to the floor if Cloud hadn't grabbed hold of her. He turned her toward him and her head fell limply to one side.

"Tifa! "

~*~

"It's getting dark," Shera commented.

Cid didn't even glance up. He was stooped down at the base of the rocket checking some connections.

"I just want to make sure the valves are working properly," he said.

"You've gone over these tanks three times," Shera pointed out. "Everything checks out. They're fine, Cid."

Cid paused for a moment, then stood up, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"I guess," he said slowly.

Shera came up beside him.

"Since when did you become such a worrywart?" she questioned. "I remember a time when I was the cautious one and you were gung-ho to get going."

"And you were right," he replied. "Whatever you say about me, you can't say I don't learn from my mistakes. Besides, it's not just me going up this time."

Shera nodded. Cid was much more careful when the lives of others were on the line instead of just his own. In a way she was grateful the others were going with him, it would make him a little less reckless.

She looked up at the rocket looming over their heads. It was the culmination of a dream, and not only for Cid. She was just as happy and proud of their accomplishment as he was. More than once she wished she could be one of the one's going along with him, but she knew with the baby that was impossible.

"Shera's right," Barret said irritably. "The ship's as ready as it's gonna be. Personally, I can't wait till we launch this thing. Waiting around like this is starting to get on my nerves."

"You know we're not going to launch until tomorrow, no matter how ready it is now, " Ellengio said.

"That don't mean I gotta like it," Barret grumbled.

"Barret's right," Yuffie chimed in. "I wish we could go now. I'm bored."

"Would you two relax," Cid said. "We'll be going soon enough. Christ, you sound like a bunch of kids."

"Look who's talking," Yuffie shot back. "Mr. I've Got the Biggest Toy on the Block."

Cid grinned and was about to reply when he saw three dark suited individuals walking towards them.

The other's turned to see what had caught his eye.

"What are you doing here?" Yuffie exclaimed.

Reno seemed not at all put out by Yuffie's manner.

"We heard what you're doing," he said. "We're coming along."

"No way!" Yuffie blurted out.

They all looked at her in surprise for a moment.

"Way," Reno replied.

"I don't think so," Yuffie reiterated. "How did you even find out we were going?"

"I told them," Elena spoke up.

"You? Why?"

"The Turks stick together," Elena replied. "Besides, we don't know what we're going to be facing, I thought we could use their unique talents."

"What, kidnapping and murder?" Yuffie snapped. "Why would you guys even want to come along?"

"For the same reason you're going," Reno replied calmly. "To stop Jenova. We live here too you know, this is as much our problem as it is yours. We don't want Jenova to return anymore than you do."

"Like you guys ever did anything unless it was for money!" Yuffie shot back. "There's got to be more to it than that."

"What's the matter Yuffie, you don't trust us?" Reno asked innocently.

"You bet your ass I don't," she said.

"Sorry you feel that way," Reno replied. "But I'm afraid the decision is not up to you."

"I doesn't matter," Yuffie said. "No one else wants you with us either."

"I'm not so sure about that," Reno stated.

"Is that right?" Yuffie replied. She turned to Cid. "Tell them they're not wanted."

Cid hesitated and looked at Yuffie sheepishly.

"Well...actually, we kind of already said they could come along," he said slowly.

"WHAT!"

"We already told Elena they could come," Cid repeated.

"When did you do that?"

Cid hesitated again, looking at Ellengio, who just turned away, obviously just wanting to stay out of this one.

"Umm, two days ago."

"Two days!" Yuffie shouted. "Why didn't I know about this?"

"Well, we really didn't think you cared one way or another," Cid replied.

"Well I do!" she shot back. "I care a lot. How could you do this? You all know what the Turks are like. They'd sell their own mother if there was any profit in it. How do we know they're not going to sabotage the entire mission? How do we know they're not going to steal the ship and leave us stranded on some strange planet? How do we know they don't want to steal the crystal materia and use it for themselves, or sell it to the highest bidder? How do we know..."

"Yuffie, calm down!" Cid exclaimed.

"I will not calm down!" she retorted, shouting louder than ever. "How could you decide to let them come along without even consulting me? Don't I have any say in this at all? Why does everybody constantly treat me like a child? Why does everyone think that I can't make a rational decision? Why am I always left out? Aren't I part of Avalanche too? Don't I have a say? Don't I get a vote? How can you just make a decision like this without..."

"Yuffie, shut up!" Cid yelled.

"I won't shut up!" she shouted back. "Don't tell me what to do! I don't have to listen to you. I can't believe you went and did this behind my back!"

"We didn't do it behind your back," Ellengio stated. "We just had no idea you had such a strong opinion on the matter."

"Ellengio's right," Cid said. "Elena came to us with this suggestion a couple of days ago. It didn't seem like it needed to be discussed with the whole group. I'm sorry you felt like you were left out, but it wasn't intentional."

"But how could you agree to take them along?" she said. "You know you can't trust Reno."

"Normally I would agree with you," Cid said. "But what Reno said was true, Jenova is a threat to everyone on this planet. That's plain for everyone to see. The Turks are as threatened by this as we are, and even though I don't trust them, they've proven in the past that they will fight for a good cause if it's to their own benefit. And we all know that stopping Jenova is to everyone's benefit."

"Even if that's true," Yuffie replied. "We have enough people. We don't need them."

"Who can say how many is enough?" Ellengio replied. "But the Turks have shown how useful they can be. Reno proved his worth at the battle of Cosmo Canyon. In fact, if it wasn't for him, you might not have survived."

"Don't remind me," Yuffie said sullenly.

"And they do have certain talents that could prove useful, talents that we do not possess ourselves," Ellengio continued. "In spite of their faults, we thought there were more benefits to bringing them than drawbacks."

"Well, I don't agree at all," Yuffie responded. "I don't trust them and I don't think they should come. What about supplies? You said that we had to know ahead of time how many people were coming."

"We added more supplies as soon as Elena told us," Cid replied. "We should have more than enough."

"So you'll let them go and still say no to Amanda?" she continued, digging for every little point she could get.

"We're not going to go through that again," Ellengio said quickly. "We've already made our reasons for not taking Amanda abundantly clear."

She turned to look at the others.

"Barret, surely you don't agree with this?"

Barret paused for a moment, surprised at being singled out.

"I'm not too thrilled with it, but I'm willing to put up with them if the others think it's for the best."

"I don't understand what your objection is," Red said. "I know we didn't get along with the Turks in the past, but we've worked with them often enough lately. Unless you have some specific objection?"

"Yes I do!" she blurted out. Then she stopped, looking at Reno, who glared back at her, a frown creasing his brow. She just stood there.

"Well?" Red coaxed.

"I just don't trust them," she said lamely.

"I wouldn't qualify that as specific," Red responded.

"Yeah, well, I don't..."

Yuffie was interrupted by a shout. They turned to see Cloud waving them back toward the house.

"I need your help," he called. "Something's happened to Tifa!"

They rushed back to the house. Cloud quickly explained what had happened as he led them into the living room, where he had laid Tifa down on the couch.

"It happened again?" he heard Aeris say as she came into the room.

"What?" he said. "You knew?"

Aeris nodded slowly.

"She told me she was having headaches. But she made me promise not to tell you. She didn't want you to worry," she said apologetically.

"And you listened to her?" Cloud exclaimed.

"I'm sorry," Aeris said "I was going to mention it to Ellengio but I thought they might have gone away."

"Great," Cloud muttered.

"Don't worry about that now," Ellengio said, stooping down to examine Tifa, Red at his side. "Let's just see if we can do anything for her."

The others stood around in silence, Cloud pacing back and forth nervously. He couldn't believe she had been having problems all along and hadn't said anything to him, or that Aeris would cover for her. After a few minutes Ellengio stood up.

"She doesn't seem to be in any immediate danger," he concluded. "Aeris, exactly what did she tell you?"

"She said she thought the headaches were being caused by the mako infusion she received," Aeris replied.

Ellengio nodded slowly.

"That could very well be," he mused. "It had never been done to a woman before, as far as I know. We can't predict what kind of consequences it would have. I'll have to look into this further. For now I think we should just let her rest. She can certainly use it, and she doesn't appear to be in any severe pain at the moment."

With that he ushered them out of the room. Aeris came up beside Cloud as he hesitated, looking at Tifa.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I should have told you."

Cloud shrugged it off.

"It's alright," he said. "No harm seems to have come from it, and she did ask you not to tell me. She can be so thick headed sometimes."

"Sort of like someone else we know?" Aeris pointed out.

Cloud grinned.

"Yeah, sort of," he replied. His grin quickly faded. "Do you think she'll be well enough to come along with us?"

He couldn't imagine leaving Tifa behind. But if she was not well...

"I'm sure she'll be fine," Aeris replied. "Besides, wild horses couldn't keep her from going if she knows you are."

Cloud nodded.

"I guess you're right. I just hope everything turns out okay."

"I'm sure it will," Aeris replied as they walked into the other room.

In her semiconscious state, Tifa heard their voices, but she could make out what they were saying. Nor did she try. The voices were more of a disturbance than anything else. The pain had faded from excruciating to merely a dull pounding in her temples. If she concentrated she could drive it away far enough to make it bearable, but any distraction disturbed her, causing the pain to increase. She was glad when the voices faded away.

She laid there for a long time, still fighting off the pain. She wasn't sure how long, time had lost all meaning for her. There was no more sound, but suddenly she felt a presence. She wasn't sure how, she wasn't even sure anymore if she was awake or dreaming. Her eyes were still closed, and every time she made an attempt to open them she felt a stab of pain. But somehow she sensed that someone was there.

She felt a soft touch on her forehead. Just a light brush against it, but enough to detect. She tried to open her eyes once more and the pain welled up again. She heard herself moan and the hand touched her head again. It felt cool and soothing, and the pain ebbed a bit.

'Relax, I can help you.'

She felt her body shudder. The voice was so sharp, so clear, it was as if someone were standing inside her head talking to her.

'Who are you?' Tifa thought. 'Aeris?'

'I can help you with the pain,' the voice replied. 'Right now it is unhindered, but you can wall it in. You can create a cage with your mind. You can overcome it.'

'How?' Tifa asked. She didn't care who it was, it didn't make any difference as long as they could help. Whoever it was, the voice was distinctly feminine.

'I'll teach you, just follow my thoughts.'

A complex series of thoughts flashed through her mind. She could tell they were being projected to her somehow. She tried to follow but quickly got lost.

'You're going too fast.'

'Sorry, I'll slow down. I'm used to doing it quickly. You'll learn to do it that fast yourself eventually.'

The series of thoughts was repeated. Tifa followed as best she could. When she had completed it she was surprised to realize that the pain had faded considerably.

'Now do it yourself,' the voice said.

Tifa tried to repeat what she had just done, but she quickly faltered. Each time the other person repeated the pattern for her, until she could follow it. Over and over they did it until Tifa could produce it on her own.

'Very good, now don't forget,' the voice said. 'Practice it over and over again. You'll get better and faster, and soon your mind will do it automatically whenever you feel the pain begin.'

Tifa did it a few more times just to make sure she had it down.

'Thank you. But who are you, and how did you...'

She felt the hand removed from her forehead, and immediately she could tell that all contact was lost. She struggled to open her eyes, but it seemed so hard to do from some reason. It seemed she was waking from a very deep sleep, and her muscles did not want to obey her.

When her eyes did open, she found herself laying on the couch in Cid's living room. She sat up, blinking, and looked around, but the room was deserted. She wasn't sure whether what had just happened to her had been real or some kind of strange dream. She stood up slowly and put her hand to her head. Whatever had happened, whether it had been some mysterious person or just a figment of her imagination, she couldn't argue with the results. The pain was completely gone.

Cid slipped out of bed, being careful not to disturb Shera. He walked over to the dresser and lifted a cigarette out of the pack. He went over to the window and looked out. The moon had risen, almost full, just above the trees. He could see the top of the rocket glistening in the moonlight.

Tomorrow they would be lifting off, and this time it would not be just a quick trip up to stop meteor. This time they were going on a real adventure. He was going to fulfill his dream once again, in spades this time. No wonder he couldn't sleep.

The baby's bassinet was right beside the window, the moon shining directly in on Sydney. Cid stood there for a moment, looking at his child, lost in thought.

So much had changed for him in the last few years. For most of his life, the urge to fly, first in a plane, and then into space, had been the primary motivator in his life. But now that he was about to achieve that dream, it was diminished. For the first time in his life he had things right here on the ground that were more important to him.

He heard Shera stir. He turned toward her and saw her looking around sleepily.

"Cid?"

"I'm right here," he replied.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes

"I didn't want to wake you," he said.

She shook her head.

"You didn't wake me, I've been sleeping fitfully all night."

He came over and sat down on the bed, then took another drag from his cigarette.

"Yeah, me too."

"Big day tomorrow."

"You got that right," Cid muttered. He looked at Shera. He could see her clearly in the moonlight. Her hair was disheveled from sleep, her eyes puffy, but to him she suddenly seemed more beautiful than ever.

"What?" she said, seeing him looking at her.

He sighed and took hold of her hand.

"You know this has been my lifelong dream," he said.

She gripped his hand tighter.

"Of course," she replied. She had known going in that one day this was going to happen, and she had promised herself she would never hold him back. "I know you have to do this."

"Yeah, but that's just it, ya see," he said awkwardly. "It's always been my dream, but I look at what I've got now, what I'll be leavin' behind, and space don't seem all that appealing all of a sudden. To tell you the truth, if they didn't need me, I'd be just as happy staying here with you and the baby."

Shera smiled and cuddled up next to him.

"Oh Cid," she said.

"But I gotta go," he continued. "There's no one else who can pilot the ship. But I just want you to know...I just wanna say..." he faltered, the words stumbling from his mouth.

"Cid, you don't have to say anything," Shera said.

"Yeah, I know, but I wanna. Christ, you know I'm no good at this sort of thing. I'd pretty much do anything I could to get outta this, but we both know I can't. I just wanna say that I'm gonna miss the hell outta both of ya."

Shera turned away and rubbed her eyes, and this time she was not rubbing the sleep out of them.

"I'll miss you too," she said, turning back toward him. "And I know Sydney will too. But I know you've got to do this. You're not flying off on some whim, Cid, what your doing is important, and it could save our child, or our child's children, from

having to someday face the threat of Jenova. It takes a special person to make the kind of sacrifices you and the rest of Avalanche have made. I'm very proud of you."

This time it was Cid's turn to look away, feeling embarrassed. He wasn't a person who was very good at handling praise.

"I'm proud of you too," he said.

"Me?" Shera questioned. "What for?"

"For puttin' up with me for all these years," he replied. "And for giving me something more precious than any rocket ship."

Their eyes drifted over to the bassinet. Cid slipped his arm around Shera and they sat there in silence for a moment.

"Just promise me one thing," Shera said finally, so softly he had to strain to hear her.

"What's that?"

"Promise me...promise me that no matter what happens, no matter what you have to face, that you'll come back to me and Sydney. Our baby needs her dad, and I don't know what I'd do..."

Her voice faded into silence. Cid looked at her, and though the room was dark he could still make out the tears on her cheeks.

"Hey c'mon," he said. "None o' that. You know me, I'm a survivor. There ain't nothin' gonna happen to this old boy, not when he knows he's got you to waitin' for him. Shit, I don't care if there's a thousand of those Jenova things lined up in a row when we reach the planet, they ain't gonna stop me from getting back here."

He wrapped his arms around her and Shera buried her head in his chest. They sat there in silence for some time, Shera trying her best to pull herself together while Cid tried awkwardly to comfort her.

"I love you Cid," she finally said, brushing away the tears.

"You know I love you too," he replied. "And don't worry, no matter what happens, I promise I'll come back. Now it's getting late, so why don't we both try to get a little rest. Sittin' around here worrying isn't going to do either one of us a bit of good."

Cid stubbed out his cigarette. Shera nodded and they both lay back down. They lay there in silence for a few minutes, then Cid glanced over at Shera. He was wide awake, staring at the ceiling. He took hold of her hand again without a word. He had a feeling neither of them was going to get much sleep tonight.

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Amanda sat alone under the trees on a small hill overlooking Cid's rocket. She had been sitting there for over an hour, hardly moving at all, just watching the technicians below as they worked to get the spacecraft ready for launch. She almost seemed to be daydreaming, but she was actually watching the workers below with a keen interest.

For all her pleading, she had not managed to get the others to agree to take her along, yet she desperately wanted to go, and she wasn't even sure anymore of her reasons. She still had a mission to carry out, and she obviously could not finish it if she stayed here and Barret went shooting off into space, but she was surprised to realize that she was also hurt because she felt she was being left out. She realized it was silly. These people were not friends of hers, it would be the height of folly for her to start becoming emotionally attached, not with what she had to do. But she was having difficulty maintaining her distance. Yuffie especially was treating her almost as if they were sisters. Amanda had never had that kind of experience before.

Suddenly she had an uneasy feeling. She spun around to see a man standing in the shadow of the trees. She jumped up, fists ready, but then relaxed when she recognized the figure.

"What are you doing here?" she questioned.

Ice stepped forward until he was right beside her.

"I was standing there for quite a while before you turned around," he said. "Seems to me someone with your training should have noticed I was there sooner."

"What do you want?" she said, ignoring his barb.

"Just wanted to see how you and your little friends are doing," Ice replied sarcastically.

"They're not my friends," Amanda said.

Ice lifted an eyebrow.

"That's funny. Seems to me you've taken quite a shine to them. Looks like you've been getting very cozy. Kind of strange considering that Barret Wallace was the man who murdered your parents in cold blood."

"You don't have to remind me of that," she said coldly. "I've got to earn their trust if I want them to let me stay with them."

"Yes," he answered. "But how long does it take? The boss is starting to get restless. We were talking the other day and he was wondering why Barret Wallace isn't dead yet."

"It's not that easy," she said, annoyed and upset that Ice was spying on her. "His friends are always with him. I just need a little more time."

Ice looked at her skeptically.

"Well you better do something soon, for your own sake as well as Calin's."

"What's Calin got to do with this?" she questioned sharply.

"Nothing at all," Ice replied. "Except that this is his little project. If it fails his credibility will be zero. Not that I would mind that, he's starting to become a thorn in my side lately, with his big ideas. But when the boss sees you screw this up, just like I predicted you would, Calin will no longer be a factor."

"I'm not going to screw it up," she said indigently.

"So you say," he replied. "But I think you're getting cold feet. I don't think you've got the guts to pull this off."

"I...I do too!" he said, wanting to shout, but keeping it down. She took a look down at the workers, but they hadn't seemed to notice her, and she was far enough away that they couldn't overhear unless she shouted. "I just need a little more time!"

Ice just gave her a penetrating look.

"Very well," he said. "But not too much longer. I understand they'll be taking a little trip into space. It's very dangerous up there. The perfect place for him to have an accident, wouldn't you agree? Might I suggest that when that rocket returns to earth that Barret Wallace no longer be among the living?"

"I get the picture," Amanda replied. "I'll do my job."

"I hope so," Ice said thoughtfully. "I certainly hope so."

Then he turned and walked rapidly back into the woods.

Amanda watched him until he disappeared, then turned and sat down slowly, looking once more at the rocket below her.

Things were not going anything like she had imagined. No one was acting the way she had expected. Calin had told her that Barret had killed her parents, but he didn't act like a killer, he didn't act like someone who was trying to take control of Corel for his own gain. He seemed to be genuinely concerned about the citizens of the city, and had been very fair and kind to her when he had met her. He even had a daughter of his own, and she could tell that Marlene was just crazy about her father, and that the man doted on the girl. She just couldn't picture Barret doing the things he was accused of. Perhaps there was some kind of mistake, perhaps somehow Calin had gotten the wrong man. It was possible, wasn't it? What if she went through with this and they found out later on that it was a mistake, that she had killed Barret for nothing? How would she be able to live with herself?

She chewed anxiously on a strand of hair, feeling a knot beginning to form in her stomach. If she didn't follow through with this, Calin would be disgraced. She certainly didn't want that to happen to the man who had raised her since she was a child. They were all depending on her to get this done, and Calin would be sure of his facts before he revealed them to her, wouldn't he? People could change, or be very clever. Perhaps Barret really did have evil designs, just hid them very well. How did she know what he was really plotting in his office at work every day? His whole personality could be an act to keep his daughter from suspecting anything. At any rate, it wasn't up to her to decide, she had a job to do and was expected to do it, no matter how she felt about it.

The problem was, she still wasn't going with them. She could hardly complete her mission unless she somehow managed to get aboard that ship. Time was running out, they were going to launch in less than two hours now. She raised her head

and looked down at the workers below once again. She hadn't been staring idly at them all this time, but had been carefully watching them, watching their patterns. Right now they were loading things into the cargo hatch, and she could see that every once in a while, the hatch was unguarded. It only lasted for a few minutes, but it was happening at regular intervals. She got up and started slowly down the hill. Whatever was going to happen, she was determined to be on that rocket when it lifted off.

~*~

Altim was determined to be on that rocket when it lifted off. From what he had overheard, these people were on a mission to another planet, an adventure he knew he could never pass up. To have an opportunity like this fall into his lap and pass it up would have been unthinkable. And he had hard monetary reasons for going as well. He knew these people had at least two types of unique materia along with them, and who knew what other materia, or even stranger things, they might find on another planet? The trip could prove very lucrative.

He made his way closer to the rocket, trying to act like just another gawking spectator. He had followed the group to Rocket town when he had heard what they were doing. Shue had remained in Wutai, not in the least bit interested in this adventure once Altim had told him the details. He preferred the low risk and steady return of work in Wutai to some crazy scheme to go into outer space. The man just had no vision!

He circled slowly around the rocket, just observing what was going on. He could see they were loading cargo, and from casually eavesdropping on some conversations he had gathered that they would be launching in a couple of hours. If he was going to do something, it would have to be soon.

He moved closer, watching the men work, and then he noticed a silver haired girl. She was one of the people who had been in Aeris group. She was standing not far away from the workers. She seemed to be just watching them do their job, but there was something in the way she kept looking up at the rocket that caught his attention.

He walked slowly over until he was behind her, partially concealed by the framework of the gantry. He had a feeling she was up to something from the way she kept looking around, as if she was waiting for something.

The workers had just finished loading a crate. Now they walked into a large truck whose contents they had been transferring to the ship. As soon as they disappeared the girl glanced around one more time, looking straight at Altim, but he ducked down at the last instant. When he looked up again he saw her sprinting for the cargo hold.

Without even thinking about it he was after her. As he rushed across the clearing toward the cargo bay door he could see that the workers were still in the truck, but would probably come out momentarily. The girl had obviously been watching them and had timed this precisely. He hoped he could make it into the hold in time.

He dashed as fast as he could, running up the ramp. He glanced back one more time to see the men emerging from the truck. With a last lunge he dived into the hold. He looked quickly back out the door, but he didn't hear or see anything out of the ordinary. He was pretty sure he had not been seen.

The cargo hold had a low ceiling and was dark, the light through the door the only illumination. The hold was filled with crates and boxes, and Altim quickly made his way back through them. Hopefully he could get lost far enough back in there so that no one would notice him, something he was sure the girl had in mind as well.

He slipped around behind a crate and suddenly someone lunged at him.

He really shouldn't have been surprised. He knew the girl was in here somewhere, and that she had probably seen him enter behind her. He had in fact expected to run into her, but he hadn't expected her to be so fast.

He tried to dodge out of the way, but she grabbed hold of his arm and twisted it around behind him, rather painfully, in fact. He tried to pull away, but she had the leverage, and he fell to the ground, with her on top of him.

"Who the hell are you?" she snarled.

"Hey, calm down," he said. "I'm not going to give you away."

"I said, who are you?" she demanded.

"My name is Altim," he replied. "I'm a friend of Aeris."

"Aeris?"

"Yes, well, sort of."

"What do you mean, sort of?"

"It's a long story," he replied. "And it's kind of uncomfortable down here on the floor with your knee in my back. Do you think you could let me up?"

"Not til I know what you're doing here," she said suspiciously.

"The same thing you are," he replied. "I wanted to go on this trip, and I didn't think they'd let me come along if I just asked."

"Why do you want to go?" she questioned, her voice beginning to lose its angry tone.

"Fun, adventure, to explore new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one..."

"I get the picture," she cut him off.

They sat there in silence for a moment. This was something that she had not expected at all. What was she to do with him?

"Can I get up now?" he asked politely.

Just then they heard the voices of the workers through the cargo bay door.

"Shhh," she said, dropping down beside him. They lay flat on the floor while the men brought in some more cargo. They were well concealed, and no one came anywhere near them.

"That's the last of it," they heard one man call out. "Let's get out of here and close this up. We've got a tight schedule."

The men's voices faded, and then there was a loud hum as the doors to the cargo bay slowly closed. The light faded until they were in pitch black, but then dim ceiling lights came to life, not very brightly, but enough to see by.

Altin sat up and brushed himself off.

"So now what?" he questioned.

What indeed, she thought? The cargo bay door was closed, there was no going out that way anymore.

"I don't trust you," she said.

Altin shrugged.

"I'm not sure I trust you either, but I don't think there's much either one of us can do about it at this point. The only way out now is through the main deck, and you won't be able to kick me out that way without being seen yourself. And I've got a feeling you want to go along on this trip as much as I do. I'm afraid we're stuck with one another."

Amanda looked at him sourly. As much as she didn't want a companion, she had to agree he was right. There was no way to get rid of him without revealing herself as well.

"I suppose you're right," she replied. "But you've got some nerve stealing my idea on sneaking aboard. The least you could do would be to come up with your own idea."

"A clever man takes advantage of every opportunity," he replied. "By the way, you didn't mention your own name, might it be Amanda by any chance?"

He remembered when he was eavesdropping that they were arguing about Amanda coming along. Seemed likely this was the girl they were talking about, and besides, he thought he recognized her voice.

Amanda frowned.

"How'd you know that?" she questioned.

"I have my sources," he replied.

Amanda just glared at him.

"So what happens now?" he asked.

"We wait until they lift off," Amanda replied. "Once they're out in space, even if they discover us, I don't think they'll have any choice but to take us along. I don't think they're gonna turn back because of a couple of stowaways."

"I guess," Altim replied. He could see that Amanda was still eyeing him suspiciously, but she seemed satisfied that he was harmless at the moment, and that it would be in both their interests to work together.

"So when do we lift off?" he questioned.

"Soon," she replied, sitting down on the floor, her back propped up against a crate. She didn't know what Altim's motives were, but she had no choice but to trust him at the moment. She was just going to make sure she kept a close eye on him. "Might as well sit down. We've got nothing left to do now but wait."

~*~

"Come on, people, move along," Cid called out. He stood at the entrance hatch to the rocket, ushering the others inside. Shera stood beside him.

"Relax, Cid," Cloud said. "We'll be up in space soon enough."

Cid did not reply, in fact, he did not even seem to hear, so absorbed was he in what he was doing.

"Leave him alone, Cloud," Tifa said. "He's excited. This is his lifelong dream. To tell you the truth, I think it's pretty exciting myself."

"It is pretty wild to think about it," Cloud agreed. He looked at Tifa carefully. "Are you sure you're gonna be okay?"

Tifa nodded.

"I'm fine," she replied. Her friends had been quite surprised with how suddenly she had recovered from her headache the other day. Cloud had been watching her closely since, but the pain had not returned. She hadn't told them what had happened to her, not really sure herself whether or not it had been some kind of hallucination.

"C'mon, make some room here," they heard a voice call out.

They looked toward the entrance and saw Cid step aside as Reeve walked in, followed closely by Cait.

"You got him fixed," Tifa said.

"Uh huh," Reeve replied. "Good as new. Better, hopefully."

"Hello Tifa, Cloud," Cait said. "It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you too," Cloud replied.

"Yeah, we've kind of missed all those neat fortunes you're always telling," Tifa commented.

"Really?" Cait said. He looked at Tifa and Cloud for a moment. "Well, they were never very good, but if you like, I can do one for you now."

"Quit clutterin' up the walkway," Cid called in to them. "We've got more people to get aboard here! I can't believe we've got this many people going. It's like a damn circus around here."

"Oops," Tifa said. "Looks like we're gumming up the works." She looked at Cait. "Perhaps later on."

"Fine with me," he said and they walked down the passageway.

Cid turned around and looked down the stairway. Lai Li was coming up, with Reno and Rude not far behind her. They were the last of them.

"Let's get a move on, people. We don't have all day," he growled.

Lai Li increased her pace and went quickly past him. The Turks took their time. Reno stopped and looked up at the rocket when they reached Cid.

"You sure this thing is going to remain in one piece?" he asked. "Doesn't look all that sturdy. I hope you've got some kind of escape vehicle."

Cid stared at him for a moment, then pointed to the hatch.

"That door's closin' in two minutes. You can either be inside or standing out here. Either way it ain't gonna make any difference to me," he said.

Reno looked at him and smiled falsely. Then he strode into the ship, Rude right behind him. Cid turned to Shera.

"I guess this is it," he said.

Shera looked at him, and he could see she was trying hard to be strong.

"Take care of yourself," she said.

"I will," he replied. "Don't let little Sydney forget about me while I'm gone."

"Don't worry, I won't," she replied.

They stood there for a moment, then Cid grabbed hold of her and pulled her toward him, bending her over and kissing her. Then he stood up and stepped into the rocket, waving quickly.

"I'll be back soon," he said.

"I know you will," she replied.

The door slid shut. Cid stared at it for a minute, then pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. He turned and walked quickly into the command center of the spacecraft.

"All right people, we're just about ready to go. Have a seat and strap yourselves in. Then sit back and enjoy the ride!"

Cid plopped himself down in the pilots seat. He started rapidly flicking switches and looking over the displays in front of him. Everything seemed to be in fine order.

"T minus fifteen minutes," he called out.

The others sat themselves down as well and strapped on their restraints. Aeris was directly behind Tifa. She found her heart beating fast in her chest. Some of the others had been along with Cid the first time he had gone up, but of course she had not been among them. The whole thing seemed terribly exciting, and more than a little frightening. She slowly looked around at the others. She couldn't see the faces of those in front of her, but those behind her ranged from the obvious excitement of Lai Li to the apparent boredom on the face of Vincent.

She sat back, trying to get herself to relax as the minutes slowly ticked away. She couldn't help but wonder what they were going to find up there in space, and on Grouchoon, if they should ever actually get there. She knew there were many dangers ahead of them, but they were in the future at the moment, and right now she was determined to make the most out of this unique experience.

"T minus one minute," Cid stated. He had his eyes glued to the instrument panel now, watching all the gauges carefully. Occasionally he would glance up at the monitor that showed the control room on the ground. He could see Shera standing in there now, undoubtedly watching the monitors in front of her. But he had too much to capture his attention right now to let his eyes linger on her, no matter how much he wanted to.

The countdown reached ten seconds and they all felt a rumble as the engines ignited. Even Cid felt himself tense up. This was it, all the work was finally coming to fruition. He had done this before, but that had only been a test, this was the real thing.

The countdown reached zero.

"Here we go!" Cid shouted.

The ship lurched upward, forcing them all back in their seats. The roar of the engines quickly became deafening. The ship began to shake violently, and some of the others looked concerned, but Cid knew it was nothing unusual. He looked out the window in front of him and saw the sky rushing towards them as they blasted up into the atmosphere. They were doing it, they were really doing it!

"Yeeeahhhhaaaaa!" Cid yelled as they left the world behind them.