

CHAPTER III: MAKO MADNESS

Every time Tifa visited the City of the Ancients, or Ifalna, as it was now called, she marveled at the changes. She looked around slowly as she and Cloud rode their chocobo's through the streets. The city had become so large that it could no longer be contained underground. Besides the difficulty of expanding an underground cavern, and despite the uniqueness of the Cetra structures, a lot of people preferred to live on the surface. The forests that once surrounded the entrance to the city had yielded to progress, and had been cut down to make room for the ever expanding city. Already a thriving business district had sprung up, and it seemed inevitable that the city above ground would soon exceed the size of that below.

The first time Tifa had visited the City of the Ancients, she had been struck by the almost eerie loneliness of it. She had never been anywhere where she felt more alone. Even in the company of her companions, she had still felt somehow isolated. It was as if you could almost hear the land itself crying out for the lost Cetra.

But she didn't feel that anymore. Now the streets were bustling with people, the air alive with sound. If she had been plopped down in the middle of this without knowledge of where she was, she would never have guessed. The place seemed just the opposite of what it used to feel like. It was vibrant now, and Tifa liked the change.

In the center of the newly developed area stood the small lake, the lake Tifa would never forget. She felt a pang of sadness as it came into view in front of them, but it quickly faded. The shell house was gone, replaced by a park. In the center of which stood the entrance to the 'old city' as the underground portion of the city was being called these days.

Cloud and Tifa dismounted and left their chocobo's at the public stable, which was located right beside the park. They walked around the edge of the lake, its crystal clear waters reflecting the sun and the sky above them. It seemed so long ago now that they had laid Aeris to rest here. The pain of it had faded, especially since Aeris was now back among them, but it would never be completely forgotten.

A two story latticework of wood overgrown with ivy now covered the crystal stairway that led down to the old city. The sunlight above them faded quickly away as they descended the stairs, replaced by the eerie glow of the stairway itself and the city below them. Tifa stared out at this more familiar scene. The city was much the same as she remembered it. Not many new buildings had been added here. Only a few new ones could be seen, immediately standing out because of they did not glow. The secret to Cetra construction had vanished long ago.

But in spite of that, much in the city had changed. The streets were lit up with lamps, enhancing and in some places even overpowering the Cetra glow. And the silence, the dark almost living silence she had felt the last time here was banished, replaced by the sounds of a thriving city. The place was no longer deserted. Far from it. Hundreds of people walked the streets, filled up the Inns, shopped at the stores and played in the parks. Tifa had last been here just a few months ago, yet each time she came, the city seemed more alive.

Just as the city above ground seem centered around a lake, so too the underground city also had a body of water in the center. As they approached it Tifa felt her uneasiness return. As the buildings fell away on either side she tried to avoid looking at the lake, but almost of their own accord, as if compelled by some unknown force, she found her gaze falling on the water, and the small gazebo just offshore.

It hadn't changed at all. It looked exactly the same as it had that day so long ago, that day that Tifa would never forget. That day that Aeris had died.

With an effort she forced herself to look away. She was never comfortable anywhere near that gazebo. It always brought back memories she would rather forget. It was one of the reasons they didn't come here to visit their friends as often as she would like.

It was funny, the city held such a mixture of emotions for her. Aeris had been killed here, yet she and Cloud had also been married in Aeris church, right down the road. Sometimes looking back, she thought that might have been a mistake. For all its changes, for all the time that had passed, no matter how many good things happened here, she would always associate this city with Aeris death. And no matter how much the city thrived, the ghost of the Cetra could still be felt. Perhaps they should have picked a place for their wedding that wasn't weighed down with so much sorrow.

"Are you okay?"

She looked up to see Cloud looking at her curiously. She realized she had gotten so caught up in her thoughts that her pace had slowed to a crawl.

"I'm fine," she said slowly. "It's nothing."

Cloud looked at her for a moment more, then glanced at the gazebo. It seemed he had some insight into what was bothering her, but he said nothing. They started off again, and this time Tifa kept up.

They turned a corner toward the church, and the lake fell behind them. Almost immediately Tifa's spirits lifted. She didn't even understand why the gazebo was still there. If it had been up to her it would have been torn down a long time ago. She had even mentioned it to Aeris, but the Ancient had wanted it left untouched, as a reminder, like some kind of shrine or something. Tifa didn't really agree. In fact, she couldn't see how her friend could stand to live here at all seeing that constant reminder of what had happened to her everyday. Sometimes she thought she didn't understand Aeris at all. But the decision wasn't up to her.

"There's Reeve," Cloud stated.

Tifa looked up. Aeris church was now in view. Reeve stood near the entrance. He waved to them and came over.

"Nice to see you both again," he greeted them warmly.

"You too Reeve," Tifa replied. "How are things going?"

"Could be better," he replied. Tifa couldn't help but look at him carefully. This was the first time she had seen him since Aeris had told her about the proposal. She wondered if he was referring to that or the recent trouble they had been having. Probably both.

"C'mon inside and I'll fill you in," he continued.

They followed him as he led them into the church. The first thing they noticed were some men working on one of the stained glass windows.

Reeve led them past the men and into a small office at the back of the church. He walked behind a large desk that took up most of the space in the room. The top of it was strewn with papers. He sat down heavily in a chair. From the slump of his shoulders and the lines under his eyes, Tifa suspected he hadn't been getting much sleep lately. Were things really that bad?

"Things with that new church starting to get to you?' Cloud asked. He must have seen the same signs that Tifa did, and if so, they must really be obvious.

Reeve nodded.

"Things seem to get worse every day," he replied resignedly. "I'm afraid I'm practically at my wits end. Bradford becomes more defiant every time he speaks. At first he kept the rhetoric down, possibly because he was afraid of some kind of retaliation. But of course there was none. That seems to have emboldened him. Now he's talking openly about throwing off all ties to the Cetra, about how they were evil and how Aeris and her church are trying to undermine human society."

"That's ridiculous," Tifa stated flatly.

"Of course it is!" Reeve spat out. "You and I know that. And these people should know better to. But they don't seem to see it that way. He may be an idiot, but he knows how to work a crowd. I've seen people who have been to his sermons. It's like they're mesmerized. He has a way of speaking that seems to be able to convince anyone of anything. It's some kind of twisted gift."

"And it's all anyone ever hears all day long," he continued, the words all coming out in a burst. "I've tried to make people see the truth, but it doesn't work. Most of the people here know about my relationship with Aeris, they think she's turned me into her attack dog. Bradford has twisted around everything I've said and done."

He suddenly reached down and scooped a paper off the desk. He held it out to them. It was a local tabloid, and the headlines, splayed across the front in bold print, read; 'Mayor seduced by Cetra witch?'

"I mean, look at this! Would you just look at this! Have you ever seen such nonsense in your life?"

Tifa just stared at it for a moment, shocked.

"How can they get away with that?" she exclaimed.

"They can say whatever they want!" Reeve went on. "It's a free city. At least, that's what Aeris seems to think. I wanted to shut them down. I could do it. Legally even. But Aeris refuses to consider it. If you ask me she's taking this whole free

speech thing a little to far, but she doesn't seem to give a damn about anyone else's opinion. Hell, what do I know? I'm just the Mayor. They don't want to hear anything from me, they want to hear it from her. But she won't even defend herself! She just takes all his bull and doesn't retaliate, doesn't even try to tell the people the truth."

"Reeve, calm down," Tifa said. Reeve stared at them both for a moment, his face red. Then he paused for a moment, purposely giving himself a second to get a hold of himself. When he spoke again his voice was much calmer.

"I'm sorry," he said. "This whole thing has gotten to me much more than I'd like. I just keep thinking something horrible is going to happen. It's obvious that these people are not above stooping to violence. I just have never been in a situation where I felt so helpless."

"So maybe we should go over to this guy's church and let him know just how much we disapprove of his actions," Cloud said, fingering the hilt of his sword.

"You'll do no such thing!"

They all turned to see Aeris standing in the doorway.

"Hello Aeris," Cloud said calmly.

"I won't have any violence in Ifalna," she continued, ignoring the greeting. "Not if I can do anything to prevent it. And I certainly won't have it started by my friends."

"We haven't started it," Reeve replied. "Did you see that hole in the window out front? None of your friends threw that rock."

She turned to him with a look of disapproval.

"No one was hurt," she stated.

"But someone easily could have been," Reeve stood his ground. "The intention was clear. At least, as far as I'm concerned."

"You don't know who threw that rock," she replied. "For all you know, it could have been someone who had nothing to do with the Church of Humanity."

Reeve did not reply to that, but the look on his face made his feelings about it clear.

For a moment they all just stood there looking at one another. Tifa decided it might be a good time to play peacemaker.

"Don't worry, Cloud's not going to go barging over there, at least, not til we know more," she said. "Let's just drop it for now, okay? We just got here and I really don't feel like getting into an argument about it."

Cloud nodded and let his hands drop to his sides.

"Of course," Aeris said after a moment. "I'm sorry to have been so testy, and after we haven't seen each other in months. You're right, we can talk about this some other time. You're probably tired from the long trek here. Come back to the house with us. You can get some rest, and Elmyra should be starting on dinner soon. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you."

Aeris words were like a balm that made the tension slip away.

"That'd be great," Cloud replied. He looked at Tifa, who was half sitting on the desk in front of Reeve. "It was a pretty long trip. Are you tired?"

Tifa hesitated a moment before replying, her hand slipping down across her stomach.

"A little," she replied.

"I still can't believe you two are going to have a baby," Aeris said with a smile.

"I know," Reeve agreed, obviously relieved to have dropped the previous subject. "How far along are you now?"

"Six months," Tifa replied, patting her stomach softly. Sometimes she could hardly believe it herself.

"And you still haven't come up with a name?" Aeris questioned.

"Not really," Tifa replied.

"Well, there's still plenty of time," Reeve stated. "Shall we go?"

The others nodded and Reeve led them out of the church. Elmyra and Aeris house was just down the block, a small nondescript two story building that was an original Cetra structure. Elmyra's voice floated through the air as soon as they entered.

"Is that you dear?"

"Yes," Aeris replied. "Along with Reeve and Cloud and Tifa."

Elmyra walked into the room from another entrance. She was holding a PHS in her hand.

"Good," she said. "You came back just in time. Vincent wants to talk to you."

They all looked at her for a moment, somewhat surprised. Of all of them, Vincent was by far the one who used the PHS the least. Cloud thought that a dire emergency would have to exist for him to use it at all.

"Is it some kind of trouble?" Aeris asked, apparently thinking much along the same lines.

"I don't know dear, I just started talking to him," Elmyra replied, holding out the device.

Aeris took it and wedged it beside her ear.

"Vincent?"

She listened for quite some time, only responding with an occasional 'uh huh'. Tifa strained her ears to try to pick up what Vincent might be saying, but to no avail.

"All right Vincent," she said finally. "Yes I understand. Uh huh. I don't know whether that's possible right now. I'll tell the others. All right. Bye."

She clicked off the PHS.

"Vincent wants us to come to Corel," she said. "He and Elena found a man in the woods suffering from mako poisoning."

"Mako poisoning?" Tifa repeated.

"Yes," Aeris replied. "They found him near Lucrecia's waterfall."

"Lucrecia's waterfall," Cloud said thoughtfully. "I didn't know there were any sources of mako in that area."

"I didn't know there was any sources of mako anywhere anymore," Tifa stated.

"Neither did I," Reeve said. "Shinra did a pretty good job of hunting down all that was available in their time, but there still might be some around that were never discovered. Still, even if that were so, it's hard to believe there might be a concentration so strong that it can cause mako poisoning and still not have been discovered."

"Unless the person was exposed over a long period of time," Tifa suggested.

"Or, someone is messing around with mako again," Cloud said slowly, bringing out into the open what they were all thinking.

"Why would someone do that?" Tifa said distastefully.

"For the same reasons Shinra did," Cloud replied. "To make SOLDIERS."

"Or to use as a power source," Reeve said thoughtfully.

"Or both," Cloud agreed.

Tifa wasn't happy at all with what she was hearing. She thought that after all that had happened, after the dangers of using mako had been so clearly demonstrated, people finally understood.

"Couldn't there be some other reason?" she pleaded.

"Sure, it's possible," Cloud said after a moment. "There's always a chance that Shinra didn't find it all, that there's still some large undiscovered source out there. It's possible the man just wandered into it my mistake."

From the sound of his voice, however, Tifa could see that he didn't believe that. She turned to look at Aeris, who didn't even seem to be listening, but was staring at the far wall, as if distracted.

"What did Vincent think?" she asked.

Aeris' head swiveled to look at her.

"He seemed to think something was up," she replied. "That's why he wanted us to come there. They couldn't talk to the man. He was incoherent. In fact, the doctors in Corel didn't think he was going to live."

Tifa looked from one to the other. That was not what she wanted to hear. It must have been obvious how much this upset her, for Cloud suddenly walked over to her and laid his arm across her shoulders.

"It's probably nothing," he reassured her. "I'm sure we'll have it all straightened out in no time."

But instead of calming her his attempt at reassurance just made it worse. She knew he was just saying that to try to make her feel better. She was sick of it. She had hoped, had prayed, that their days of fighting and controversy were finally over. After they had stopped Jenova she thought they were done, that there was no one else left to fight. But now this? Was there someone else out there performing twisted experiments, or trying to make a mako enhanced army? Would it ever end? She pulled away from him angrily.

"Don't lie to me," she snapped. "I'm not a child. I know you don't believe that."

He just stood there looking at her for a moment, surprise written on his face. Then he slowly folded his arms across his chest.

"Is everyone in a bad mood today?" he questioned.

Tifa turned to Aeris once more.

"What about you?" she questioned. The Ancient probably knew more about mako than any of them, yet Aeris had not voiced an opinion. "What do you think of all this?"

"I'm not sure," Aeris said slowly, sounding somewhat distracted. Reeve gave her a sharp look.

"Aeris, is there something on your mind?" he asked.

Aeris hesitated a moment before answering.

"Lately I've felt something was wrong," she said. "The planet has been disturbed. I'm afraid I've been too distracted to pay much attention to it."

"How long have you felt this way?" Reeve questioned.

Aeris shrugged.

"A few weeks," she replied.

"A few weeks?" he repeated. "And you didn't say anything?"

"I didn't want to burden you with anymore worries," she replied defensively. "It was just a feeling. It was nothing definite. But Vincent's find casts things in a new light."

Reeve just looked at her for a moment, then turned away.

"I'll say it does," he muttered.

"It could still be nothing," Tifa said, making one last effort to get herself to believe that.

"True," Cloud replied. "But we won't find out by standing around here discussing it. I think Vincent is right. We need to go to Corel." He turned to face his wife. "Tifa, it might be a good idea if you went back to Kalm."

Tifa just looked at him for a moment.

"I want to come with you!" she blurted out.

Cloud did not reply, but his face was set. For a moment they were silent. She turned to look at the others. Immediately she realized she would get no support.

"I think in this case, Cloud might be correct," Reeve said tentatively. "Your most important concern should be that baby."

Tifa still didn't reply. She didn't want to go back to Kalm. If they were going into danger again she wanted to be by Cloud's side. She needed to be by Cloud's side. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. It didn't take a genius to realize that she wasn't going to change this decision.

"I can't go either," Aeris spoke up.

They turned toward her.

"You all know the situation here," she stated. "I don't think this would be a good time for me to leave."

For a moment they were silent again. Reeve's gut reaction was to protest. He didn't want to leave Aeris here, unprotected. He would never forgive himself if something happened to her while he was away. But it was true, it wouldn't be a good time for her to leave. Bradford would undoubtedly take advantage of that. Even if she wasn't defending herself, her mere presence was a source of comfort for her followers. If she left, the few rational people that still remained here might fall under Bradford's sway.

He was tempted to tell Cloud that he was going to stay too. But he didn't. Without Tifa or Aeris with him, Cloud would need all the help he could get. He couldn't let his friend go alone. But still he couldn't help but say something.

"Are you sure you'll be safe here by yourself?"

Aeris turned to look at Tifa.

"Instead of going back to Kalm, why don't you stay here with me?" she suggested. "This way we'll both have some company."

Tifa glanced at Cloud.

"It's alright with me," she said slowly. In fact, the offer made her feel a lot better.

Cloud seemed to have no objection. The fact of the matter was, he thought it was a good idea as well. Though Tifa couldn't fight, he felt better leaving someone he trusted here with Aeris. Reeve, in fact, looked visibly relieved by the idea.

"That's fine," Cloud said.

"All right," Reeve said, happy that that had all been settled relatively painlessly. "Let's give Cid a call and see if he can come pick us up."

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"What a beautiful day."

Cid opened one eye at Shera's observation. He was lying on his back on a blanket spread across the ground. Shera was sitting beside him, pulling items out of the picnic basket they had brought with them. Not far away Sydney was playing in the grass with a toy airplane.

Cid looked up at the cloudless blue sky above them. The sun was almost directly overhead. He turned to look at Shera, the tall mountains to the south of Rocket Town silhouetted behind her.

"Yup," he returned.

Shera looked up for a moment, shading her eyes from the sun.

"I'm glad we came."

He let his head fall back down, bringing his hands up behind it.

"Yup," he repeated.

She pulled the final item out of the basket, a red pitcher, and set it down beside the blanket.

"Is that all you can say?" she questioned.

He cocked an eye at her one more time.

"Yup."

She laughed and shook her head.

"You're incorrigible," she commented. "And don't you say 'yup'," she cautioned as he opened his mouth to reply.

He paused and looked at her for a moment.

"Yes I am," he decided upon.

"We should do this more often," she said, still smiling. Since the successful trip to Grouchoon, Cid had become even more famous than ever. Companies all over the world were clamoring for the services of the company he and Shera had formed, Highwind Inc. Almost immediately upon returning they had been deluged with offers. They had been working nearly nonstop the entire year just trying to keep up. In fact, only two months ago a new company, Vanguard, had hired them to build half a dozen aircraft similar to the Slipstream for what seemed to Shera to be a ridiculously large sum of gil. In fact, it seemed so unrealistic that at first they had thought the offer was some kind of joke. But they soon found out the company was perfectly serious and the offer was legitimate. Personally she thought they were crazy, but she wasn't about to complain. They were both doing what they really loved and making a whole lot of gil doing it. For them it was a dream come true. She didn't care how crazy the company was, as long as it paid them.

Of course, for that kind of gil they were expected to do an exemplary job. These last two months they had been working day and night making sure everything went smoothly. The gil was good but the long hours were tough, especially on Cid. With Sydney to tend to, Shera couldn't help him as much as she used to. He had been going from dawn to dusk for a long time now, and though he didn't say anything, she knew he needed a rest.

Which was the reason she had suggested this little getaway. Cid had protested, of course. There were a million things that needed tending. The workers he had were total incompetents and would either goof off or screw up the moment they were out of his sight. The deadlines were closing in and he couldn't possibly finish in time if there were any delays.

But all his protestations had fallen on deaf ears. Shera knew very well that the projects were currently running on schedule. And in spite of what Cid said about the help, the truth was they were some of the best in the business. Them being away one day wasn't going to make any difference, and Shera knew it.

She took a deep breath. It was nice to feel fresh air on her face. Air uncontaminated by the fumes from rocket fuel. They had set their blanket out at the foot of a hill just north of the mountains. Cedar and elm trees were scattered about them, but the blanket itself was in a small clearing. To the west a river meandered around the hill, twisting its way in a slow half turn before turning eastward and disappearing into the trees. To the north the ground dropped down slowly, opening up onto a wide plain. If she looked, just on the horizon she could make out the rooftops of the tallest houses in Rockettown.

"The food is ready," she announced, standing up. She turned to see that Sydney was now playing not far from the river. The toddler was tossing the small airplane in the air and chasing it.

"Time to eat, baby," she called out.

Sydney turned to look at her, smiling as she walked toward him. The child was only a few paces from the river.

The sun was almost directly overhead. It was so bright she almost had to squint to see. She should have brought a hat, she thought idly. A gentle breeze blew through her hair, sending tendrils of it dancing about her face. It felt refreshing.

A shadow in the water suddenly caught her eye. At first she thought it was a reflection of something in the sky, perhaps a cloud. But she glanced up and the sky was clear. When she looked down again, the shadow had moved. In fact, was still moving, and rather swiftly. Now she realized it wasn't something in the sky at all. It was something under the surface of the water, and it was big. It had been moving slowly, but now it suddenly sped up, darting right for the shore, right for the spot where Sydney stood.

"Cid!" she cried out, suddenly running forward, before she was even sure what it was. A moment later there was an explosion of water as the beast shot out of the river.

It was huge, or at least, it looked so to Shera. It bore a resemblance to a frog, or at least, more to a frog than anything else. But the huge jaw filled with razor sharp teeth was extremely unfrog-like. Shera really didn't notice much of the particulars. All she saw was some kind of green horror lurching for her child. The details were for some reason lost on her.

She screamed again. Sydney stood transfixed, not understanding the danger yet old enough to realize her mother was frightened. She frowned, and then opened her mouth, as if to start crying, but she didn't get the chance.

With a burst of speed Shera raced forward and scooped up the child, a moment before the monster crashed down on the spot where she had been a second ago. Shera felt like a ton of bricks had slammed into her leg. She cried out again and fell to the ground.

Rolling to the side, she turned her head to see the monster right beside her. She could hear its screeching cry, its disgusting order filled her lungs, almost making her gag. She tried to scramble away while at the same time protecting Sydney underneath her.

Something clamped down on her leg again. She pulled away, but it was as if she were held in a vice. She half turned to see fiery red eyes staring down at her. She screamed again.

And one of the eyes went out.

Shera felt something wet splash against her back. The creature let out a hideous roar. And then suddenly she was free. She scrambled up, pulling herself to her feet. For some reason her left leg didn't seem to want to obey her. She stumbled a few feet, until she was clear of the monster, then turned to look back.

The creature was thrashing violently about, Cid's spear still protruding from one eye. It lashed out at Cid, who dodged to the side, then deftly reached in and pulled his spear loose. The creature cried out again, lifting itself in the air, then slamming its front legs down, trying to pin Cid underneath, but again the pilot was too quick for it, dodging to the side yet again. The creature tried to repeat the tactic, but this time when it reared up Cid suddenly lunged forward and drove the spear right up into its soft underbelly.

The creature let out yet another roar, even more anguished than those before. It jerked back, and once again Cid lost hold of his spear. But he didn't need it anymore. The last blow had been mortal. The creature jerked spasmodically, then suddenly turned and tried to get back to the water. But at the very edge it collapsed to the ground and lay still.

Cid ran over to Shera, who was standing frozen with Sydney in her arms.

"Are you two alright?" he exclaimed. She found herself sinking to the ground. Sydney was crying softly in her arms. She realized tears running her own cheeks as well. Cid sat down beside her and put his arms around her.

"It's all right," he said. "It's over now."

For a long time she couldn't move or speak or even think. But eventually she started to calm down. In a few minutes Sydney quieted, and that seemed to soothe Shera as well. Eventually, she felt recovered enough to get up again, but when she tried, her left leg gave out on her.

"I've hurt my leg," she said.

"Let me take a look at it," Cid replied.

He examined her leg.

"It's not cut," he said. "But there's a bruise. You might have a big black and blue mark there tomorrow. Do you think you can walk?"

"I don't know," she said.

She rested there for a little while longer, then tried again. Although her leg still hurt, she thought she could manage.

"I think it's going to be all right," she said, getting unsteadily to her feet.

She turned to look at the body of the creature beside the water.

"What is that thing?"

Cid walked over to the beast and nudged it with his foot.

"Beats me," he replied. "I thought we'd cleared all the monsters out of these parts. I guess there must still be a few left."

"I heard some talk about town of some people seeing some things up this way," Shera said slowly. "But I thought it was just that, talk."

Cid looked up slowly, his gaze falling on the mountains to the south.

"It must have come down the river from the mountains," he surmised. "There might still be things like this in the forests up there, where nobody goes."

Shera made no reply.

"Well, I think that about does it for the picnic," Cid observed. "Are you ready to go back?"

He picked up Sydney. The young girl had completely recovered, and now seemed as happy as she had been when she was playing with his plane by the stream. Shera wished she could recover as quickly. They had come up here to leave their troubles behind them. To relax. To get away from the hustle and bustle of Rocket Town. But the hustle and bustle didn't seem like such a bad thing anymore. The fact was, she suddenly couldn't wait to get back.

"I'd like nothing better," she replied.