

CHAPTER VII: ACHY BREAKY HEART

Rude walked into the common room and sat down to have breakfast. Vincent, Cid, Cait, Red and Elena were already there. None of the others were around.

Elena looked at him as he sat down beside her.

"Reno still sleeping, I suppose?" he said.

"Actually no," she replied. "He was up early this morning. Said he wanted to take a look around. I haven't seen him since."

"Huh," Rude said. They both knew this was not typical Reno behavior.

"I wouldn't mind taking a stroll myself," Vincent said. "This place has some very interesting architecture."

"Yeah, dark and dreary, just how you like it," Cid commented.

"Well, it's certainly better than wandering around in a freezing wilderness," Elena said.

"Yeah," Cait added. "Compared to what we were doing, this is like a vacation."

"Well, it's no Costa del Sol," Cid remarked, "but at least the food is good."

"Is that all you think about?" Elena asked.

"That and aircraft," Vincent answered.

Cid just nodded.

"It is nice here," Red said. "But I suggest you don't get too comfortable. Things could change in a hurry."

"Yeah, especially when we find out that Zangan knows all about what happened to Yuffie and Staniv," Elena said.

"So you agree with Reno?" Cid said.

"Of course," she replied. "Don't you?"

Cid shrugged.

"To tell you the truth, I kind of think he's guilty myself," he admitted.

"Hey, let's take a poll," Elena responded. She stood up. "Let's see what the political landscape is like. Vincent?"

She turned to look at him.

"Much as I hate to condemn anyone with so little evidence, but my gut feeling is that he is guilty."

"Red," she said.

"I cannot say," he replied. "There is not enough evidence."

"Cop out," she said and looked at Cait.

Cait held out his arms and looked up.

"It is written in the stars," he replied. "Guilty."

"Rude," she said, turning to the last one. She couldn't help but smile. Not one not guilty.

"Not guilty," Rude said.

"What?" she said.

"Not guilty," he repeated.

"How can you say that?" she questioned.

Rude shrugged but said nothing more.

Elena had not expected that. Still, it had turned out better than she thought.

"That's four to one for guilty, with one gutless abstainment," she said, glancing at Red, who ignored her jab.

"But the others aren't here," Vincent reminded her.

"Yeah, and you know Tifa and Barret would vote not guilty," Cait added. "And Cloud said himself that he trusted Zangan."

"Yeah, but I think he just said that to make Tifa feel better," Elena responded. "I think he would vote guilty."

"You don't know that for sure," Red said.

"We all know how Reno would vote, but what about Aeris?" Cait said.

"I'm sure Miss goody two shoes would vote not guilty," Elena responded scornfully.

"Elena," Vincent said evenly. "That was uncalled for."

She turned to look at him. She opened her mouth and for a moment Rude was sure she was going to snap at him. But then she shut it. The look Vincent was giving her was not angry, but his gaze was so penetrating that it made everyone in the room uncomfortable. Rude had to turn away, even though Vincent was not even looking at him. How does he do that, he wondered.

"I'm sorry," Elena said.

There was an awkward silence.

"Well, that was fun," Cid finally said. "Looks like it broke about even. Not that it matters anyhow. Even though I might think he's guilty, that doesn't make it so. I'm afraid we just don't have enough evidence to prove it."

Elena sat back down slowly.

"Not yet we don't," she said softly.

~*~

Zangan led Tifa into a large gym. Four of his men were practicing nearby. They bowed as Zangan entered and sat down to watch the master. Tifa wasn't sure she wanted an audience.

"It's been a while since I've done this," she said, as they walked out onto the mat.

"Don't try to lull me into a false sense of security," he replied with a smile.

They bowed to one another and Zangan assumed the ready position.

"Begin," he said.

He waited until he was sure she was ready, then sprang forward and delivered a flurry of blows, but she fended them off easily. He backed off for a moment and smiled again.

"I see you remember the basics," he said. "Now let's try something a little more complicated."

He came at her again, much more swiftly. She backed off slowly, waiting for a chance to counterattack, but he never seemed to leave any opportunity to do so. She turned to the left to block a kick, but his other leg shot out at what seemed like an impossible angle, and hit her on the right side, knocking her to the ground.

He reached down and helped her up.

"Concentrate," he said.

She nodded and he attacked again. In the next ten minutes she found herself down on the mat three more times.

He reached out a hand to help her up once again.

"You seem distracted," he said. "Is there something on your mind?"

Tifa shook her head.

"No," she replied. "I guess I just have to warm up."

Just then the door to the gym opened to their right and Cloud stepped in.

Tifa smiled.

Aeris followed a moment later.

"Remember what I taught you," Zangan continued. "You have to let it..."

Tifa leaped in the air and kicked viciously at Zangan's head. He blocked the blow, but as she came down she immediately dropped to the ground and swept Zangan's legs out from under him. He fell to the ground and she sprang up to stand over him.

There was a murmur from the observers.

Zangan looked at her in surprise. He glanced over at the newcomers and burst out laughing.

"Where did that come from?" he asked. "Now that's more like the girl I taught."

Tifa extended a hand and helped him up. She saw Cloud and Aeris sit down on the mat by the entrance. Cloud gave her a thumbs up. As he did so another man entered the room.

He walked over to Zangan and bowed.

"Honored one," he said. "Your presence is required in the laboratory immediately."

Zangan nodded.

"Very well," he said.

He turned to Tifa.

"I'm afraid we'll have to cut this a little short. Duty calls."

He turned to the men who had been watching.

"Greco," he said.

One of the men stood up. Tifa recognized him as the man who had spoken to them at the beginning of the battle on their first day here.

"Greco is my second in command," Zangan said, turning to Tifa. "If you wish you can continue practicing with him. Just try not to hurt him."

With that Zangan turned and swiftly left the room.

Greco walked over to her and folded his arms across his chest.

"You think you're ready?" he asked.

"I think I've had enough for one day," Tifa replied.

"What's the matter, afraid I'll hurt you?" he challenged. "You know he took it easy on you."

She turned to look at him.

"If you're trying to make me angry enough to fight, it worked," she replied. "Let's see what you've got."

They faced each other on the mat. Tifa bowed, but Greco barely dipped his head in response. Then he launched himself at her.

He was nearly twice her size, and used his superior strength to try to overpower her. She realized immediately that he was too strong to stand toe to toe with and dodged out of his way. She launched a kick as he went by but he avoided it. He came at her half a dozen times, but each time she spun out of the way.

"What is this," he said scornfully, "a fight, or a dancing lesson?"

She said nothing as he came at her again. She dodged one more time and struck at his side. But even as she did so her foot slipped on the mat, and she fell down on one knee.

Immediately Greco was on top of her. He launched a series of brutal kicks at her head. She fended off the first three, but the fourth one got by her guard and stuck her in the face. With a cry she fell to the ground.

Although she did not see, Cloud suddenly stood up.

Greco stood over her triumphantly.

She looked up at him, in obvious pain. A trickle of blood ran from her nose.

"What's the matter," he said. "Can't take a little pain? What are you going to do now. Cry?"

She wiped the blood from her nose with her forearm and looked at him. Faster than he thought humanly possible she suddenly sprang up. She launched a flurry of punches so quickly that he barely had time to bring his arms up, much less defend himself. She flipped in the air and struck him in the chin with a kick, then dropped down and swept his legs out from under him. He went down with a crash. She jumped over him, then picked him up and dropped him on his back. She hit him with an uppercut and picked him up again. This time she brought him down so hard it made Aeris gasp. He was no longer fighting, but just lay on the ground looking at her. She stood above him and brought her fist back, concentrating all her power in it.

"Tifa!" Cloud shouted.

She looked over at him for a moment, then down at Greco, who was looking at her helplessly. For a moment more she stood over him. Then she dropped her fist, turned, and walked out of the room without a word.

~*~

Zangan entered the lab. He saw three of his security men gathered around a man in a lab coat sitting in a chair. He walked over to them.

"What's the trouble?"

One of his men stepped forward.

"We caught this man in an unauthorized area," he said. "He had set one of the instruments to overload when we turned it on."

Zangan turned to look at the man.

"Who are you working for?" he asked.

The man looked at Zangan and shook his head.

"Why should I tell you anything," he said. "You're just going to kill me anyway."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you decided on sabotage," Zangan replied.

"Somebody has to stop you," the man replied bitterly. "And it's just a matter of time before we do. There are plenty more like me out there."

"If they are all as incompetent as you then we have nothing to worry about," Zangan replied. "Things will go much easier for you if you tell us what you know."

The man looked down at the floor and did not reply.

The door to the lab opened and Quays came in. He had a pistol strapped to his hip.

"I heard that you caught a spy," he said, walking over to Zangan. He looked at the man in the lab coat. "Is this him?"

"Yes," Zangan replied.

Quays stood in front of the man.

"So what have you got to say for yourself, Mortice?"

The man looked up at Quays with hatred in his eyes.

"You're a madman," he said angrily. "This project is insane, and can only lead to the destruction of us all. It has to be stopped. And it will be."

Quays laughed.

"Stopped! By who? You? You couldn't even perform a simple act of sabotage. Who are you working for?"

Mortice stared straight ahead and did not answer.

Quays stood in front of him for a moment. Then he suddenly kicked Mortice in the face. The chair he was sitting on rocked

back and would have fallen had not one of the men standing next to it grabbed it to steady it.

Quays looked at Mortice closely.

"We can make this easy or we can make this difficult," he said calmly. "Who are you working for?"

"Renada," Mortice said.

"Ah hah, now we're getting somewhere," Quays replied. "And just where is Renada?"

"I don't know," the man replied. "I never actually met him. I just spoke to one of his agents before we came here."

"I see," Quays said knowingly. "And these other people you spoke about who are going to stop us. Who are they?"

"I don't know," Mortice said.

Quays pulled out his gun and aimed it at Mortice's forehead.

"Don't take me for a fool," he said grimly.

"I swear, I don't know," Mortice replied nervously. "I know there were some others, but they didn't tell me who they were."

"I'm not sure I believe you," Quays replied. "And that's not good for you. Are you sure you don't know anything else? Last chance."

"I've told you everything," Mortice said quickly. "They told me there were others, but they didn't tell me who just in case I got caught. I swear that's all I know!"

Quays did not move for a long time. Then he smiled slowly and lowered the gun.

"I believe you," he said. He turned away and walked toward the exit. But when he got to the door he stopped.

"Of course, if you don't know anything else, then you are not much use to us anymore, are you?"

He turned and fired. The bullet struck Mortice in the center of his forehead. He slumped down in the chair.

Zangan looked at him.

"Was that really necessary?"

"I'm just making your job easier," Quays replied. "Any other potential saboteurs might think twice before they try anything now."

He started to leave but then turned back to look at Zangan once more.

"And by the way, I may not be much of a fighter, but I'm a very good shot."

~*~

Reno looked up to see Tifa walking down the hall toward him. She strode past without a word, but he could see a streak of blood on one of her arms.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked, following her.

"Fine," she said without looking back or slowing down.

He almost had to run to keep up with her.

"Hey, slow down," he said.

"Leave me alone."

"I just wanted to say that there are no hard feelings," he persisted. "I mean, about what happened in Midgar. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones. I know it wasn't your fault. You were led on by the others."

She did not respond, just kept on walking as if she hadn't even heard him.

He grabbed hold of her arm.

"C'mon," he said, "I just want to be friends."

She turned suddenly, grabbed his arm and twisted it around behind his back. With a cry of pain he suddenly found himself slammed against the wall with her behind him.

"I don't want to be friends with you," she snarled. "As far as I'm concerned you're a coward and a murderer. You killed my friends and enjoyed it. I'm not about to forget that. And as for my being led on by the others, that's nonsense. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I willingly participated. I'm as much to blame for killing those people as if I had pressed the button myself, and if you touch me again, I'll kill you too!"

She pushed him savagely away. He fell to the floor as she walked on, not looking back. He looked at her, his face turning dark with rage.

"Stuck up bitch," he muttered.

He got up, rubbed his arm slowly, then turned and walked away in the opposite direction.

~*~

That evening Cloud beckoned Tifa over as she came into the common room for dinner.

"Are you all right now?" he asked as she sat down beside him.

"Yeah," she replied, smiling slightly. "I don't know what got into me. I could have killed that guy."

"I was tempted to myself," Cloud said. "He didn't hurt you too badly, did he?"

"No, I'm fine," she answered. She looked across the room. She could see Greco sitting at another table. She thought one of his eyes was blackened.

She saw Reno sitting at the far end of the table beside Rude. He studiously ignored her.

"I'm afraid I'm not making very many friends," she said softly.

Cloud grinned.

"Well, that's not really what we're here for, is it?" he said.

For a while they were both silent as they ate their fill.

Barret appeared and sat down on the other side of Tifa.

"I heard you kicked some guys ass," he said. "Sorry I missed it. What happened?"

Tifa shook her head.

"To tell you the truth, it isn't really something I want to talk about."

"Suit yourself," he replied. "But when the others ask me, I'm going to have to tell them something. If you don't tell me what happened I'll just have to make up my own story."

"Great," she said. "You'll probably have me fighting off ten of them."

"Blindfolded," he agreed.

"With both hands tied behind your back," Cloud added.

"Cut it out," she said, but couldn't help smiling.

Barret grabbed a plate and began to fill it.

"So have you heard if they've made any progress on the search for this Renada person?" he asked.

"No, I haven't," Cloud replied. He looked at Tifa. "Has Zangan said anything to you?"

She shook her head.

"No, but I'll ask him the next time I see him."

"Good," Cloud said. "Much as I enjoy being able to relax, we do have a mission to accomplish. I don't feel right just sitting here knowing that it still needs to be completed."

"What more can you do?" Tifa asked. "Zangan's men are looking for Renada. I'm sure they have a much better chance of finding him than we do."

"I know," Cloud said quickly. "I just don't feel right sitting here doing nothing."

"What about this experiment," Barret said. "Do you think we should be looking more into that?"

"What do you mean?" Tifa asked.

"Aeris said it was dangerous," he responded. "I know she's no scientist and can be a little ditzzy at times, but she usually has pretty good instincts about that sort of thing. And she did say the danger was inside the fortress. Do you think they really know what they are doing?"

"I don't know," Cloud replied. "And no offense to Zangan, but I'm not sure I trust this Quays fellow. It seems like he's trying too hard to hide something."

"Scientists are always worried about other people stealing their ideas," Tifa said defensively. "I'm sure Zangan wouldn't work for him if he wasn't honest."

"Maybe he has an agenda that even Zangan doesn't know about," Cloud said thoughtfully.

Tifa had no response to that. Just how much did Zangan know about what Quays was doing? Would Zangan even be able to understand if Quays explained it to him, or to any of them? That would be another thing she would have to ask him when she saw him.

Even as she thought this Zangan strode into the room. He looked around a minute until his eyes fell on her. He came over quickly.

"Mind if we have a little talk?" he said as he came up.

"Not at all," she responded. "In fact, I have a few things I wanted to ask you."

"C'mon," he said. "Let's take a little walk then."

She got up and followed him out of the room.

Cloud watched them disappear out the door.

"I was talking to the others," Barret said next to him. "Almost all of them think something's not right here."

"Even if that's true," Cloud said, "I don't think we're going to be able to convince Tifa."

He got up and walked out of the common room. When he reached the hall he looked around, but saw no sign of Tifa or Zangan. He walked down the hallway, not really paying much attention to where he was going.

He was pretty sure Quays was up to something. The real question was whether Zangan had any knowledge of it or not. He wondered how far Tifa would go in her loyalty to her old friend. What would she say if they somehow found proof that he was connected to Staniv's death. Would she still try to justify his actions? Would she try to deny it? Or would she accept it? He hoped she would listen to reason, but what if she didn't? What would she do if forced to choose between her old friend and her new?

Still, it probably wouldn't even come to that. It was quite possible that Zangan was perfectly innocent. It might even be that everything they had been told was the truth. But Cloud thought it much more likely that Quays had sent out some of his men to kill without Zangan's knowledge. If that were true, and they told Zangan, how would he react?

Cloud shook his head. The possibilities were too complicated to worry about. First find the proof, he thought, then worry about the consequences.

He found himself at the end of a corridor beside an open door leading out into the courtyard. A chill breeze blew in, but he found it refreshing. He stepped out into the courtyard and looked around.

The sky was just darkening into deep twilight, and was half obscured by clouds. He could see a few stars glinting in the spaces between. The lights in the windows of the tower to his right glowed warmly in the deepening darkness. Only one window was dark, a small one at the very top of the tower.

"Cloud."

He turned to see a marble fountain on one side of the courtyard. The water was not running in it now. Aeris sat on the

edge of it, her eyes glinting in the darkness.

~*~

Quays sat alone in the basement lab while multicolored lights played around him. He studied the instruments, then smiled to himself. The readings indicated all was ready for the next step.

He got up and walked over to the glass enclosed chamber that held the materia. He stood there for a few moments staring inside. The materia blazed with light, brightening the room with flashes of color, much brighter than they had been just yesterday. He couldn't help but stop to admire it. Amazing how such power could be so beautiful as well.

Finally, however, it was time to do more than just admire it, he thought. It was time for him to awaken that power.

He walked over to the entrance of the chamber, opened it, and slowly stepped inside.

The moment he stepped in the room he could feel the energy washing over him, even before he touched the materia. He walked over to it, not able to turn away, as if drawn by a magnet. He stood and stared into it. The colors swirled mesmerizingly, almost like a living thing.

Slowly he reached out his hands and laid them on it. The materia was warm and he felt a slight tingling sensation run throughout his body. The colors swirled excitedly around the areas he put his hands, but then calmed. He bowed his head and began to concentrate.

The materia had been flashing in some sort of natural rhythm. The colors shifting every few seconds. But now the rhythm suddenly sped up, and the lights flashed even more brightly. The colors began to blend and fade into one another, until slowly one color predominated. Quays smiled in satisfaction as the orb became a solid emerald green.

Now the materia flashed brighter still and a green mist formed in the chamber. The room grew very hot, and Quays felt himself starting to sweat, though he still did not move, for along with the heat he felt power flowing through his body, power like he had never felt before.

The mist grew around him until it filled the entire lab. Now he could see nothing but blazing green light surrounding him. The power continued to flow into him, and he let it, feeling almost drunk on it, until it filled his entire being so strongly that he thought he would explode.

Then he realized. There was a crack as if the very air had been rent asunder. The Ultima drove down toward the center of the planet, and the earth convulsed.

~*~

Zangan led Tifa to his office on the third floor of the tower. He offered her a seat once inside, but stood himself.

"I understand Greco was a little rough with you," he said.

"You asked me not to hurt him," she replied. "I didn't listen."

He smiled.

"You taught him not to be so arrogant," he responded. "It was a lesson he needed to learn."

Tifa shrugged.

"So what do you think of our little organization?" he asked.

Tifa did not answer for a moment.

"It reminds me of when I was training with you," she replied.

Zangan grinned.

"We did have a good time, didn't we?" he said slowly. The grin faded away, replaced by the sad look she had seen once or twice before.

"I never realized how much I missed you until I saw you again," he said.

"I'm sorry," she found herself saying.

"You shouldn't be," he replied quickly.

"But I am," she continued. "It was my fault that we drifted apart. I wanted so much to hurt Shinra that when you didn't agree with me I didn't want to have anything to do with you. I was such a jerk."

Zangan chuckled.

"What?" she said, looking at him.

"You've always been your harshest critic," he replied. "Don't be so down on yourself. I've found that the one's that are most driven are also the one's that are the most uncompromising. But that is what makes you the best. After all, it all worked out in the end, now didn't it?"

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

"C'mon, of course it did," he prompted. "Shinra is gone, as it should be, and now we are reunited. I'd say that worked out pretty well."

Tifa nodded but said nothing.

Zangan looked at her for a long time before he spoke again.

"I'd like you to join us," he said.

"Huh?"

"The reason I asked you here tonight was to ask you to join us," he repeated.

She looked at him in surprise. That was a request she certainly had not been expecting. She did not speak for some time.

"I don't know what to say," she said finally.

"Yes?" he suggested.

"This may seem kind of sudden, but I've been thinking about it since the first time I saw you again," he continued. "Tifa, you were my best student, it would be an honor to have you working with me again."

Tifa blushed.

"Besides, I'm not getting any younger. I can feel my skills deteriorating. No, don't try to deny it," he said when he saw the look on her face. "It won't be much longer before I won't be able to do this any more. I can't think of anyone I would be more happy to see take my place."

Tifa felt overwhelmed.

"This is so sudden," was all she could say.

"I understand," he said immediately. "You don't have to answer right away. Take all the time you want to think about it."

She was silent for a moment.

"What about the others?" she asked.

"I saw them fight," he replied. "Any, or all, who wish to join as well would be welcome."

"You make it very tempting," she said.

"So what's holding you back?"

"I'm not sure," she replied slowly. "How much do you know about this experiment Quays is performing?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Some of the others think that what Quays is doing is dangerous, and to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I disagree with them."

"What he is doing is very dangerous," Zangan agreed. "But I'm keeping a close eye on him. You don't have to concern yourself with it."

"That's not a very satisfying answer," she said.

"I'm afraid that's all I can tell you at the moment," he said. "You'll just have to trust..."

Suddenly the ground rocked beneath them.

~*~

"What are you doing out here?" Cloud asked, coming over to sit down beside her. "Aren't you cold?"

Aeris shook her head.

"Sometimes I get claustrophobic when I spend too much time indoors. It seems like ages since I felt fresh air on my face."

Aeris looked up. The clouds almost filled the sky. She could see a single star glinting above.

"You know," she said suddenly, "we've visited so many interesting places, yet it always seemed we never got to enjoy any of them. Costa del Sol, the Gold Saucer, even Icicle Inn. Wherever we were we always seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere else. I think I would have enjoyed snowboarding if we had gotten more of a chance to do it. Do you think after all this is over we could go back to Icicle Inn to do some more, this time just for fun?"

"I suppose," Cloud said, then, "You mean, just the two of us?"

Aeris looked at him for a moment before she answered.

"And...anyone else who might want to come," she said slowly.

"Yeah," he responded. "That sounds like it would be good. Would be a lot of fun, I mean. I'm sure everyone would enjoy it. Well, maybe not everyone," he finished, thinking about Cait's trials on the slopes. And Tifa had told him that Barret had not fared much better.

The inside of the fountain was covered with a sheet of ice. Cloud picked up a pebble and skittered it across the smooth surface. None of that would happen until they were finished here.

"Have you felt anymore danger?" he asked, coming back to reality.

"It hasn't gotten any worse, it that's what you mean," she replied. "But it doesn't go away. I've felt it since the moment we set foot in this place."

"Do you think it has something to do with Quays' experiment?"

"I have no proof of that, but that's my feeling," she replied. "What else could it be?"

Cloud made no reply. What else could it be indeed? Exactly what was Quays doing down there in his lab, and more to they point, why, he suddenly thought, hadn't he tried to find out?

Cloud shook his head as he realized the truth. He hadn't tried to find out because he was afraid. He was afraid the truth would implicate Zangan, and he was afraid of what that would do to Tifa.

"What's wrong?" Aeris asked, seeing the troubled look on his face.

"I'm worried that Zangan is involved in all this. Tifa thinks of him as a father. If he had something to do with Staniv's death, she'll be devastated."

Aeris looked at him for a moment.

"So you're worried about Tifa?" she said evenly.

"Yeah, sort of," he replied. "Aren't you?"

Aeris thought about it for a moment.

"Some, but she's a big girl. Even if Zangan is involved, I'm sure she can handle it."

Cloud looked at the ground.

"I hope so, but..."

Suddenly the entire courtyard shook around them. Aeris cried out as if she had been stabbed and fell to the ground.

"Aeris!" he said.

He slid off his seat and knelt down beside her. The ground still rocked for a moment with aftershocks, but then all grew still.

"Aeris, are you okay?"

She did not move. He reached down and lifted her head, turning it so he could see her face. Her eyes were open, and she seemed conscious, but she looked at him as if she did not recognize him.

"Aeris, what happened?"

She stared into space for a moment more, then shook her head and her vision seemed to clear. She looked at him and he saw fear on her face.

"Oh Cloud," she said, wrapping her arms around him. "The planet. The pain. Oh, it was horrible."

"Easy, easy, it's all over now," he said, trying to sooth her. He could feel her heart beating rapidly against his chest. What could have scared her like that? He wanted to blurt out questions, but he knew it would do no good until she calmed down. For a long time she sat there silently in his arms.

Finally she looked up at him, and her eyes were clear.

"What happened?" he said softly.

"I don't really know," she replied. "Something hurt the planet. Hurt it like I've never felt before. The planet was in agony. Didn't you hear it scream?"

Cloud shrugged.

"I don't know. I felt something, but it just might have been an effect of the earthquake. I take it that was no ordinary earthquake."

Aeris shook her head.

"No," she said. "Cloud, I'm scared. Something is very very wrong. It was almost as if someone were trying to kill the planet."

They sat in silence for a few moments longer. Cloud did not understand what was going on, but he did not doubt what Aeris was telling him. One thing was for sure, he said to himself, he was going to get to the bottom of this.

He looked at Aeris again.

"Are you all right now?"

She returned his gaze and nodded, the trace of a smile appearing on her lips for the first time. He thought it amazing how much it brightened her face. She was still in his arms, her face inches from his, her deep green eyes staring at him. He thought they had never looked so vulnerable.

"Cloud," she said softly.

"Umm."

She looked at him for a moment more, then bowed her head and rested it against his chest. He slowly helped her stand, but she stumbled slightly as she got to her feet.

"C'mon," he said, leading her back to the door. "Let's get you inside."

"What the hell was that?" Zangan questioned.

The room still shivered around them as he spoke.

"Some kind of earthquake?" Tifa suggested dubiously.

Zangan walked over to a glass framed door across the room from Tifa. He opened it up and stepped out onto a small balcony, looking around.

Tifa came up behind him. The balcony overlooked the courtyard below. It was deep twilight and the courtyard was filled with dark shadows. But even in the dim light she could see Cloud next to a fountain below her, with Aeris in his arms.

She stood stone still as her face went pale. Zangan looked at her, then out into the courtyard. Then back at her again, understanding dawning on his face.

"Tifa," he said softly.

She did not respond. She took a slow step back and her hands came up to her mouth.

"Tifa," he said again and reached toward her.

As his hand made contact she jerked violently away, then turned and ran from the room.

Zangan's hands dropped to his sides.

"Tifa," he said yet again.

~*~

Tifa stopped running when she reached the hallway. She walked quickly down the hall, trying with all her strength to control the anguish in her heart. She kept telling herself to be strong, but her legs wobbled as she walked.

She went as quickly as she could toward her bedroom, praying that she wouldn't encounter anyone. But even as she reached the last corridor before her room who should come around the corner but Reno and Rude.

Rude saw the look on her face and was instantly filled with concern.

"Tifa, what's wrong?" he said, starting over to her.

But even as he did so Reno grabbed him and pulled him back.

"Leave her alone," he said as she walked by.

"Let go," Rude said, trying to break free. "Tifa, are you all right?"

"Just trust me!" Reno said, dragging him back. "I've seen that look before!"

She entered her room and closed the door behind her. She took a deep breath and walked over to her bed. Although she strove mightily to prevent it, she felt the tears begin to roll slowly down her cheeks. She sank softly down onto the bed, and, giving in to the inevitable, began to sob uncontrollably into her pillow.

~*~

Zangan appeared suddenly as Cloud helped Aeris back inside. He had an odd look on his face. He came toward them but stopped when he saw how pale Aeris was.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Aeris nodded.

"What was that?" Cloud asked.

"What was what?" Zangan responded.

"It felt like an earthquake," Cloud said. "But there was more to it. Aeris says it hurt the planet. She felt it's agony and heard it scream."

"You heard it scream?" he said with a puzzled look on his face.

"She's an Ancient," Cloud explained. "She can feel the planet, talk to it."

Zangan nodded.

"She was hurt," he said thoughtfully. "So that explains it."

"Explains what?" Cloud asked.

"Never mind," Zangan responded. "I don't know what that was. As far as I know, it was just an earthquake. We've felt them

a few times in the past, but none that were that strong."

Cloud looked at him, and it was obvious that he was not satisfied with that explanation.

"C'mon Aeris," he said. "Let's get you up to your room so you can get some rest."

They walked past Zangan. Cloud turned to look back at him for a moment, but Zangan just seemed to be staring at nothing in particular, apparently lost in thought.

He turned back to Aeris. Whatever was going on, he was going to find out about it, no matter the consequences. He had been sitting around too long, he thought. The vacation was over.