

CHAPTER XXXIII: FINAL FAREWELL

"Ellengio?"

Aeris waited patiently, but the Ancient did not respond, nor even turn toward her. He just sat there looking out over the ship on the ledge below them.

Aeris came up beside him and sat down.

"I'm sorry," she said.

For a moment he still didn't speak. Finally he turned and looked at her.

"You have no need to apologize," he said. "You did what you thought was right. There is no dishonor in that. I don't blame you. It's too late for that now. Right or wrong, the generator has been activated and Shinialyn is cut off...forever."

Aeris looked up at the clear blue sky.

"Forever is a long time," she said.

Ellengio looked at her, and for the first time since the reactivation of the generator, she saw him smile.

"The optimism of youth," he said. "Yes, forever is a long time. No one knows what the future holds. The world changes. And if you don't adapt to that, you are left behind. I suppose that is what happened to us Cetra. I don't blame you for what you did, Aeris, though I don't agree with it. But it's over now. I was never much of one to dwell on the past. Our race has come to its end. I have no choice but to accept that. But it's time now to look to the future."

He stood up and gazed out into the desert, a thoughtful look on his face.

"The Chadara are a good people," he stated. "The Cetra and Jenova made their own bed, and you could say whatever they got they deserved. But the Chadara had nothing to do with this. They just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, really. They were the only true innocents here."

Aeris stood up beside him but said nothing.

"They are an intelligent people," Ellengio continued. "They should have had a fine civilization here. But now I fear this war between Jenova and the Cetra has nearly destroyed them. Who knows how long it will take for them to even return to their former level, much less advance beyond that? They could use all the help they can get."

Aeris nodded slowly, then turned toward him suddenly and gave him a probing look.

"You're planning on staying here, aren't you?" she asked.

Ellengio paused for just a moment, then nodded.

"The Cetra were the reason Jenova came here, the reason so much harm was done," he said. "It would be fitting, don't you think, then, if it was a Cetra who gave them a hand reconstructing? It's the least I could do, really. It's the least the Cetra could do. And maybe, just maybe, I can make up, just a little bit, for what we did to them."

Aeris was silent for a moment. This was something she hadn't expected. But the more she thought about it, the more sense it made to her. This was more like the Ellengio she had come to know.

"You're a good man, Ellengio," she said.

"Perhaps," he replied. "I just think it would be better this way. Besides, I've a feeling it would be better if we parted ways now. I've a feeling most of your companions will not be as forgiving as you are."

Aeris conceded the point with a curt nod.

"I will still miss you," she said.

"And I you," he replied. "There was so much I wanted to discuss with you. It seems that every moment we spent together was hectic. We never really got a chance to just sit down and talk."

"I know," Aeris said, nodding in agreement. "I would have liked that."

"When are you leaving?" he asked.

"As soon as Cid is done with the preparations," Aeris replied. "It shouldn't be long now. I really should go down and give them a hand."

"Yes, well, don't let me stop you."

Ellengio turned away and looked out at the horizon. Aeris stood there for a moment looking at him. Somehow, she thought there was more she could say. Ellengio seemed to sense her hesitation.

"Go on," he said. "The Cetra's time is over. The humans are your people. You said so yourself. You belong with them."

Still Aeris hesitated. But she realized there really wasn't much else she could say.

"Good luck, Ellengio."

"Good luck to you too, Aeris," he replied. "I wish you well."

Aeris turned and walked slowly back down the ridge. She looked back once to see him still staring out at the plain far below. Even though she didn't agree with what Ellengio had done, had tried to do, she still couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He had only done what he thought was best for the Cetra. She could hardly blame him for that.

Most of the others were busy loading supplies into the ship. Cid stood by Reeve, who was looking over a clipboard. The others stood by as Cloud picked up the last of the crates to be brought on board.

"Reeve, where should we put this?" he asked.

"In storage bay two," Reeve replied.

"I don't know why we need all these supplies," Yuffie said. "We came with more than enough. We certainly didn't use half of what we brought. This is just a waste of time."

"Oh stop your complaining," Cloud chided.

"Don't be too hard on her," Elena contributed. "At least she's giving us a hand, unlike Mr. sore back over there."

Yuffie looked over at Reno, who was sitting in the shade of the spaceship, out of earshot.

"Yeah, like he was anymore beat up than the rest of us," Elena said sarcastically.

"Ellengio is going to stay," Aeris said.

The others looked at her in surprise. Cloud stopped and put the crate he was holding down.

"Stay, as in here?" Yuffie said.

Cloud frowned.

"What is he up to?" he asked suspiciously.

"He's not up to anything," Aeris replied. "He wants to help the Chadara. He says it's the least he could do."

Cloud and the others still looked skeptical.

"You sure he's not up to something?" Cloud asked candidly. "How do you know he's not going to just wait for us to leave and then try to shut down the generator?"

"You know he can't do that," Aeris replied. "The lifestream is protecting it. He can't get to it anymore. No one can."

"You don't know that for sure," Cloud replied, still not convinced.

"Cloud, he's not going to cause any trouble. He's only staying to help the Chadara."

"Or so he told you," Cloud reminded her.

"And I believe him," she said, a bit defensively.

Cloud shook his head.

"Aeris, we all know how trusting you can be. And there's nothing wrong with that. But sometimes...well...just look at his track record! How are we supposed to trust him now?"

"So what are you saying?" Aeris replied. "That you won't let him stay? I don't see how you can prevent it."

"We can hog tie his ass and dump him in the hold," Cid suggested.

"I think that would be a very bad idea," Aeris replied. "And quite impossible too, if he didn't want you to. In spite of all that happened, he didn't fight us, I'd like to remind you. And no matter what you may think of him, he's still a Cetra, and I don't think you'd want to."

"Well, that may be, but I still don't think it's a good idea to let him stay," Cloud said. "We came here to finish this. To be sure that we would never have to worry about Jenova again. How can we do that if he stays?"

Zack and Roshnialu appearing coming up the slope with a group of Chadara.

"What's up?" Zack questioned.

"Ellengio says he's going to stay here," Elena told him.

Zack looked back and forth between them.

"Cloud thinks it's a very bad idea," Aeris stated.

Zack paused for a moment.

"I could imagine you would think so. But..."

He paused, first looking at them, then at Roshnialu. It became obvious he had something on his mind.

"But what?" Yuffie said impatiently.

"But..." Zack said, then paused again. Once more he looked at Roshnialu. "But I'm going to stay too," he said finally.

"What?" Cloud and Aeris both exclaimed together.

Zack looked as if he had been expecting just such a response.

"Zack, you can't be serious," Cloud said. "I can understand Ellengio. Earth isn't his planet. Not really. I can understand him wanting to be close to Shinialyn, even if he can't get there himself. But you, Zack, earth is your home, not Grouchoon."

Aeris stepped forward.

"I can understand you wanting to stay," she said, glancing over at Roshnialu. "But is that really what you want to do? You know Roshnialu would be welcome to come back with us."

"I know," Zack replied. "But this is her home. She has ties here. And they need her. They need her wisdom and strength to rebuild. She can't leave now."

"But earth is your home," Cloud said.

"I don't have a home," Zack replied. "Not really. Ever since I lost my memory, there has been nothing left for me on our planet. All this time I've been chasing a phantom, the ghost of my former life. This is a chance for me to start anew. No one knows me here. I have no past on this planet. There aren't any old ghosts here to come back to haunt me."

They were all silent for a moment. Aeris could hardly believe that Zack would be staying behind as well. She wanted to ask him again if he was sure, almost didn't want to believe what he was telling them. But she could tell just by the look on his face that he had made up his mind.

"I can't believe it," she heard Tifa say. "Zack, are you sure?"

Roshnialu came up beside him and he took hold of her hand.

"Yes," he replied. "There is no doubt, not anymore. But this is not a time to be sad. For the first time since I can remember, I'm truly happy. This is my place now."

Aeris stepped forward. She didn't want to leave Zack behind, but she also somehow knew that he was right. This was the best thing for him. She placed her hand on his arm, then slipped her arms around him and hugged him.

"I'll miss you," she said. "But I'm happy for you too."

He looked down at her, smiling. Then he kissed her goodbye.

"I'll never forget you," he said. "For a long time, you were the one thing I had to hold on to. Thank you, Aeris."

Aeris nodded, then turned away, the full realization of what he was saying finally sinking in. There was little likelihood they would ever see each other again. She walked away, tears forming in her eyes.

Cloud stepped forward, and he and Zack looked at one another for a moment. He put out his hand, and Zack took it and pulled him closer, and the two embraced. Then Zack stepped back.

"I'll miss you too," he said. "I don't remember much about our friendship, but I know it was important to both of us."

Cloud just nodded slowly, at a loss for words, torn between sadness and happiness for his long lost friend. Finally he managed to speak.

"Good luck, buddy."

Each of the others came forward to wish Zack luck. When they were done Zack spoke again.

"Well, I was going to give you a hand getting ready for the trip, but it looks like you're just about done."

"Yeah," Cid said. "Just this one crate to go and we'll be all set."

"I bet you can't wait to get back," Zack said.

"Yeah," Cloud said, but his voice was strangely ambivalent.

For a moment there was an awkward silence.

"Well, no sense in dragging this out," Zack broke it. "I've said my piece. I wish you all well. Now you better be on your way. The sooner you're safe on your way back, the better I'll feel."

One of the Chadara had been looking them over carefully. Now he stepped forward until he stood in front of Elena.

"Hooman," he said.

Elena stared at him for a moment, then her face brightened.

"Winslow!" she exclaimed. "Hey everyone, it's Winslow!"

"Winslow? Who the hell is Winslow?" Yuffie questioned.

"He's the Chadara that saved Elena's life," Cloud replied.

"And his name is Winslow?" Yuffie said.

"That's not his real name," Elena said. "We just called him that."

Roshnialu came over and spoke rapidly to Lai Li.

"Roshnialu says his name is Donalis," Lai Li said.

"Donalis? That's the guy that helped us in Darius," Cait said.

"Yeah, he's kinda the unofficial leader of the revolt," Lai Li said.

Donalis spoke again, looking at Elena

"On behalf of all the Chadara, he wants to thank us all for everything we've done. He says they'll never forget us, especially you, Elena."

Elena looked at him for a moment, her face showing both happiness and embarrassment.

"And we won't forget you either, Win..uh, Donalis," she said. "And I don't think I ever properly thanked you for saving my life."

She leaned forward and kissed the Chadara on the cheek. He just looked at her curiously.

"All right," Cid agreed. "Let's get this crate aboard and get the hell out of here."

"Just one more thing," Cloud said, looking at Zack once more. "I probably don't have to say this, but as long as you're staying, do you think you could keep an eye on Ellengio?"

"Cloud," Aeris spoke up.

"Don't worry," Zack said. "You know I'm as suspicious of him as you are. Roshnialu and I will make sure he doesn't cause any trouble."

Cloud nodded, feeling a little better about the whole thing now.

"All right then."

He lifted the crate again, and without another word they all piled into the ship. Cid made a few final preparations, and then announced they were ready to go. They looked out the front windshield to see Zack and Roshnialu still standing where they left them. Surprisingly, Ellengio had come up to stand beside them. They all waved one final time. Then they turned to move off to a safe distance.

"I can't believe we're leaving them behind," Aeris said.

"Yeah," Cloud agreed. "But he's happy, that's the important thing. I hope everything works out for them. Roshnialu seems like a very unusual woman. I would have never thought she was his type. Seems Zack has a taste for the exotic."

"And what's wrong with that?" Aeris asked.

"Nothing at all," Cloud replied.

"All right, let's get this show on the road," Cid announced. "Everyone, strap yourselves in and prepare for takeoff."

The others did as they were told. Soon they all felt the dull reverberation as the engines came to life. The sound quickly rose to a loud roar.

"Here we go!" Cid exclaimed.

Suddenly the entire rocket ship shuddered. Aeris felt her hands involuntarily tighten on the seat as the ship began to move. With surprising speed the rocket accelerated, until they all felt themselves being pushed back in their chairs. Aeris tried to look out the front windshield, to catch a glimpse of the planet below them, but all she could see was sky. The ship climbed steadily for some time, and for a long time it seemed as if they were motionless, the ever changing sky in front of them, and only the tug of the g forces giving away the fact that they were moving at all. But eventually the blue sky in front of them darkened into the black of space. Soon after the g force suddenly faded away, as Cid cut the engines.

"Okay," he said. "We're on our way home. You can all get up now if you want. As soon as we get far enough away from the planet, we can use the black materia again."

Aeris got up out of her seat and immediately walked back to the observation room. She sat down on the couch there, looking out into space. She couldn't see either Shinialyn or Grouchoon from this position, for both were behind them, hidden from view by the bulk of the spaceship, but she could once more hear the sounds of all the other planets. She sat in silence, not moving, just absorbing it all. She didn't think she had ever heard anything as beautiful.

And that was just how Reeve found her about an hour later. He came in as quietly as he could, but she turned as soon as he entered. He came over and sat beside her.

"It's almost time to use the black materia," he said. "Are you just about ready?"

"I suppose," Aeris replied. "Although I'm a little nervous about it. Last time Ellengio did most of the work. I hope I'm up to it."

"I do too," he replied, looking at her thoughtfully. "Is there any chance something could go wrong?"

"I don't know," Aeris said honestly. "If I can't summon the wormhole, then we'd obviously be stuck here. But if you meant something else, something even worse, like getting lost somewhere in the universe, I don't think so."

"I guess that was kinda what I meant," he replied. "It seems like we've been gone forever. I'm starting to get homesick, I think. It would be a shame if something happened now, after it's all over."

"Yes," she replied. "But don't worry, we'll be fine."

He looked closely at her while she gave him a reassuring smile.

"Okay, I believe you," he said finally.

They were silent for a moment.

"I can't believe Zack and Ellengio both stayed behind," Reeve said.

"I know," Aeris agreed. She looked at him for a moment before she spoke again. "You looked a little upset there after we parted. That kiss thing didn't bother you, did it?"

"No, of course not," Reeve said immediately. Then hesitated. "Well, okay, maybe a little. But that wasn't what I was really concerned with."

"Then what was it?" she asked.

Again he hesitated, looking into her green eyes.

"It was just that, well, Ellengio is the only Cetra left, and Roshnialu was half Cetra too, and they were both staying behind. I was a little worried that...well, that you might want to as well. Stay, I mean. After all, Grouchoon is probably as close to Shinialyn, the home of the Cetra, as you were ever going to get. I was just...well, worried, you know?"

Aeris rested a reassuring hand on his knee.

"You shouldn't have been worried," she said. "I never lived on Shinialyn. All my life I've lived on earth among humans. That's the only home I know, the only home I want. And the truth is, I can't wait to get back there."

Reeve nodded, obvious relief on his face.

"That's good," he said. "That's very good. Cause Grouchoon wouldn't really be my first choice of places to spend the rest of my life. Not that I have anything against it, or the people there, of course. It's just that it wasn't really my kind of planet."

"Well, you can rest easy then," Aeris said with a smile. "But would you really have stayed, if I had decided to?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," he replied. "Anyplace would be heaven for me, as long as you're there."

Aeris smiled.

"Why Reeve, if I didn't know you better, I'd think you were trying to sweet talk me."

"I'm only telling the truth," he replied.

She leaned forward and kissed him.

"I know that," she said. "And that's what I love about you."

Red suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," he said, eyeing the two of them. "But Cid says we are far enough away from the planets to use the black materia."

Aeris and Reeve both stood up.

"Okay," Aeris replied. "Do you know where Tifa is?"

"She's with Cloud in the control room," Red replied.

"Could you ask her to come to the forward cabin please?"

"Sure," Red replied, and immediately trotted back down the corridor. He found Tifa and told her of Aeris request. Tifa looked surprised.

"What does she want me for?" she asked.

Red shrugged.

"She didn't say."

Tifa nodded and walked quickly down to the cabin, wondering what was going on. She found Aeris sitting on the floor, the black materia in front of her. She looked up as Tifa came in.

"I need some help with this," she said without preamble.

Tifa looked at her in surprise.

"You want me to help?" she said. "But I don't know anything about this."

"Last time I used this Ellengio was with me, and he did most of the work. I don't know whether I can do it by myself. You've used materia before," Aeris said.

"So have we all," Tifa pointed out.

"I know," Aeris replied. "I don't know how to explain it. I just feel like I'd be more comfortable if you were with me. I'm going to need some help and we've been through so much together. So please..." she indicated for Tifa to join her.

Tifa hesitated for just a moment. She was pleased that Aeris felt that way, but she wasn't sure she was worthy of it. She had no idea what she was supposed to do. Still, if Aeris had that much faith in her, she was more than willing to try. She took her place on the floor opposite the young Ancient.

"So what do I have to do?" she asked.

"You have to think of a door," Aeris replied.

"Huh?"

"In order for this to work you have to visualize a gateway in space. I have no idea what a wormhole would look like. But it's the function, not the form that counts. So when I did this with Ellengio I pictured it as a door. Just try to think of a door, but not just any door, one you are very familiar with. One you know every detail about. Can you do that?"

Tifa paused for just a moment.

"Sure," she said. "I'll just picture the door to the bar. I know every dent on it."

Aeris nodded.

"Okay. Just keep in mind that even after the materia releases, and the wormhole forms, we still have to concentrate. The door has to stay open until the ship passes through."

"How will we know when that happens?" Tifa questioned.

"Don't worry, you will," Aeris replied. "Are you ready then?"

Tifa looked at her again. She still wasn't sure she was best choice for this.

"Yes," she said.

Aeris reached out and placed her hands on the black materia.

"Put your hands over mine," she said. "It's going to feel a little funny, but it's important that once we start you don't remove your hands until we're done."

"I understand," Tifa said. She reached out and put her hands on Aeris'. If Aeris hadn't warned her, she would have pulled away. The black materia felt like a living thing beneath them.

She looked at Aeris again, but her friend had her head bowed, her eyes closed. Tifa closed her own eyes as well. She tried to clear her mind and concentrate on the door to the bar. At first it was difficult. She found it hard to think about just one thing. In spite of her attempts to concentrate, she found her mind wandering. The vibration of this ship, even her own breathing seemed to interfere. The longer she tried and couldn't do it, the more frustrated she got.

Finally she realized that she was trying too hard. Instead of concentrating on the door, she just concentrated on trying to relax. That seemed to help, and slowly the sounds around her seemed to fade into the background. It was only then that she thought about the door.

Almost immediately, she felt sudden warmth from the black materia. She hadn't realized before how hot it was in the room. She felt sweat beading on her forehead, and for a moment, she almost lost her concentration again. But she took slow deep breaths, felt her whole body relax, and focused on the door.

Her hands felt hot now, so hot she could hardly stand it. She wondered how Aeris, whose hands were underneath hers, could continue to keep her hands on the materia. But she did not let go. Her mind was focused now, and she was determined not to lose that focus, no matter what happened.

The warmth beneath her hands continued to increase, and she could feel the power building up. She had used materia before, but it had never felt like this. Even knights of the round didn't compare to the raw power she felt now. It awed her with its strength. And scared her as well. A power like this could consume both of them, if not controlled properly.

She had thought it was hot before, but the heat increased again. Suddenly she felt burning pain shoot through her body as the power flowed through her and out of her. For just a moment she felt as if a thousand volts of electricity were coursing through her. But then, before she could even cry out, it was gone, and she knew the materia had released.

She almost opened her eyes then, feeling a rush of triumph, but she remembered what Aeris had told her. She had to continue to concentrate. The job was only half done. They couldn't relax until the ship was through the wormhole.

Sweat drenched her body now, but she wasn't thinking about it. When the materia had released, she had been sorely tempted to open her eyes. But now she thought once more about the door. The door to her bar in Kalm. They only had to hold out a little longer.

But she wondered just how much a little longer could last. It seemed to be taking forever. She felt completely spent, and it was a chore just to remain in a sitting position and not fall to the floor in exhaustion. She knew she couldn't do this much longer. What the hell was taking them so long?

Even as she thought she couldn't sit up any longer, the world suddenly convulsed around them. For a moment she felt completely disoriented, then everything faded away into darkness.

She opened her eyes to find herself lying on the floor, the black materia near one arm. Aeris was on her hands and knees a foot away, looking at her. Aeris was soaked in sweat as well, and she looked as exhausted as Tifa felt.

"How long was I out?" Tifa asked.

Aeris shook her head.

"I don't know," she replied.

"Did we do it?" Tifa asked weakly.

Aeris held out her hand.

"Let's go take a look."

Together they struggled to their feet and made their way slowly to the observation room. Cloud and Reeve were already there, along with some of the others. Cloud came over to Tifa as soon as he saw her, a look of concern on his face.

"Are you all right?" he questioned.

"I'm fine," Tifa replied, having regained a little bit of her strength. "Did we do it?"

Cloud waved his arm at the window.

"See for yourselves."

The two girls walked up the window and looked out into space. Off in the distance, but easily distinguishable, was the cloud wrapped surface of their own planet. Tifa looked at Aeris and smiled.

"We did it," she said.

Aeris put her arm around her friends shoulder.

"We sure did," she replied. "And doesn't it ever look sweet."