

CHAPTER VIII: A STROLL IN THE NIGHT

A clawed hand raked out. Cloud saw it coming. Knowing he couldn't get out of the way he twisted round so it hit him on the shoulder. The blow was strong enough to knock him to the ground, but not strong enough to penetrate his armor. While still on the ground he lashed out with his sword. The beast leaped away as it felt the blade penetrate its flesh.

Pulling himself to his feet he turned just as another of the beasts lunged at him. Spinning deftly out of the way he swept his sword up and slashed down on it as it passed by. The sword clove into the beast's back, snapping vertebra. The animal collapsed to the ground.

The one he had wounded rushed at him again. He braced himself and swung his sword, but the beast dodged out of the way. Without warning yet another of the creatures slammed suddenly into his back, knocking him down again and almost causing him to lose his grip on his sword.

He felt claws slash down his arm as he tried to protect himself until he could bring his sword to bear. The creature's hot breath was in his face, almost gagging him, and he could see its sickly yellow eyes staring at him as it snapped at him with its teeth.

He tried to drive his sword into the beast, but in such close quarters he couldn't get enough leverage to penetrate the beast's thick hide. Giving up on that tack he suddenly twisted himself to the side, hoping the unexpected shift in weight would allow him to break free.

It worked. He felt burning pain as the creature's claws raked along his back, but he pulled free, only to see the second beast lunging at him.

But suddenly a crimson blur flew through the air, intercepting the beast as it was about to pounce. Nipala's weight knocked the creature to the side, even as her own claws drove into its flesh.

Cloud scrambled to his knees, even as the beast that was clawing him tried desperately to get a grip again. Turning round, Cloud swung his sword. The beast tried to leap back, but it wasn't fast enough. The sword came down on its skull, killing it instantly.

Cloud spun around, ready to strike, but Nipala didn't need his help, already having dispatched the other creature.

The both turned, looking down the slope. Red stood not far away, amid the bodies of two more of the beasts, licking a wound on his leg.

Cloud lowered his sword.

"Looks like that's all of them," he commented.

"What are these things?" Nipala questioned, looking curiously at the creature at her feet. They looked like a cross between a wolf and a lizard, about the same size as Nipala. Grey fur covered most of their bodies, except their back, which was encased in black scales. They had the clawed feet of a lizard as well, but also a long hairless tale. Altogether the effect was nothing to write home to mother about. They were downright ugly, or so it seemed to Cloud.

"I've never seen anything like them before," Red responded as he came limping over. "Like the others we've seen, it doesn't look like a natural mutation."

Cloud nodded. They had been combing the forest for almost two weeks now. So far they had found no sign of the mako source, whether natural or artificial. However, if any of them still harbored doubts as to its existence, they were quickly being dispelled. This was the tenth, no, eleventh group of monsters they had come upon since they had started searching.

And that was just his group. They had split up in the beginning. Reeve had laid out a grid, and each person had taken a portion of it to search, figuring that would be the fastest way to cover the large area involved. However, after a few attacks they had soon realized that searching alone was just too dangerous, and had merged into two groups. Cloud had taken Red and Nipala with him, and left Cid in charge of Barret, Reeve and Cait. It was slower this way, but there was just no choice.

He knew Cid's group had run into about as many monsters as he had. Even though the area was wild and untamed, it still seemed like much too many to be a natural occurrence. There had to be a mako source around somewhere. Cloud was sure of it. It was just a matter of finding it.

But that was proving difficult, as most of them had predicted. Even after two weeks, they still had a huge area left to cover. It might take months before they were done.

Cloud saw green light and felt a tingling sensation on his wounds. He looked over to see Nipala using a cure material on both he and Red. His wounds hadn't been that bad to begin with, just some scrapes and minor cuts. After the material light faded, he didn't feel them at all anymore.

They had started out near Lucrecia's falls. It had seemed logical, considering that's where Vincent had found the mako crazed man. The falls were at the southern end of the mountain range, the land to the south falling away to open plains. At first they had fanned out in all other directions, searching at random. After a week of this, Reeve had suggested a new tack. He had plotted their progress, and noticed that the monster attacks had been more frequent to the groups heading to the northeast. Assuming that the creatures would be more abundant the nearer they got to the mako source, he suggested they concentrate their search in that area. Cloud had to admit it made perfect sense, but by the same token it had increased the frequency of their encounters. After a solid week of fighting, Cloud could see that the combat was taking its toll. They were all exhausted.

Nevertheless, no one suggested that they slow down their search. They were all determined to go on, determined to find the source. This wasn't fun. They weren't on vacation. They were all tired and sore and Cloud was sure most of them would jump at the chance to head back to their homes to get some rest. But no one complained. No one left. Cloud couldn't help but feel a little bit proud of them all.

Not that he was any less anxious to get this over with. He wondered, for the millionth time, it seemed, how Tifa was doing back in Ifalna. This was the first time since they had announced their engagement that they had been separated for, well, more than a few hours, now that he thought about it. He wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, but he missed her. It seemed like she had always been with him, always been by his side in a fight. He had come to depend on her being there, not ever having to worry about an unexpected attack, always knowing that she was there to protect his flanks, knowing she would cover for him if he got too aggressive or reckless, or both. He had to be more cautious now that she wasn't there, and frankly, that cramped his style.

He wondered how things were going back in Ifalna. He had spoken to her last evening, and she hadn't mentioned anything out of the ordinary. Of course, knowing her, even if something had happened she might keep it to herself, not wanting to worry him. He could understand. She knew what he was doing was important; she knew he couldn't come rushing back, even if he wanted to. He knew she took pride in being able to take care of herself, and wouldn't call him back unless it was truly important.

But even so, he would go back if he had too. She and the baby were more important to him than anything. He just hoped she didn't underestimate the dangers.

"If this keeps up it's going to take us forever," Nipala stated glumly. "It's bad enough without all these attacks. I don't know how many times I've used cure on us all in the last week. But even cure spells don't heal as well as old fashioned rest. I feel like every single one of my bones aches."

"True," Red nodded in agreement. "Cure spells don't offer as much relief as real healing does. The wounds are fragile, and more easily damaged again. The Elders have done several studies on this. The spells are only a temporary thing, really, just something to hold you together until your body can heal itself. You can't go on forever just using spells, without allowing time for the body to naturally heal. In that situation, as time goes by, the spells become less and less effective. It can be dangerous, in fact. Damage can accumulate insidiously over time, without your even being aware of it. You think the spell is doing more good than it really is. And then suddenly, when the burden becomes too much, everything might give out at once. It can kill you."

"Wonderful," Cloud muttered.

"It would help if we had more people to give us a hand," Nipala said unhappily.

"Yes it would," Red agreed. "Unfortunately, it's never easy to get people to do something like this. Especially if the danger isn't clear cut. It would be different if we had proof there was a mako reactor out there somewhere, or at least, I hope it would. Right now everyone has something better they have to do. The danger isn't obvious enough."

"Even if we had more volunteers," Cloud spoke up. "I'm not sure that would help in this particular case. With all these monsters around, anyone helping would have to be trained in battle. Otherwise they'd just end up needing rescuing and causing us to waste more time."

"I suppose you're right," Red sighed. He lifted his head and looked around. They stood on the side of a hill surrounded by tall pine trees. "I guess there's nothing for it but for us to keep going as long as we can, hoping we'll get lucky and find the place soon. I suggest we head downhill. The forest floor down there would be difficult to see from the air. We might find something there that Cid couldn't spot."

The pilot had flown them over the entire area before they had started their search on the ground, but they had seen nothing out of the ordinary.

Cloud nodded in agreement and they wearily started to make their way downhill. There were no trails here. The ground was rocky, and covered with brush and decaying tree trunks. Progress was slow.

After a short time they came across a narrow ravine cut in the ground, obviously from runoff down the side of the mountain, although it was dry now. The bottom was wide enough for them to walk and clear of obstructions, and using it they made much better progress.

They walked in silence. Cloud wasn't known for his conversational skills to begin with, and they had spent so much time together already, they didn't really have anything to say to one another.

They reached the bottom of the valley, and saw another mountain looming up in front of them. Here they turned east for a while, following the valley floor. Soon they would have to start up the mountain again, back the way they came. It was tedious business criss crossing the entire region, trying to make sure they didn't miss anything. But it had to be done. If they finished the search and found nothing, he wanted to be certain it was because nothing was there and not because they missed it.

But all they had seen so far was virgin woodland. There were no trails, no large open spaces. No clues that more than a solitary adventurer or two had passed this way. If there really was a mako reactor here somewhere, there had to be some sign. There had to be some kind of access. Equipment and supplies had to be brought in and out. People had to be coming and going. There had to be power lines to transport the electricity produced to where it was needed. That wasn't something you could easily hide.

Yet they had seen nothing. There was no sign at all of any construction, of any roads, of anyone being anywhere near here. It just didn't make sense.

Unless the mako source was natural. Perhaps Red was right, and some rock slide somewhere had uncovered a new mako fountain. At this point that seemed to be the only reasonable conclusion.

So how come he didn't believe it?

A rustling sound in the trees caught his attention.

He looked up and saw something swooping down on him.

"Look out!" he shouted.

He leapt out of the way as claws snapped at the air where he had stood a moment before.

He spun around, whipping out his sword, as the air around them was suddenly filled with flying creatures.

They weren't as large as the other beasts. They were some kind of bird, or birdlike creature, for they had feathers. They appeared just a little larger than the average bird of prey. That was about all Cloud could be sure of, for they swarmed around him and his friends in a thick cloud, making it hard to pick out any individual creature. What they lost in size they made up for in numbers. The sky seemed to be filled with them.

Cloud swung his sword wildly through the air, not really aiming. There were so many of them he was bound to hit a few no matter what he did. And indeed, he felt the sword bite into flesh and saw a creature fall. A dozen times he swung, and almost everytime a bird fell or flew off, badly hurt. But they were getting their licks in too. Already he had half a dozen wounds from claws that had torn at his exposed flesh. Though none of them by themselves were too painful, the damage was adding up.

He looked around and saw that Red and Nipala were in just a bad a state as he was.

"Retreat!" he shouted. "There's too many of them!"

Cloud turned and ran, swinging his sword behind him as he went. Red and Nipala didn't waste time arguing. Indeed, seeing the wisdom of his suggestion, they turned tail as well, and after just a few paces they had caught and passed him. He felt a

claw tear across his neck. He swung his sword again, struggling back up the hill. For what seemed like a lifetime, but was really only a few moments, the birds continued to attack. But then the attacks suddenly seemed to diminish. Which Cloud could mostly tell by the fact that he could see the sky again and not just a mass of the creatures above his head. One more time a claw slashed across his back, as if to get in one parting blow, and then the birds fell back, disappearing into the tress from whence they had come.

Cloud sat down wearily on the ground, panting heavily. He shook his head.

"I think I'm getting too old for this stuff," he muttered.

Nipala came up beside him, and once more he felt the tingling heal of a cure spell. It didn't make him feel a whole hell of a lot better.

"I think it might be wise if we went back to Corel and got some rest," Red commented.

Cloud looked up at them. Both Red and Nipala were lying on the ground beside him, looking just as tired as he thought he must. Cloud turned toward the trees they just retreated from and stared at them for a moment. Then he nodded.

"I guess we'll have to," he agreed. "Even if we weren't winded, I don't know whether we'd be able take on that many creatures by ourselves."

He forced himself to get to his feet.

"But we'll be back," he continued, almost as if talking to himself. "With reinforcements. Looks like this might be a job for our entire group. One thing for sure, if Reeve's right, if the number of creatures we encounter is dependent upon how close we are to the source of the problem, then I'd say we oughta be damn close to finding what we're looking for."

~*~

It was dark.

Aeris looked around her room and saw the familiar outline of the furniture of her bedroom. It could be dimly made out in the light that seeped through her curtains.

She sat up, looking around slowly. All was quiet, but for some reason she was uneasy. She felt as if something had awakened her. Something out of the ordinary. She listened carefully, but no sound disturbed the darkness around her.

At least not at first. But then she did hear something. It wasn't loud. She could barely make it out, but it wasn't her imagination. It sounded like a whimpering cry.

She pushed back her covers and stood up, her nightgown shimmering in the faint ethereal glow from the Cetra buildings outside. She walked to the door without turning on the light. She felt perfectly at ease in the darkness. She pulled open the door and stepped into the hallway, halting again to listen.

After a moment she heard it again. A short cry, a little louder this time. She thought it was coming from the next room. The room Tifa was in.

She hurried over to the door to Tifa's room, stopping in front of it. Again she paused to listen, a frown forming on her thin features.

There was silence.

"Tifa? Are you alright?" she called out, trying to be loud enough to be heard, but not to wake up Elmyra, who was farther down the hall.

There was no response.

She hesitated a moment, then heard the cry again. She immediately pulled open the door.

Tifa was lying on the bed on her side. The covers were on the floor beside her. Aeris looked around the room, not sure what to expect, but there was nothing in the room out of place.

Tifa twisted onto her back, moaning. It seemed obvious she was having an unpleasant dream.

"Tifa!" Aeris said more forcefully, walking over to the bed beside her friend. Aeris couldn't see her all that clearly, for she still hadn't turned on a light. Tifa was wearing just a t shirt and panties, and even in the dark Aeris could see the shirt was covered with sweat. She reached out and took hold of Tifa's arm.

"Tifa, wake up!"

Tifa's eyes opened. She looked around wildly for a moment, then her hand shot out, grabbing Aeris' arm so tightly she thought Tifa's fingernails would draw blood.

Aeris sat down on the bed beside her friend, taking her hand in her own as reassurance.

"It's okay. It was just a dream. You're alright now," she said soothingly.

Tifa's hand slowly relaxed. She looked around, finally realizing where she was.

"I'm sorry," she managed to say, feeling embarrassed. "Did I wake you?"

"It's alright," Aeris replied. Tifa had mentioned she had been having some nightmares when they had last talked, but Aeris hadn't realized they were quite so upsetting. "Was it about the baby again?"

Tifa nodded, pulling herself up into a sitting position and tucking her legs in underneath her.

"I don't know," Tifa said wearily. "I mean, I know it's just a dream. I've gone over this a hundred times with Cloud, and with you and Red and all. I know what Jinn showed us wasn't real, wasn't a vision of the future. And yet...I don't know, no matter how much I tell myself that nothing is wrong, there's still a little bit of doubt, you know. I know it's foolish but..."

"It's not foolish," Aeris reassured her. "It's perfectly natural. We've all been through a terrible ordeal. For all that happened to you, I'd say you've coped remarkably well. You're stronger than you think."

Tifa looked down at the bed. She didn't think she was strong at all. If she was, Jinns visions wouldn't bother her so much. But perhaps she was asking too much of herself. Aeris words did make her feel a little better, but it didn't banish the doubt completely.

"Thanks," she said gratefully. She looked around for a moment. "Do you know what time it is?"

The glow from the Cetra buildings outside was never changing, offering no clue to the time, or even if it were day or night.

"It's just after four a.m.," Aeris replied.

Tifa nodded. It was later than she thought. Or earlier, depending on how you looked at it. She looked at Aeris.

"You're probably tired. Go get some sleep. I'm fine now."

Aeris stood up.

"Actually, I'm not tired at all," she replied. "In fact, I think I'm going to take a walk. It's very peaceful in the streets this early in the morning."

Tifa looked at Aeris curiously. Growing up in the part of Midgar she was from, Tifa would have never even considered taking a walk out on the streets this time of night. True, this was far from Midgar, but still, considering the trouble they'd been having lately with the Church of Humanity, she wasn't sure Aeris should go wandering around by herself.

But knowing her friend as well as she did, it didn't seem likely saying that would make her change her mind.

"I'm not tired either. I'll come with you."

Aeris nodded.

"If you wish," she said. "Just give me a minute to change."

She turned as walked out of the room. Tifa got up off the bed, thinking how strange it was to go out taking a stroll at four o'clock in the morning. But what the hell. She really wasn't tired, and doubted she'd be able to get back to sleep even if she tried. Not that she wanted to try. Having those nightmares once a night was bad enough. She didn't want to try for a repeat performance. Taking a little stroll might be the best thing for her. She'd get a little fresh air, and maybe take her mind off those stupid dreams.

She pulled a pair of shorts out of the dresser and slipped them on. There was a mirror over the dresser and she stood in front of it straightening her hair. The glow from the Cetra buildings was ever present, making turning on a light

unnecessary. It took some getting used to actually, especially if you liked it very dark when you slept. Cloud always had a hard time sleeping whenever they came here for that very reason.

But it didn't bother Tifa.

Satisfied that she was at least half way decent looking, she stepped out into the hallway. It seemed silly to be concerned about her appearance at four in the morning. It wasn't likely they were going to run into to many people on the street this time of the day. Nevertheless, old habits died hard. She didn't want to go out there looking like she had just woken up.

Aeris appeared a few moments later. She was wearing a simple white dress that fell to just above her knees. She quietly closed the door to her room, then motioned for Tifa to follow her. They walked down the hall as quietly as they could, not wanting to wake Elmyra, then out the front door.

It was cooler outside. Which was pleasant, actually. Tifa had been uncomfortably hot from tossing and turning in bed. The cool night air that filtered down from above was refreshing.

She looked around. As she had suspected, there was not a soul in sight. It was brighter out here, though still not as light as during the day. The glow from the Cetra buildings was unchanging, of course, but man made street lights that made it as light as day during the day were turned off at night. The city had a much more otherworldly look with only the cetra glow to light their way. It could almost be described as eerie, if one wasn't used to it. It reminded Tifa of the first time she had come here.

But, like her dreams, her first visit here wasn't something she wanted to be reminded of.

She looked at Aeris walking along beside her. It was obvious the Cetra had made her peace with the place. Tifa wonder if she ever even thought back to what Sephiroth had done to her here.

Aeris took a deep breath.

"It's so quiet," Tifa said, keeping her voice low. There was no one near, but it almost seemed somehow disrespectful to break the silence by talking too loudly. A normal city was full of sound, night or day. But here, there seemed to be no noise at all. There were no vehicles in the lower city. It was still small enough that everyone could walk to wherever they were going. Tifa thought that would change eventually, as the underground city expanded. There was no breeze down here either to rustle the leaves on the trees. She couldn't even hear the almost universal sound of insects chirping or buzzing. The stairways leading down to the city were open. There was nothing there to prevent insects from coming down here. And with all the flora that grew here, they certainly wouldn't be wanting for shelter or food. Yet, she couldn't hear any insect noises, nor could she ever remember seeing any during the day. Was she just unobservant, or was this another strange effect left over from the Cetra?

"Yes," Aeris agreed. "I think that might have been one of the reasons the Cetra chose to build here. For some reason the voice of the planet can be heard here more clearly than any other place I've ever been."

Tifa didn't reply. She hadn't really thought about that. She hadn't really thought that silence to her, real silence, might not be to her friend. She wondered if the Cetra had built here because the voice of the planet was so loud, or the other way around.

"What's it like?" she said hesitantly.

"What's what like?"

"Being able to hear the planet," Tifa replied slowly. She had always wondered about that. What it would be like to be able to hear the planet itself. It sounded so strange, and yet, she couldn't help but wonder. It was a stupid question, really. She didn't expect Aeris to be able to explain. But she couldn't help but ask.

"It's very...comforting," Aeris replied. "It's strange. Being part Cetra, I can't help but feel alone sometimes. I know, I have all of you to keep me company. No offense, but that's still not exactly the same. That's why I was so happy when we met Ellengio. Sometimes you just...I don't know. I'm not sure I can explain."

"No, I understand," Tifa replied. "I've felt the same way at times, though probably to a lesser extent. It's the same with men and women, I guess. Growing up, learning martial arts, working in the bar, being a member of Avalanche, there weren't all that many girls around. I was the only female in some of martial arts classes I took. Most of the guys were okay, but even so, it was nice to have a girl to talk to on occasion, someone I knew would know exactly how I felt and what I was saying."

Aeris nodded.

"Anyway, even though the Cetra are gone, I still feel like I have a contact with them, because of the planet. It's something we all share, something that's with me all the time and no one can take away or get in the way of."

"Uh huh. But what does it...actually sound like?" Tifa continued.

"What do you mean?" Aeris questioned.

"You actually hear a voice? Like someone standing right next to you talking?"

Aeris smiled.

"No, not exactly. The voice of the planet doesn't speak in words. It's more like feelings, emotions. But I can hear the voices of the Cetra too."

"That's another thing," Tifa said. "You can't possibly hear every Cetra that ever lived, right. How many do you hear? Do they all talk at once, or do they take turns?"

"I can't really say how many I hear," Aeris replied. "Most of the time they're not talking to me, I can just hear faint conversation, almost noise really. It's like having a radio on so low you can barely hear it. You can hear a sound, but you can't really make out what anyone is saying. But if someone tries to talk to me directly, I can usually hear it. The closer the person is to you by blood, the easier it is to hear them, or at least, that's the way it seems. I can hear my mother quite clearly whenever she tries to speak to me. Others, less so."

Tifa shook her head slowly. It was just unimaginable. What would it be like to hear voices constantly? In a way Tifa was envious. She wanted to know what it was like. On the other hand, sometimes she felt sorry for Aeris. That seemed like the kind of thing that might drive someone nuts.

In fact, she thought suddenly, maybe it really did. There had been humans in the past, and probably quite a few around at this very moment, who claimed to hear voices in their head. She wondered if they were all just delusions or if by some fluke they had managed to tap into whatever it was that Aeris possessed. All the Cetra could speak to and hear the planet, it wasn't anything out of the ordinary for them. They were expected to, in fact. But it wasn't normal for humans. Perhaps there was a real explanation for what all these 'crazy' people were hearing. It made her look at things in a whole different light.

"But you hear it all the time? There's never any time when you don't?" she asked.

And if the Cetra changed the way people thought about hearing voices, didn't it also change the way we thought about death? Tifa hadn't really thought too much about what happened after someone died. She had hoped there was some kind of afterlife, but of course, there had been no way to tell. But the Cetra *had* an afterlife. Ifalna was dead, yet Aeris could still communicate with her. And in a way that made it obvious that Ifalna was still aware of what went on in the living world. Here was proof that there was awareness after death. And if there was an awareness for the Cetra, didn't that make it that much more easier to believe there was an awareness for humans too. True, they didn't have to kind of awareness the Cetra obviously possessed, and what held true for the Cetra didn't necessarily apply to humans. But still, if it was true for one species, it made it that much easier to believe it could be true for all, in some fashion. Perhaps when humans died they went to a similar place, but for some reason could only observe, not directly communicate. It was comforting for Tifa to believe that her mother and father were out there somewhere watching over her, not just in spirit, but literally.

Aeris stopped and turned to look at her suddenly.

"You've never asked me about this before," she observed. "Not that I mind, but what brought on this sudden interest?"

Tifa hesitated a moment before answering, digging with her foot into the roadway. She had always wondered what it was like to hear the planet, to possess the powers that the Cetra possessed. But she had never said anything. The truth was that in spite of her friendly attitude, Aeris had always intimidated her a bit. Her beauty, her exotic background, all conspired to make her seem so much more, aloof wasn't really the word. Aeris didn't act like that at all. Tifa really couldn't understand how she felt. It just had never seemed right to her to ask Aeris about these sort of things. Perhaps it was just her shy nature. In any case, she wasn't going to say that.

"I don't know," she said finally. "I've always been a little bit curious, I guess."

Aeris looked at her for a moment, then smiled and shrugged.

"Yes, I hear them all the time," she replied. "The only time the voices faded was when we went out into space. I couldn't hear the voices of the Cetra, but I could hear the other planets. Their sounds are drowned out here by the voice of this planet, but up in space I could hear them all. It was the most beautiful thing."

Aeris sighed, obviously thinking back to the experience.

"Well, Cid's still got his rocket," Tifa pointed out. "Maybe he'll take you up into space again one of these days."

Aeris smiled at the thought.

"You know, I might enjoy that," she replied. "Knowing how he feels about flying, somehow I don't think it would be very difficult to talk him into it."

Tifa had to agree with that. Cid would probably be ecstatic at the prospect.

"But you and Cloud have to come with us," Aeris added.

Tifa looked down at herself.

"In that case, I think it might be a while before you see space again," she said. "I don't think Cloud would be too happy to see me zooming off in a rocket in this condition."

"I supposed not," Aeris said with mock disappointment. "I guess he has a point though."

"I guess," Tifa agreed. "A trip into space might be a bit much. Right now I'm lucky he lets me lift a frying pan to make breakfast in the morning. I swear, what is it with guys that they think as soon as you become pregnant you're completely helpless?"

Aeris laughed, the loudest sound they had made yet. It echoed in the air around them.

"Maybe you should enjoy it while it lasts," she said disingenuously.

"I don't know," Tifa replied. As much as she enjoyed the attention she would rather do without it. She had spent practically her whole life proving to herself and the world that she could take care of herself. She hated being helpless, or even being thought of as helpless. "I just want him to be himself."

The both resumed walking.

"Don't be too hard on him," Aeris said more seriously. "He can't help himself. He's only doing it because he loves you."

Tifa couldn't help but smile. It was true. Cloud might be a thick headed dolt at times, but her was *her* thick headed dolt. And it wasn't like she didn't do stupid things herself often enough.

She looked over at Aeris and her smile slowly faded. All this talk of Cloud make her think of Aeris situation with Reeve. The young Cetra had told her that she had declined Reeve's proposal of marriage, but she hadn't really given Tifa any details, and again, Tifa had been reluctant to ask. But now she felt she might be bold enough to say something. She wasn't sure why, whether it was because they were spending so much time together or just something in the night air.

"Aeris..." she began.

The Cetra turned her clear green eyes toward her.

"Hum?"

In spite of her new found comfort, Tifa still found herself hesitating a moment.

"Umm, when I talked to you last month. On the PHS, and you told me...you know, about Reeve? You really didn't go into any details and I was kinda wondering..."

She looked closely at Aeris features for any sign that the question was upsetting her friend, or that she had passed into an area that was off limits to discussion. And indeed, Aeris suddenly looked away. But when she turned back again, her face looked unhappy but not unwilling.

"I was wondering if you would ask me," she said slowly. "I'm not sure I can explain that either."

She fell silent. Tifa waited patiently.

"I really envy you and Cloud," she said finally.

Tifa looked at her in surprise.

"Why?"

"We've all led such hectic lives," Aeris continued. "Extraordinary lives, really. We faced down a giant corporation, stood against an insane warrior out to destroy the world, even went to another planet and battled an alien race. We fought countless battles, almost been killed dozens of times. Even *been* killed. We've become famous. Yet in the end, you and Cloud can go home and forget about that. You can blend back in, raise a family, live perfectly normal lives."

Tifa wasn't sure where Aeris was going with this.

"But you can do that too," she said.

Aeris shook her head.

"No. I don't think so. It's different with me. Because I'm a Cetra."

Tifa frowned.

"It doesn't matter," she objected. "As far as I'm concerned, you're no different than me or Cloud, or anyone else. I know the other members of Avalanche think of you that way, and I'm sure there are plenty of other people who do to. Don't let the Church of Humanity..."

"No, it's not that," Aeris cut her off. "It's not the Church of Humanity. They're just the most vocal about it, but the truth is no matter what you may feel or how you may think, I am different. It's something I can't change. It's something I don't *want* to change. It's not really a matter of how others look at me, it's how I feel about myself. I'm not meant to have a normal life."

"What do you mean?" Tifa questioned.

Aeris sighed.

"I'm not sure how to explain it," she said again. "I don't know how I know, but I *know* that I have some purpose here. Everything that's happened has been for a reason. I died because I was *meant* to die, and you brought me back because I was *meant* to be brought back. It's all part of the plan."

Tifa just looked at her confused.

"What purpose? What plan?" she said, lifting up her hands.

"I don't know," Aeris replied. "I can't see it clearly. All I know is that I have more to do, and I know it's not going to be easy, and I know it's not going to be safe. But I know I have to follow it, no matter what. I have no choice. And I don't know if I can do that and also, well, get married, have kids, do all the things a normal human does. I have to follow my path, and I'm afraid that somewhere along the line I might have to choose between that and...and..."

"And the man you love," Tifa finished.

Aeris nodded.

"I don't want to have to make that choice," Aeris said slowly.

Tifa looked at her friend sympathetically. She thought she could understand what Aeris was saying now, but that didn't mean she agreed.

"But how do you know it's like that?" she questioned. "Did the planet tell you. Or your mother?"

"No," Aeris replied. "I can't ask the planet questions directly. Not those kind of questions anyway. And my mother has never mentioned anything like that."

"Then how do you know it's true?" Tifa pressed.

Aeris lifted up her hands.

"I just *do*," she said, rather lamely, in Tifa's opinion. She had heard this argument before from other people on occasion. There were some people out there who thought they were put here for a specific purpose. She didn't think it was true, at least not for humans.

"So you're afraid that somewhere down the line, this 'purpose' of yours is going to force you to choose between it and Reeve. And Reeve's going to come out on the short end of the stick."

Aeris nodded, but Tifa wasn't buying it.

"Aeris, there are plenty of people who think they were put here for some higher purpose," Tifa spoke up. "But that doesn't make it true. As far as I'm concerned, you make your own purpose. Your purpose comes from inside *you*. You get out of life what you put into it, and though it may not be easy sometimes, I think you can pursue your career goals, or whatever you want to call it, and still have a normal life along with it."

"I don't know," Aeris replied. "I don't know how the others feel. I don't know if the others have the kind of certainty I do. I can't feel what they feel, so I can't tell. All I can say is how I feel about it. And I can tell you with all honesty that there is no doubt in my mind about this. I'm going to follow this, wherever it leads, no matter what I must do. I just don't want to see Reeve hurt. I don't want cause him or anyone else anymore pain."

Tifa bit her lip. She realized this wasn't something she could argue about. She couldn't prove that Aeris was wrong, and Aeris couldn't prove she was right. And with Aeris stubborn nature, it was a sure bet she wasn't going to be budged from her position by anything less than definitive proof. What it came down to was a simple matter of faith. Something Tifa was constantly questioning in herself and something Aeris seemed to have in remarkable abundance. Still, Tifa couldn't help but wonder whether her friend was just making her life unnecessarily complicated. Prophecies had a tendency to be self fulfilling. If Aeris believed that what she had to do would get in the way of having a happy life, get in the way of any marriage, it's quite possible it could turn out just that way. But was that fate, or was Aeris, by her own actions, bringing trouble down on herself?

"Are you sure you're not being too hard on yourself?" was the best she could muster.

"I don't know," Aeris replied, and for the first time Tifa could remember, she heard a hint of self doubt in Aeris voice. Perhaps her beliefs weren't as strong as Tifa thought. "I don't think so. I understand your point of view. I've heard that argument before. But I can't help but think that it's not the same, that I can tell because I'm different, because I'm a Cetra."

There was always that wild card in there, wasn't there, Tifa thought. She always thought of Aeris as just another person, but it was true, Aeris was different. There was no getting around that. If it were another human, she would be on firmer ground, but that Cetra thing threw things off. She really didn't know how Aeris felt about this. She couldn't. Because Aeris was Cetra, or half Cetra, she corrected, there was just no way to tell for sure.

Aeris forced herself to smile.

"Anyway, that's how I feel about it. I don't know why. I told you it was hard to explain. But you never know. Things might change. Eventually things have to become clearer. Maybe when the time comes, when I understand things more clearly, I'll be able to make a more informed decision. Until then..."

Tifa didn't reply. What Aeris said could very well be true, but she couldn't help but wonder how long it might take before this epiphany took place. She knew Reeve was in love with Aeris, but love couldn't function in a vacuum. Not forever anyway. How long would Reeve wait?"

"I wonder how long they're going to be gone?" Aeris mused.

Tifa wasn't sure whether the conversation had made Aeris think about Reeve and the others or this was her subtle way of changing the subject. Either way she politely went along.

"I don't know," she replied. "Cloud told me earlier when he called that they might have found something, but couldn't check it out til tomorrow. Oh, I guess that would be today, now wouldn't it? I hope they really are on to something though. I miss him."

Tifa wasn't used to being on the sidelines. Again it left her with a vague feeling of helplessness, and she didn't like that at all. She remembered when Cid had gone to fight Jenova, right before Sydney had been born. Shera must have felt pretty much the way she did now. Or maybe not. Shera had never been one of the fighters, had never gone looking for that kind of danger. Maybe that made it easier, but not by much. She wondered how Shera could live like that, always wondering, never sure if Cid would come home at all, without going nuts

They were walking slowly down the street, not paying much attention to where they were going. Tifa looked up and saw that they were just across the road from Aeris church. They hadn't met a soul the whole time they were out, but now Tifa stopped short. In the light that emanated from the building, she could see a figure standing by the front doors.

She frowned and pointed.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Aeris looked at the church too. The furrow in her brow told Tifa that Aeris was surprised as she was.

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

She immediately started walking over to the church. Tifa stood there for a moment, then hurried to catch up.

"Aeris," she started, suddenly realizing just how dangerous their position was. There was no one around to help them. Aeris didn't have her staff, and Tifa wasn't really in the best condition to fight. She didn't know what the person in front of them was up to, but given the hour, it didn't seem likely it was anything good. Perhaps in this case discretion was the better part of valor.

But Aeris wasn't paying attention. She was walking forward at a rapid pace, so fast Tifa could barely keep up, seemingly determined to confront whoever it might be and find out just what was going on.

As she approached the steps the stranger looked up and spotted her.

By now they were close enough to make out the intruders features. It was a man. Or boy might have been a better term. He seemed no more than sixteen or seventeen years old.

If Tifa feared an attack her concern was short lived. As soon as the boy saw them he bolted.

"Hey, wait!" Aeris called out.

But the boy didn't pay any attention. By instinct Tifa started to run after him, but came to her senses just a few moments later. She stopped, then turned and walked back to Aeris, who hadn't moved at all.

"I don't know what..." Tifa began.

But Aeris wasn't looking at her. Instead she was looking at the front of the church. Tifa turned toward it as well, wondering what had caught the Cetra's attention. She frowned, coming up slowly to stand beside Aeris. She hadn't noticed it before, but now she could see what the boy was doing. Splashed across the front of the church in crudely formed blood red letters were the words 'Cetra go home. This is our world. You're not wanted here.'