

IC CHAPTER XXIX: JENOVA PRIME

A single set of stairs led downward. Aeris led the way, her feet tapping softly on the steps. Jinn followed silently behind her. There were no turn offs, just the one staircase, going down and down and down, the occasional switchback the only interruption. Aeris had no idea how far they descended, but by the time they reached the bottom they must have been deep inside the mountain.

At the bottom they found a large room cut out of the earth. The walls seemed to be of native rock, yet they still gave off the dim glow of all Cetra structures. A faint humming sound filled the air. The chamber was quite large, perhaps ten meters wide and at least twice that in length. The far wall was concave, and set against it was a large silver device. The sound seemed to emanate from this, and there was no doubt in Aeris mind that they had found the generator.

She walked forward, staring at the machinery. Cetra machines were very rare. In spite of their technological achievements, they did not place a great emphasis on the use of artificial devices. Oh they had them, and used them on occasion, but only reluctantly. They preferred if possible to leave the world in it's natural state. As creatures finely tuned to the lifestream, the ripples caused by machinery made them uneasy, although no harm had ever come from it.

The instrument in front of them was quite large, the size of a small room itself. It filled the far end of the chamber. The base was in the shape of a flattened circle, with crystalline rods protruding to various heights from the top. As they came close she saw flat panels on the front, but that was the only sign of any controls. A human looking at it would have a hard time identifying it as a machine and not a work of abstract art.

Aeris stopped when she stood a few feet in front of it. The hum was quite loud now, and she could feel a faint vibration in the ground. She turned to see Jinn not far behind her, completely focused on the machine. A frown creased her brow. They had never run into the barrier he had mentioned.

"So this is it," Jinn said slowly.

Aeris eyebrows went up, and she felt a sudden chill. The words had not been in Cetra. She knew he was bright, but he couldn't possibly have learned that quickly, could he? And they had not been spoken hesitantly, as if newly learned. Instead they had been said with the ease of someone long accustomed to a language.

Then, as if a light switch had been flicked, she felt a sudden change. Like a cold wind gusting suddenly on an otherwise calm day. The aura she had felt from Jinn had always been weak, barely perceptible. She had assumed it was because he was so different from her. After all, she had been separated from the Cetra here for over two thousand years. There was bound to be considerable differences between them by now. But now the aura was gone, replaced by another. Another aura that instantly made her skin crawl.

She opened her mouth to speak, an exclamation of surprise, but it came out in barely a whisper.

"Jenova."

Jinn ignored her. He walked over and stood in front of the instrument, looking at it thoughtfully. Finally he turned toward her, a look of disdain on his face.

"After two thousand years of looking, we've finally found it," he said. "Ironic, isn't it, that a Cetra would be the one to lead me here."

Aeris took a step back, the full horror of what was happening closing in around her like a fist. Her mind reeled, realizing what they had done. All this time Jenova had been hunting in vain for the generator. All this time the Cetra and Chadara had managed to keep it hidden from them. And then they had come along, and within days had led Jenova right to the very object it had been seeking all these years. Ironic indeed, the bitter taste in her mouth was enough to choke on.

She looked at him, but his appearance had not changed. He was still the young boy, so innocent looking, so much like Cloud. The disguise had worked so well, that even now she found it hard to believe what he truly was. The appearance was obviously meant to do just that. It was frightening to realize just how well it had worked. She took a step back.

"How could this be?" she managed to stammer.

"It was a simple matter to hide my true self from one as young and naive as you," he said matter-of-factly. "You have no idea of the true power of Jenova. The older Cetra, Ellengio, would have been a bit more difficult, but fortunately, he was not around."

"What are you going to do?" Aeris said.

"What we have been trying to do for two thousand years," he replied. "Destroy the generator and free my people."

Aeris found herself holding the princess guard in front of her.

"I can't let you do that," she said.

Jinn did not seem to think much of her threat. He didn't even seem to be paying any attention, as if her presence was not worthy of his notice.

"I'm well aware of that," he replied. "But don't worry, when I destroy it, you won't feel bad about it."

Aeris raised one eyebrow.

"Oh, and why would that be?"

Jinn looked at her now, a wolfish grin of his face.

"Because my dear, but the time I destroy the generator, you won't be feeling anything at all."

Suddenly his arm shot out. She seemed well out of his reach, but his limb seemed to stretch, lashing out at her. With a swift twist of her rod, she batted it aside.

"You'll have to do better than that!" she exclaimed.

Jinn laughed, a deep rumble, a sound that seemed impossible from the young man in front of her.

"I'm not ready to kill you just yet," he said. "I'm curious about something. These other creatures with you, the 'humans'. They are so weak, why have you allied yourself with them?"

"Why should I answer any of your questions?" she said.

"Indulge me," he said graciously. "You may live longer. But don't get any ideas of them coming to your rescue. They are even more easily deceived than you. The simple ruse of an imaginary barricade was all it took, but in case they become suspicious, there is another surprise. The Chadara guards have already been alerted and are on their way. They may even have already arrived by now. They should be more than a match for your motley crew, and keep them from interrupting our lovely conversation."

Aeris hid the fear she felt at his words well.

"They may be stronger than you think."

Jinn's hand stuck at her again, this time aimed at her leg. She dodged out of the way, her rod coming down again, but he drew back before she could strike.

"No," he said. "They are not. There is not even a question about it. I have reached into one of their minds, remember? I know everything about you. All your strengths, all your weaknesses. They may put up a noble fight, but they will be defeated, just as you will be. What merit do you see in them?"

"They are my friends," she replied.

"They are not your species. Or perhaps it is because you are half human. Do you feel you own them allegiance because of that? I would have thought the Cetra in you would be more dominant."

"See that?" she said. "You don't know everything about us."

She leaped forward, swinging her rod quickly. For an instant Jinn stood there, taken by surprise by her sudden attack. But before the rod could make contact he twisted out of the way. His arm shot out again, striking her side and knocking her down. She sprang to her feet almost immediately, but Jinn made no attempt to follow up.

"It doesn't matter what species they are," she said. "They are my friends."

Jinn slowly circled around her. She kept turning to face him, the princess guard ready.

"This makes no sense to me," he said. "How can another species be your friend? Their interests and yours are not the same. When they conflict, they will turn against you."

Aeris shook her head.

"No they will not," she said.

Jinn eyed her curiously.

"No?" he said. "This one they call Tifa. Is she your friend?"

"Of course," Aeris replied.

"She knew you had feeling for this Cloud person, yet she wanted him for herself. She took him from you. Is this the way of friends?"

"She loved him more than me," Aeris said. "And he loved her. I cared for Cloud very much, I still do, but it was not the same as how she felt for him. I'm happy for both of them."

Jinn slowly shook his head.

"She took what you wanted, and you are pleased with this? This friendship concept is becoming more and more confusing. She is jealous of you, you seem to realize this, but you don't mind. It seems they get all the benefits and you get nothing."

"They stood by me as well," she replied. "They revived me from the lifestream. That is what friendship is all about."

Jinn suddenly lunged forward. Aeris brought her rod up, but he ducked underneath, slamming against her knees, and knocking her down again. Even as she fell the princess guard swung around, striking Jinn on the shoulder and knocking him back. She jumped to her feet again, feeling a sharp pain in her left knee.

"The one you call Cloud, he was the one that led the others on that journey. Yet his reasons were to redeem himself. He had promised to be your bodyguard, and he failed. He didn't revive you for your benefit, he did it for his own sake."

Now it was Aeris turn to shake her head.

"You can twist anything around, make anything anyone does appear to be for selfish reasons. That doesn't make it true."

"And what about your reasons, Aeris. What are you fighting for?"

"That's simple," she replied. "To stop you."

"And why do you wish to do that?" he questioned.

"You're already destroyed my home world," she replied. "I won't let you destroy my adopted one as well."

Aeris stepped forward and swung her rod again. Sparks flew as it struck the ground where Jinn had been a moment before.

"We destroyed your home world?" he said. "I think not. It was your people who bear the responsibility for that."

"What do you mean?" she questioned.

"I see you have forgotten your own history," he replied. "Perhaps the truth was never handed down to you from those who left. It wouldn't be surprising."

Jinn lunged again. Aeris dodged once more, somehow finding a way to remain on her feet this time, but her counter blow missed again.

"No, they probably did all they could to hide the truth. The fact that your own people were the one's who created us. That they thought of us as freaks, stripped us of all our dignity, all our rights, and hid us away. We were a mistake, but we were a mistake that could think, that could feel. We had done nothing wrong, had only come into the world at your people's bidding, yet we found ourselves oppressed, treated as worse than slaves.

Aeris could not hide the surprise in her eyes at this.

"That's not true," she said.

"Oh but it is," he replied. "I have no reason to lie about that. All we ever asked for was a chance, all we wanted was to live in peace, but your people never gave us that chance. You created us, and then tried to take everything away from us, and when we revolted, when we refused to be swept under the rug, you tried to destroy us."

"No," Aeris said. This had to be another lie, just another ploy to get her to doubt herself, her people. He was trying to take away her will to fight, but she wouldn't fall for it. "Why should I believe anything you say?"

"This is common knowledge to every Jenova, and to the Chadara too, as it was to the Cetra before they were finally exterminated. You see, they underestimated us. They thought because we were different, because our outward appearance was not pleasing to them, that we were inferior. They never took us as a serious threat, and that was their greatest mistake. They nearly wiped us out, and when our turn came, we were not merciful. No, it is your race that was the cause of all this misery."

"It's a lie!" Aeris snapped.

She struck again, so quickly that her rod was just a blur. Jinn dodged, but the princess guard managed to strike him a glancing blow on his right shoulder. Aeris swung again, but his arm came up, blocking the blow. His other hand came around, grabbing her rod and nearly tearing it from her grip. She managed to hold to it, but stumbled back.

"It is not!" he retorted. "It was your race that started all this. It was your race that tried to wipe us from the face of your planet, that started the war. We were just trying to defend ourselves."

Aeris had been slowly backing up, and now she felt the far wall behind her back. She didn't believe what Jinn was telling her, but even if it was true, it wasn't going to change anything.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "That happened thousands of years ago, on a planet that I've never known. There's nothing I can do to change that. All I know is, the people who are with me, they never did Jenova any harm, yet you went to their planet and tried to subjugate them. I'm not here to defend my race, I'm here to stop you from hurting them."

"How noble of you," Jinn replied, grinning mercilessly. "It might be interesting to try to understand what you see in them, but I have more important things to do. I kept you alive this long because I wanted you to know the truth about your race, about what they did to us, before you died. But now the game is over."

He sprang at her, so quickly there was no chance to dodge. Aeris only had time to bring her rod up, but Jinn was not holding back this time, he slammed into her with the force of a truck, knocking her arms away and her whole body back to slam against the wall. She cried out in pain as the princess guard clattered to the ground. She found herself pinned against the wall, Jinn's hand wrapped around her throat.

She struggled desperately, striking out at Jinn with her hands and feet, but nothing she did seem to phase him. She tried forcing them to the side, nearer to her rod, her hand clawing desperately for it, but it remained elusively beyond the reach of her fingers. As she grew more desperate for air her attack became more savage. One of Jinn's arms held her neck, the other had her right arm pinned, but her left arm was still free, and she beat on Jinn furiously, finally clawing at him. She kicked at him with her legs, so hard that she felt her own bones would snap, but she didn't think about that. The only thing on her mind was fighting frantically for a breath of air. But now matter how she struggled, she couldn't break his iron grip on her throat. She began to feel light headed, and she realized she was only moments from passing out.

Was this how it was all to end, the thought flashed through her head. Had she been revived, saved from death only to have it all end here, far from home, at the hands of Jenova. It all seemed so pointless!

A blast reverberated through the room. Jinn was knocked away from her, and she fell to her knees, gasping for air. She looked up to see Reeve standing in the doorway. Even as she did so he fired his shotgun a second time.

Jinn was knocked to the floor, his body deforming from the damage caused by the shot. But almost immediately it shifted back into place.

"Reeve, get out of here!" Aeris yelled.

"Are you all right?" he called out.

"Yes," she replied. "Go, warn the others!"

"I'm not leaving without..."

He was cut off as Jinn extended his arm, striking Reeve in the midriff, forcing the wind out of him and knocking him to the floor.

"So you saw past my little ruse," Jinn said. "Perhaps you humans are a bit more clever than I gave you credit. But what is it your people say, curiosity killed the cat?"

He struck again, even as Reeve was getting to his feet. Aeris winced at the fierceness of the blow, which sent Reeve spinning backwards across the floor.

Jinn stepped forward and grabbed hold of Reeve, picking him up like a rag doll.

"I'll teach you to interfere with your betters," Jinn snapped. He lifted Reeve over his head, about to throw him once more at the wall, but then glanced over at Aeris. Her head was bowed, her eyes closed, her forehead creased with concentration. A white glow seemed to surround her body.

Jinn dropped Reeve, and leapt at her, moving faster than seemed possible. His leg shot out, catching her in the chest and slammed her back against the wall.

"We'll have none of your Cetra tricks," he snarled.

Aeris pulled herself to her knees, her head spinning, her concentration broken. Blood trickled from the side of her mouth.

Another blast from Reeve's shotgun made Jinn stumble again. He turned around to see Reeve standing unsteadily not far away, a look of defiance on his face.

"Leave her alone!" he exclaimed.

"My, you are persistent," Jinn said.

Without even looking behind him his arm swung out, striking Aeris in the side of the head and knocking her down once again. Jinn then folded his arms across his chest.

"So what are you going to do about it?" he challenged.

Reeve fired a second blast, hitting Jinn full in the stomach. Jinn took a step back, a grimace crossing his face, but other than that, the blast seemed to have little effect.

"You know," he said, "that's really starting to annoy me."

Reeve ran forward. Jinn's arm shot out again, grabbing hold of Reeve and stopping him in his tracks. Reeve fired again, at point blank range, but the click of the hammer was the only response.

Jinn pulled Reeve close and stared into his face.

"Looks like your toy has lost its bite," he said.

Reeve struggled for a moment before realizing that it was useless. He looked at the gun again, then at Jinn.

"Don't bet on it," he said.

Suddenly he drove the barrel forward with all his strength, right into Jinn's face. With a grunt Jinn stumbled back, letting him drop to the floor.

With a roar of anger Jinn lunged for him again. Reeve tried to dodge out of the way, but Jinn was too fast, wrapping an arm around Reeve's leg. Jinn swung him around and flung him across the room again. He tumbled to the floor beside Aeris, who was herself just struggling to her feet.

Jinn walked toward them.

"Now that you're both together, you can say goodbye to one another."

Reeve put a hand on Aeris shoulder to steady her, looking at her closely. She tried to give him a reassuring smile, but he could tell by the blood on her face and the way she was breathing that she was badly hurt. He turned back toward Jinn, burning with impotent rage. His shotgun was on the other side of Jinn, a few feet that was as good as hundred miles. With the shotgun he could have at least caused Jinn some discomfort, with no weapon, he knew there was little he could do.

Aeris, in spite of her pain, stepped forward, rod raised in defense. Jinn's hand shot out, as if swatting away an annoying mosquito, and the princess guard flew from her hands.

"It's time to..." he stopped and turned suddenly toward the stairs. Cloud stood there with the Chadara weapon in his hands, Tifa right beside him.

Jinn sighed.

"Looks like I've wasted way too much time," he muttered. "Where's the rest of your little crew?"

"On the way," Cloud replied. "With reinforcements."

Jinn looked at Cloud dubiously.

"Not likely," he said. He walked over by the machine, turning so they were all in front of him.

"Looks like I've underestimated you," he said. "Perhaps you humans aren't as weak as I'd supposed."

He paused and looked at them all thoughtfully.

"But you know," he continued. "There really is no reason for us to fight. You humans are not Jenova's enemy. We really have no interest in your little planet. There are plenty of others out there. In fact, it might even be possible for our two species to interact in a way that's beneficial for both of us."

Cloud frowned.

"I think it's a little late for that," he said. "Jenova has already come to our planet, and shown by their actions that they cannot be trusted. They tried to make slaves of us all. We're certainly not going to take your word for it that it won't happen again."

"We only turned against you humans when you allied yourself with the Cetra," Jinn replied. "With the losing side. It's still not too late to change your mind. There are many benefits to working with us instead of against us."

Cloud laughed humorlessly.

"Said the spider to the fly," he retorted. "No, we've seen your idea of benefits. We're not going to be taken in. What, suddenly you're outnumbered and you want to negotiate?"

Jinn's hand shot out again. Cloud leaped to the side, just barely avoiding the blow. He brought the Chadara weapon up.

"Outnumbered by the likes of you is hardly outnumbered," Jinn said, looking at Cloud with disdain. "I was merely making a good faith effort to give you a chance to join the winning side. As I said before, Jenova and humans have no need to fight. Any reasonable creature knows that peaceful cooperation is better than fighting."

"Give it up, Jinn," Reeve said. "No one's going to join you. If you're going to win, you're going to have to beat us all. And even if we lose, we're not going to make it easy for you."

"Oh really?" Jinn said. He paused for a minute, looking at them closely again. "That's very foolish of you. There are many things Jenova can give you. Have you ever once even stopped to look ahead, at what life has in store for you? I don't think so. You walk through life, the whole time with your eyes closed, because you are afraid. Let me open them for you for just a minute. Let me show you what life has planned for you, if you continue on your current course."

Reeve frowned, not understanding what Jinn was talking about, thinking this was just some kind of delay tactic. A strange mist seemed to form in front of his eyes. Although he felt no pain, he tried to cry out a warning that Jenova was launching some kind of attack, but he seemed to have lost the power to speak. The room seemed to be fading away around him, as if he were falling asleep while wide awake. For a moment he felt panic rising up in him, but then his vision came back into focus. He looked around slowly. He was no longer in the generator chamber beneath the mountain. He was in another place, a place he recognized immediately. It was Aeris' church in Ifalna.

Standing beside the altar, only a few feet from him, was Aeris. A pink bow held her hair, but her dress was white and sleeveless, perfectly offsetting her slender arms. Light was streaming through the window above the altar, falling on her like a mantle, producing a visible aura that shined all around her. Her back was toward him, her long chestnut brown hair glowing in the radiance. Though she was standing, her head was bowed, as if in prayer. He couldn't help but smile. She was a vision, closer to an angel than anything on earth.

As if sensing his presence she turned toward her. For a moment their eyes met, and for the first time he felt a hint of uneasiness. Her face was stern.

"I'm leaving you," she said.

It was as if someone had driven a knife into his stomach. He looked at her face, but she was gazing past him, as if looking at something he couldn't see.

"I've thought about it for a long time," she continued. "I realize now that this was a mistake. I've tried to make it work, I really have, but the truth is, we are just too different. I thought I loved you, but I realized some time ago that I was just fooling myself. You know how I felt when I was younger, I didn't have the heart to hurt anyone. It was because of that that I told you I loved you. I've tried to make it work since, out of loyalty, but I can't do it any longer. I can't keep fooling myself."

Reeve took a step toward her, and was surprised to see her step back.

"Aeris, please..." he began, but she held up her hand.

"It's too late to say anything," she said. "This has been a long time coming. You don't know how many sleepless nights I've spent over it. Maybe it's me, maybe because I'm weak. I need someone strong Reeve, someone who can take care of me. Someone who can hold me in their arms and I can feel safe. You're not that person, Reeve, much as you try to be. I made a mistake, I admit it, but is it right to have to pay for it the rest of my life?"

Reeve stared at her, too stunned to reply. Was this the Aeris he knew, the one who was so kind, so loving to everyone and everything she met? He had never heard her speak like this, never heard her complain or say a bad word about anyone. But now he looked into her eyes and saw the face of a stranger. How could she have changed so much and him not notice?

"Aeris.. it...it doesn't have to be that way. We can work it out, I can change," he stammered.

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "It's too late. You can't change who or what you are, no matter how much you try. I know you care, but sometimes even caring isn't enough. There's been an emptiness inside me my whole life, and emptiness that can't be filled. I'm searching for something, and I don't know what it is."

"I'll help you search for it," Reeve managed to say, despite the dryness of his throat.

"You can't," she said. "All you can do is hold me back. I need to fly free Reeve. Maybe it's because of my Cetra blood, I don't know, but I can't stay here with you, and you can't come, because if you do, I'll never be able to find what I'm looking for."

Reeve shook his head slowly, not knowing what to say, thinking desperately for anything, any words that might make her change her mind. She was his whole life, didn't she realize that? He couldn't bear the thought of living without her.

"I can't believe you can say this to me, after all we've been through..."

"It's not easy for me, but I have to," she replied. "I was afraid it would be difficult for you to let go. I was going to just leave without talking to you, but Elmyra said you deserved at least this, and I suppose it's true. But there's no sense in dragging it out any longer. I have to leave Reeve. I have to leave now."

And with those words she strode purposefully past him. She held her head rigid, not looking back, while Reeve felt his heart breaking.

"Aeris, please don't leave me!" he called out, his voice filled with anguish.

She hesitated for just a second, one foot faltering. But then she resumed her walk, each step filled with resolve. A moment later she was gone, and Reeve felt his world crashing down around him. His face pale, his breathing shallow, he stood there as the only thing that was ever important to him walked out of his life forever.

"Aeris!" he called out. His mind screamed to run after her, to stop her. This couldn't be real. He couldn't let her go, it couldn't be too late. She couldn't have stayed with him all this time without feeling something for him. There had to be a way to make her see that. There had to!

He ran to the door, stopping as he stepped outside, looking down the road quickly. There were many people strolling by this time of day, some of them stopping to look at him curiously. He ignored them, looking around helplessly. He had only hesitated a few moments, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Aeris!" he yelled, not caring who else might hear, or what they might think. "Aeris, where have you gone? Come back, come back to me. Please!"

There was no answer but the echoes of his own voice. He found himself falling to his knees in anguish. He buried his face in his hands, the torment in his heart unbearable. She was gone, and she had left only despair.

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Aeris looked around, a curious expression on her face. Her surrounding had changed dramatically. She was in her church, her church in Ifalna. She was alone, the others had vanished along with Jinn and the room they had stood in. A light caught her attention. She looked at the window to see the flickering yellow glare of fire outside. She could hear the rumble and shouts of a crowd.

She frowned, wondering what was going on. Along with the shouts she could hear screams and the clash of weapons. There was a battle going on outside, a battle in Ifalna. How could that be?

She took a step toward the window, but stopped and turned toward the door as someone entered. She saw Elmyra looking at her.

"Mother, what is going on?" she questioned, running over to her.

"You have to leave, Aeris," Elmyra said slowly.

Aeris frowned. It didn't take her Cetra senses to see that Elmyra was extremely upset.

"Leave? Why?"

"You know why," Elmyra said quickly. "I know you said you would never leave. I know you've done nothing wrong, but you have to go. It's the only way we can save what's left of Ifalna."

Aeris looked at her, bewildered and shocked at her words.

"I don't understand," she said. "What is happening?"

Elmyra shook her head.

"I know it doesn't make sense. I'm so sorry it had to come to this. I remember how thrilled you were to come back here, to repopulate the ancient Cetra city, the city of your people. I remember how filled with hope we all were. I remember when you completed this church, and how you said it would be a place of healing, and how you made it exactly that."

Elmyra looked around with a helpless expression.

"But even then there was talk. Rumors from other cities, about how it had been thought the Cetra were gone, and that it was better that way. How this was not the Cetra's planet, and that they had no right to be here. No right to spread non human customs, no right to spread their own brand of religion."

Aeris shook her head.

"You know it wasn't like that," she said. "Everyone who joined us came of their own free will."

Elmyra nodded.

"Of course," she said. "But that didn't matter to them. By rebuilding the City of the Ancients you were challenging them, whether you meant to or not. They began spreading rumors about us, about the Cetra. There was some concern, but you told us to ignore them, that it was only talk."

A loud explosion from outside made them both flinch.

"But talk can be a very powerful thing," Elmyra continued. "Even outright lies can begin to be believed, if no one stands against them. I know you were only trying to do the right thing, I know you were trying to stay above the fray, but without a voice to champion our cause, city after city turned against us. But even the most pessimistic of us never thought it would come to this, that they would gather together and attack us without warning."

Aeris brought her hand up to her chest, her face pale.

"How could this happen..." she said softly.

"I'm sorry, Aeris," Elmyra replied. "I know you only wanted to help people. I know you wanted to make Ifalna a city of healing. But you didn't count on the jealousy and pettiness of others."

Aeris slowly walked over to the window, hardly believing this could be happening. She looked out to see people running by. Another explosion rocked the street, throwing some of those outside to the ground. Some got up and started running again, others remained still.

Was this the result of her dreams? Was this what her legacy would be? More killing, more death, and all because of her?

"We're hopelessly outnumbered," Elmyra said urgently from behind her. "It's just a matter of time. You have to leave, there's no other choice. Cloud told me to get you out of here, before..."

Aeris turned around, a stab of fear entering her heart at Elmyra's sudden hesitation.

"Before?" she questioned. "Before what?"

Elmyra did not speak for a few moments, just stood there in silence. A silence that was deafening.

"They...they tried to make a stand down by the lake," she said, seeming to force the words from her mouth. "But the line didn't hold. Cloud went to their assistance, to help stem the breakthrough."

Elmyra faltered again. She lowered her head.

"He was killed," she said. "Torn apart by the mob. There were just too many..."

She couldn't go on. Aeris stood as if turned to stone. It was impossible. Elmyra had to be mistaken.

"No," she said. "I don't believe it."

Elmyra took a deep breath and lifted her head.

"You have to be strong," she said. "Many terrible things have happened, but you don't have time to grieve now. With his last breath he bought you some time. Don't waste it."

Aeris didn't know what to do, what to say. She felt tears stinging her eyes. She opened her mouth, but no words came out. She stepped forward, flinging her arms around her mother. Elmyra cried out in pain and stepped back. Aeris looked at her in shock. She glanced down at her hands and saw they were stained with blood.

"Mother!"

"It...it's all right," Elmyra said, and for the first time Aeris realized that her halting speech was not from grief alone. "Don't be concerned about me. You've got to save yourself."

"Oh mother," Aeris said again, her heart pounding in her chest. She had thought her world shattered that there could be fighting in the streets of her beloved city. But now, Cloud dead, her mother...this was worse than she could comprehend.

"I can't leave without you," she said, her voice filled with anguish.

"You must," Elmyra said, and suddenly she stumbled, and would have fallen had not Aeris been there to steady her. For the first time Aeris noticed how pale her face was, and the laboring of her breath. Even with Aeris support, she slowly sank to the ground.

"You must go," she repeated, looking up at Aeris with pleading eyes. "Hurry. Leave me. It's your only chance to save yourself."

Aeris shook her head, trying to protest, but no words came out. There were no words to describe the grief that filled her. She pulled her mother closer to her, holding her, squeezing her tightly, as if by doing so she could protect her.

"You've got to hold on," she whispered. "Please mother. I need you."

The shouts outside were louder now, sounding as if they were coming from the street right outside. But Aeris was no longer listening. She clutched her mother, thinking of nothing else, listening to her soft breathing, feeling the faint rise and fall of her chest against her own body, until it went still.

Aeris pulled her mother closer still, sobbing uncontrollably. It was too late, too late for everything. All her plans, all her dreams had come to naught. She had been resurrected, had been given a second chance, and had ended up destroying everything she held dear. How she wished it had never happened. How she wished she had never been born!

Her mother's body slid to the floor. Aeris fell upon it, her bitter tears mixing with her mother's blood, knowing this death would torment her for the rest of her short and miserable life.

~*~

"Push!"

Tifa blinked in the stark light. A figure stood in front of her, a tall man, a white lab coat, the details lost in the glare of the lights around her. She was lying down, sweat covered her brow. She felt exhausted, and in pain.

There were others nearby, she realized as her eyes focused. Two women in white uniforms. Nurses? She blinked again, turning her head to cut down on the glare. She was in a hospital room, but what were they doing to her?

She felt a wave of pain course through her unexpectedly. She cried out and felt a hand grip her arm. She turned the other way to see Cloud looking down at her.

"Just hang in there a little bit longer Teef. It's almost over."

The waves of pain coursed through her, welling up from her abdomen. The doctor bent down, his hands under the surgical gown that partially covered her.

"C'mon, push, keep it up!" he said.

Tifa's hand clamped down on Cloud's arm as the pain increased. She looked from the doctor to the nurses back to Cloud, who was smiling at her reassuringly.

My god, she thought, I'm in labor!

"Breathe!" she heard Cloud say.

She realized that she had tightened up her muscles, straining against the pain. She tried to will herself to relax, but it was difficult. She found herself wishing it would stop, telling herself that if she held on for a moment more, the contraction would subside, but long minutes seemed to drag by, and there was no end to it. How much longer could this torture go on? She found her fingers digging deeper into Cloud's arm.

"Oh god I can't take it," she said through clenched teeth.

She felt Cloud run a cool rag across her brow.

"Just a little longer," she heard him say.

Tifa gritted her teeth and held on. The cool cloth had helped just a little, but the pain had not subsided. She tried to think about something besides the pain, to abstract herself from it, but it was no good. She couldn't focus on anything else. And then suddenly, as fast as it had come, the pain began to diminish.

She let out a puff of air, falling back onto the bed. Even with Cloud keeping her cool, her whole body was drenched in sweat.

"They don't call this labor for nothing," she managed to gasp out.

Cloud smiled and patted her arm reassuringly.

"It shouldn't be too much longer now," she heard the doctor say. "Let's see if everything is positioned properly."

He bent down, disappearing from her view, but she could feel him.

She looked at Cloud, and in spite of her pain and exhaustion, managed to smile at him.

"We're having a baby," she said.

Cloud nodded.

"Ow!"

She looked down to see the doctor jerk backward, clutching his hand.

"What is it?" one of the nurses said.

The doctor stood there for a moment looking at his hand with a frown on his face.

"I don't know," he finally said. "Something sharp cut my finger."

"What?" the nurse said. "How could that be?"

The doctor shook his head.

"I don't know," he said slowly.

"What's going on?" Cloud asked.

The doctor looked over at him and shrugged.

"It's nothing," he said. Then he looked at Tifa. "Everything's fine. Just keep it up."

Before anyone could say anything more Tifa felt another contraction coming on. Again she tried to get herself to relax, and again it proved impossible. This one seemed to go on even longer than the one before. She tried to stay calm, she tried to relax, she tried to breathe, but soon she found her muscles tightening, in spite of all she could do. She clenched her teeth again, awash in pain. It was agonizing, excruciating, and it went on and on.

She turned toward Cloud, a look of desperation on her face.

"The pain," she managed to say between gasps. "I can't stand it."

Cloud looked over at the doctor.

"Isn't there something you can give her?" he asked.

The doctor seemed preoccupied.

"It won't be much longer. We've come this far, let's just try for a little bit more," he managed to say.

Cloud looked doubtfully at Tifa. Her face was red and he could see the agony in her eyes. Tifa grabbed his arm once again and shook her head.

"There's something wrong," she said, in tears now. "This can't be normal. It can't hurt this much!"

Cloud looked at the physician again.

"You've got to help her!" he demanded. "She's in pain."

"A few seconds more," the doctor replied, engrossed in what he was doing. "I'll try to help you along."

He bent forward again. Tifa just stared up at the ceiling, trying to endure the endless agony for as long as she could. How long had this contraction been going on now? It seemed like forever. It had to end soon. It just had to! She felt like she wanted to scream.

And then she heard one.

One of the nurses stood with her hands over her mouth, a look of horror on her face. The other was the one who had screamed. There was a crash as a tray fell to the floor. The doctor jerked back, crying out and clutching his hand again. Tifa felt something wet splash across her face. She could see blood flying from the doctors hand, running from the spot where two of his fingers had been.

The nurse screamed again, then scrambled back, stumbling for the door. The other one stood rooted in place. The doctor was just looking at his hand in shock. She heard an exclamation from Cloud beside her. For a moment she felt relief from the pain as shock overcame it.

"What is it?" she shouted. "What's happening?"

But even as she spoke, she knew. It was the Jenova cells, the cells that inhabited Cloud's body. They had done something to their child, something horrible. She felt her heart pounding in her chest, as if it would burst forth at any moment. Suddenly the pain returned, for one searing moment she felt as if her flesh were on fire. Before she realized what she was doing or had a chance to stop herself she screamed in pain. Then the pain was gone, replaced by a dull ache. She felt something wet slither along her leg. And then a grey slime covered tentacle slid into view from beneath her hospital gown.

Her head fell back, and she screamed and screamed and screamed.

~*~

"Are you almost ready?"

Cloud rubbed his hand against his chin, looking critically at it the mirror. After a moment he decided a shave wasn't necessary.

"I'll be done in a minute, Teef!" he called out.

He stepped back, getting a view of his whole body from the waist up. He stopped for a moment to adjust his belt buckle.

"I thought it was the woman who was supposed to take forever," he heard coming from the other room.

He grinned but did not reply. It was her fault really. If anything was out of place, she was sure to mention it and straighten it out for him. He knew she just wanted him to look his best, but it was still a bit annoying at times to have someone fuss over you like that. Just one of her little quirks. He couldn't complain though, he had plenty of those himself, and she managed to put up with all of them. He ran his hand quickly through his unkempt hair. At least she had never tried to change that. She seemed to know that that would be going over the line, and besides, he had a feeling she kind of liked it that way.

He opened the medicine cabinet and took out his toothbrush, brushing his teeth quickly. He turned on the water and rinsed out his mouth. He had just turned off the water when he noticed something in the sink. It was a single strand of hair, right beside the drain. He probably wouldn't have noticed it at all, except that Tifa usually kept the place so clean. If it would have been a blond hair, he would have just assumed it was his own, but it wasn't blond, nor brown either.

It was silver.

He reached down and picked it up, standing up straight and eyeing it carefully. A frown slowly creased his forehead. He and Tifa were too young to be going gray. They hadn't had any visitor's lately, not since Cid and Shera had been over three days ago, and neither of them had gray hair.

It was then he heard a sound that made him freeze in place. It was faint, barely to be heard, yet it was very distinct.

It was the sound of laughter.

He turned around quickly. Though the sound had been faint, he got the distinct impression the source was very close to him, perhaps even in the same room, but he looked around, and the bathroom was empty.

He felt the hair rising on the back of his neck. He stood there for a long time, completely still, just listening, but the sound did not repeat itself. Finally he shrugged.

"Must be just my imagination," he muttered.

He turned and put the toothbrush back in the cabinet. As he shut the door he heard it again, plainly now, as the speaker was standing right behind him. He jerked and turned around quickly, fists ready.

The room was empty. His eyes darted around the room. There was no way that could have been his imagination.

"Tifa?" he called out, though he knew she could not possibly be the source. It was a man's voice. An eerily familiar one.

"We are one."

Cloud stepped back, and felt a sharp pain in his side as he banged against the sink. He clenched his teeth, feeling sudden anger welling up inside him. He knew that voice, would never forget it for as long as he lived. The voice that had taunted him for so long, the voice he had finally thought himself rid of.

"Sephiroth," he hissed.

Somehow, somehow, Sephiroth had returned. He was in the house now, Cloud just knew it. He had come back, come back for what he believed was his, what he thought was part of himself. They were inexorably linked through their Jenova cells.

"You can never be free of me. I am a part of you."

Cloud looked around warily. Sephiroth was somewhere in here, in the house. They were in deadly danger, and Tifa probably wasn't even aware of it, and he was defenseless. Sephiroth could slaughter the both of them unless he acted quickly.

"Tifa, get out of the house!" he shouted. "Sephiroth is here!"

Even as he spoke he dashed into the bedroom, every moment expecting to feel the bite of Sephiroth's Masamune. His sword was propped on in the bedroom cabinet, the doors open. He dived over his bed, rolled on the ground and swept the weapon into his hand. Then he turned and sprung to his feet.

He looked up to see Sephiroth standing in the doorway, his Masamune raised over Cloud's head, and a look of triumph on his face.

The Masamune descended, the cold steel of death flashing in front of Cloud's eyes. Quick as a cat Cloud propelled his own sword upward, feeling it drive through flesh and bone. At the same time he slid to the side, letting go of his weapon as the

Masamune slammed into the floor where he had been a moment before. He rolled quickly farther to the side, then sprung to his feet, fists ready on the unlikely chance that the blow had not been fatal. He looked up and froze in horror.

The blow was undoubtedly mortal. The sword had been driven up just below the sternum, up through the chest to protrude from between the shoulder blades in the back. Tifa's face was ghostly white, and blood dripped from the corner of her mouth. A look of shock was in her eyes as she stared at the handle of Cloud's blade. She tried to speak, but no words came out. Her hand clawed at him, almost seeming to move of its own accord. She took one faltering step forward, then collapsed to the floor.

Cloud stood there staring at her in horror, the full realization of what he had just done slamming into him like a fist. For a long minute he remained motionless, almost unable to comprehend the horror of what had just happened, of what he had just done. Finally he fell to his knees beside her, shaking violently, begging for this not to be true, pounding on the ground, blinded by rage and the agony of his grief, and screaming out her name over and over again.

He shut his eyes, and when he opened them again, he stood once more in the chamber far underground, with Jinn standing before him and his friends by his side. He looked at them and saw that their faces were pale, and he suspected they had gone through something similar to what he had.

"What kind of trick was that?" he questioned sharply.

"No trick," Jinn replied. "Just a taste of what your future holds. Kind of ironic, don't you think. After all you've done, having helped save you planet, that you should be rewarded such. Seems a shame, actually. But it doesn't have to happen that way. I am more powerful than you can imagine. I can make sure it doesn't end up that way, and all you have to do is join me."

"That was just parlor tricks!" Cloud said. "How do we know that was a vision of the actual future?"

"It was," Jinn assured them. "For all of you. That is the ultimate reward you are going to receive for all of your labors."

"We don't believe you!" Tifa said.

Jinn looked at her.

"Don't you?" he questioned, staring right at her. "Answer me honestly, didn't that vision have the stamp of truth on it. Didn't you feel it, didn't you know?"

Tifa said nothing, but her face was pale from the ordeal. After a moment she turned away from Jinn.

"Tifa, he's just trying to make you loose your will to fight," Cloud said. "It's a trick. There was no truth to it. Remember, he knows your fears. He was in your mind. He knows just how to get to you."

Tifa looked at Cloud. For a moment she hesitated, then attempted a reassuring smile. She stepped over to stand beside him, as if being near him would give her strength.

She didn't say anything, but turned to face Jinn once again.

"Those were interesting visions," Aeris spoke up. "But they were only that. Not even Jenova has the power to see into the future."

Jinn's gaze stabbed toward her.

"Don't I?" he questioned. "How do you know how much power I hold? I am the culmination of thousands of years of Jenova breeding. I am far superior to anything you have ever met. The Cetra have always underestimated us. That was your biggest failing."

"It might have been my people's, but it is not mine," Aeris said quietly.

"You're not going to get us to join you," Reeve said.

Jinn did not even look at him.

"So be it," he said. "It is as I would have suspected. I had some hopes for you humans, but I see it is pointless. You have been too long with the Cetra, have been contaminated by them beyond repair. You leave me no choice but to have you join them in oblivion."

Jinn pulled himself up, suddenly seeming to become much taller than the young boy he appeared. When he opened his mouth, the words rang in their ears.

"Jenova Prime!"

A yellow light began to glow around Jinn. It swirled around him, forming a mist. The mist grew thicker quickly, and it almost seemed as if Jinn was dissolving into it. His body slowly seemed to be fading, molecule by molecule being taken away, draining into the mist around him. Soon the mist filled the room, and Jinn had faded away completely.

"See now the true power of Jenova!" a voice shouted, seeming to come from all around them. The mist filled the room now, swirling and spinning, flecks of yellow light flashing through it. Suddenly some of the points of light drew together, coalescing into a ball of golden light that suddenly shot forward, hitting Aeris with a clap of thunder and slamming her to the floor.

Cloud shot the Chadara weapon as the mist where the ball of light had come from, but it passed harmlessly through it.

"What's happening?" Tifa said, obviously unnerved.

"It's become this mist," Cloud replied. "I don't know whether our weapons will be able to hurt it."

Jenova Prime's laughter filled the room around them.

"So how are we supposed to fight it?" Tifa cried out.

Cloud shook his head.

"I don't know, but we have to find some way."

He glanced over at the others. Reeve was helping Aeris to her feet.

"Is she all right?" he called out.

"I'm okay," Aeris said.

A flickers of light drew together again.

"Look out!" Cloud shouted.

Reeve pushed Aeris to the side again as a ball of light flashed past them.

Cloud fired again, but it seemed to have no effect.

"Damn," he yelled.

"It seems to be after Aeris," Tifa pointed out.

"He probably thinks she's the biggest threat," Cloud replied. "Reeve, try to protect her!"

Reeve nodded, pushing Aeris up by the wall and standing in front of her.

Cloud stared at the mist around them. He fired at random, but the mist seemed completely insubstantial. How could they fight an enemy like this?

The lights sudden drew together again. Quickly Cloud turned and fired. The ball of light exploded instantly on contact with the blast from the Chadara weapon. At the same time Jenova cried out.

"I got it!" Cloud yelled triumphantly.

"Cloud, look out!" Tifa yelled.

Even as she spoke the lights formed balls of fire in half a dozen places around the room at once. Cloud was about to fire at one when he felt something slam into him from behind. He tumbled across the floor, hearing the blasts of other fireballs. He pulled himself to his feet, ignoring the burning pain in his limbs, and looked around to see that all the others had been hit as well.

The laughter roared around them once more.

"Your attempts to defend yourselves are useless," the Jenova voice boomed. "You have no concept of my true power. You have had a taste of fear in your visions, but now I will make it a reality. I have looked into your minds, and I have chosen a suitable vessel. Behold now the instrument of your destruction!"

The yellow flickers of light suddenly started spinning around the room, faster and faster. Cloud kept his weapon ready, prepared to fire at any that seemed to form into a larger mass. But this time it seemed as if all the flickers were spinning

faster and faster toward the center of the room, closing in on one another until it seemed as if all of them had joined into one large mass. The light was now so bright they could barely look at it. And then, it suddenly took on form. The shape of a man appeared in the light, becoming more substantial by the second. Cloud felt a shiver of fear, and the hot rage of anger at the same time as the figure became more and more recognizable, and Cloud knew that he would have to face his old foe once again.

Sephiroth stood in the center of the room, looking around slowly. The mist had faded away, and behind Sephiroth, Jinn had reappeared. He looked once more the young boy that had known the entire trip, but when he spoke, it was the booming voice of Jenova that came out of his mouth.

"I have looked in your minds. I have reached into the lifestream and brought back that which you fear most. This is no vision. Not this time. The man before you is real, held here by my will, infused with my power, a hundred times stronger than he once was. Look now into the face of death!"

Jinn laughed one more time. Then he turned to look at Sephiroth.

"Kill them all!" he commanded.