

CHAPTER II: EVERYBODY'S SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING...

A cold wind blew past Aeris as she followed Red on the narrow path that wound up the side of the mountain, with Reeve trailing behind. To the left and far below them she could see the snow laden trees that covered most of this region of the great glacier. They had spent the last two days plodding through that very forest, searching for some sign of who they were looking for, but they had found nothing.

She looked up. The mountain rose above them, but not too much higher she could make out the pinnacle. It stood poised above them like a jutting finger, in stark contrast to the featureless slate gray sky surrounding it.

Aeris lowered her head and silently followed the others. It had been too long, she thought. They had waited too long to come back here. The one they were searching for could be far far away by now, anywhere really. Thinking about it logically that was the only conclusion that she could draw.

Still, she wasn't about to give up. After all, Red knew the odds as well as her, maybe better, but he showed no sign of having given up hope.

She turned and stopped to wait for Reeve to catch up. He caught up to her in a moment, panting slightly as he walked. They had covered a lot of ground in the last two days, and the toll was starting to show on him. He was not used to this much physical activity.

"Hey Red," she called. "How about we take a little break?"

Red turned to look back at them. She motioned toward Reeve. Red nodded that he understood.

"Okay," he said. "But let's go on a little further. This narrow trail will not be very comfortable. I think the path widens up ahead. I'd rather find a place out of the wind."

Aeris looked at Reeve.

"Don't worry about me," he said gamely. "Let's go."

He walked on ahead of her. She shrugged and followed. They turned a corner and the path grew steeper. The wind blew more strongly here, and it was colder than ever. Aeris lowered her head and pressed on. She couldn't help but think that maybe they should have stopped when she had suggested, but she couldn't blame Red for wanting to press onward.

"Man, it's cold," she heard Reeve mutter.

She looked at him sympathetically. It was clear that the going was a little more difficult than he had anticipated. To his credit, however, he had doggedly pressed on with them. And he had kept the complaining to a minimum.

"Not much further," she said reassuringly.

The trail twisted in a figure S ahead of them. Aeris looked at the cliff face beside them and saw that it was worn and cracked. Parts had broken off and rubble now littered the trail in front of them.

"Be careful," she said. "The ground here looks treacherous."

Even as she spoke one of the rocks Reeve stepped on broke apart. He stumbled and flailed wildly to try to keep his balance. Then with a cry he suddenly fell and tumbled over the edge!

"Reeve!" Aeris shouted.

Red turned at Aeris cry. They both ran to the edge and looked over.

The place where Reeve had fallen was not a sheer drop, but instead a steep slope. Reeve had slid down the slope in a shower of rocks and now lay precariously on a narrow ledge perhaps thirty yards below them. He was not moving.

They both stood there and looked at him, trying to discern how badly he was hurt. They couldn't tell much from this far away. After a minute or two, however, they saw move. He looked around and then slowly sat up.

"Reeve, are you okay?" Aeris called.

He looked up at them.

"I...I think so," he said hesitantly. He started to get up and then winced in pain, clutching his arm.

"My left arm is hurt," he said.

Red looked down at him and nodded. The slope down to him was too steep to negotiate. Actually, Red thought he had been lucky. A few feet more to the left and he would have missed the ledge and fallen into a deep chasm.

Aeris slipped off her backpack and opened it up, reaching in to haul out a long rope.

"We're coming to get you," she said.

She looped the rope around an outcrop of rock and threw it down toward Reeve. The other end landed on the ledge beside him.

Red came up next to her.

"It's my fault," he said. "We should have stopped. I am endangering you both."

"Don't be silly," she responded immediately. "You couldn't have known this would happen."

She pulled on the knot to make sure it was tight.

"Perhaps after we retrieve him I should go on alone," Red said slowly.

Aeris stopped what she was doing and looked at him.

"You're being ridiculous," she admonished. "We're not going to abandon you just because of a little adversity. Now stop this nonsense and give me a hand."

Red did not respond, but he came over and helped her with the rope. When they were sure it was secure she looked down at Reeve again.

"Okay," she told him. "I'm coming down."

Reeve waved an acknowledgment.

She grabbed hold of the rope and swung herself off the path. She looked down for a moment and hesitated. They were very high up.

"Can you make it?" Red asked from above her. He would have gladly gone himself, but unfortunately his body was not designed for rope climbing.

"Yes," she said after a moment. She gritted her teeth and started down.

Once she got going she realized it wasn't that difficult. The mountainside was steep but not vertical. As long as she held onto the rope to steady herself she could almost walk down the slope. She went down quickly, but even so made sure she didn't look down again.

It didn't take her long to reach the ledge that Reeve stood on. It dropped off into space on her left but ran for perhaps fifteen feet on the other side of her. Reeve, feeling a little more comfortable as he saw her coming down to get him, had walked along the ledge as he waited for her. He now stood about ten feet away and pointed to the cliff face as she dropped onto the ledge.

"Hey, there's a cave here," he exclaimed.

She walked over to him and saw that there was a jagged opening in the cliff wall where he stood. It was narrow but wide enough to walk through. They couldn't see very far into it.

"Let me take a look at your arm," she said.

He sat down inside the opening so as to be out of the wind. She knelt down beside him and took hold of his arm. He winced.

"I think it might be broken," he said unhappily.

Aeris did not respond. She cradled his arm in her hands and bowed her head. She sat there silently for what seemed to Reeve to be a long time, but was really just a few moments. A gentle breeze suddenly seemed to waft through her hair. He felt it on his face, and it was cool but not cold. Not at all like the freezing wind he had felt all the way up the mountainside.

Suddenly the breeze increased until it swirled around them. But again there was no bite to it. If anything it felt refreshing to Reeve, and suddenly he realized that his arm no longer ached.

Aeris opened her eyes and stood up. He looked at his arm, and moved it back and forth. There was no pain.

"Thanks," he said.

Aeris smiled.

"You're welcome."

He started to get to his feet but then suddenly noticed something drifting in the wind on the rocks next to him. He reached over and picked it up. He stood up and showed Aeris what looked like a tuft of red fur.

Aeris looked at it, then at him and her eyes widened.

"Do you think?" she said.

Reeve shrugged.

"I don't know, but I think we better get Red down here."

That was easier said than done. Eventually Reeve climbed back up, tied the rope around Red, and then lowered him down. Then he descended once more himself, this time a little more slowly than the first. But finally they all stood on the ledge.

Red immediately walked over to the cave opening. He lifted his head and sniffed the air.

"She was here all right," he said immediately.

Aeris felt a rush of anticipation. Finally they had found something. But she realized this was no real reason to get excited. The one they were searching for could have been here many months ago, and might very likely be long gone by now.

Red padded into the cave and started sniffing the ground. Aeris and Reeve followed him in. It felt much better to be out of the cold wind. Aeris looked around her while Reeve sat down on a large stone.

"The scent is strong," Red stated. "Either she spent a lot of time here, or she was here recently."

He slowly walked deeper into the cave, fading almost from sight in the dim light.

"It leads down the tunnel," he said. "There must be a passageway that leads out again somewhere. That must be how she got up here in the first place."

He looked at them expectantly, obviously more anxious than ever to continue.

"Do you feel up to going on?" Aeris asked Reeve.

He nodded.

"I feel fine now," he replied and smiled reassuringly.

They followed Red as he led them deeper into the cavern. The tunnel went steeply downward, but not dangerously so. It twisted and turned, with many branches, and soon Aeris was totally lost, but Red never hesitated at any of the turn offs. The scent was leading him unerringly onward.

Red pressed forward, energized by the fact that he had a plain trail to follow. For a while the anticipation gave Aeris and Reeve renewed energy as well, but as the hours passed and the tunnel continued on unvarying, they began to tire once again. Soon Aeris called to Red to suggest a halt, and although obviously reluctant, he agreed.

They stopped in a rather large chamber that marked the intersection of three different tunnels. Reeve flopped down immediately against the wall of the cavern, maybe not quite exhausted, but close to it. Aeris sat down beside him, while Red paced nervously nearby.

"Sorry you came?" she asked as Reeve wiped the sweat from his brow. It was much warmer here in the caves, and they still had on their winter clothing, which made them uncomfortably warm. Still, it was better than the freezing wind they had felt on the mountainside, Reeve thought.

"No," he replied. "I'm just a little out of shape. I didn't realize how much. If you guys can put up with me for another week or so, I might be able to keep up."

Aeris smiled.

"You're not a burden," she responded.

She slipped off her backpack and turned to rummage through it for a water bottle.

Reeve turned at a sudden sound. One of the tunnels that led out of the cavern was right next to him. He looked down it as a dim form suddenly loomed into view.

The first thing he noticed were the eyes. Fierce yellow eyes that almost seemed to blaze with their own light. Below them a long muzzle filled with the second thing he noticed, long dagger-like teeth.

Reeve opened his mouth to speak but for some reason no words came out. All he seemed to be able to do was move his lips silently and point.

The wolf lunged towards him.

He suddenly found his voice and let out a terrified scream. He scrambled back madly on hands and knees to try to get out of it's way.

For a moment he was certain he was dead, but then the beast flashed past him, passing right in front of him, but for some reason ignoring him. Instead it charged straight at Aeris.

She was on her knees looking through her backpack when she heard Reeve cry out. She looked up and when she saw the beast she quickly turned and picked up the Princess Guard. She pivoted and swung just in time to hit it across the face and send it stumbling into the wall beside her.

Instantly it turned and sprang at her again. She brought up her rod, but the beast was too close to swing at now. Instead she held it between them, sliding it up against the wolf's neck as it attempted to rip at her throat. For a moment she stood unmoving, stalemated. But the wolf was much stronger than she. Slowly her arms were being forced back, and suddenly she felt the touch of it's hot breath on her neck.

In a flash of crimson Red suddenly leapt upon the wolf's back, knocking it over and off of her. Immediately she sprang up as Red tore at the beast with his claws. She scrambled over to help, Princess Guard ready, but the ferocity of Red's attack took all the fight out of the wolf, and it suddenly turned tail and ran, disappearing back down the tunnel that it had come from.

Red looked at Aeris

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Aeris nodded and turned to Reeve, who was still sitting on the ground where he had scrambled out of the way. She walked over to him and extended a hand to help him up. He took it and slowly got to his feet.

"The worst that could happen is we get a little cold, right," she said with a smile.

Reeve looked at her without a word, or the hint of a smile.

"C'mon," Red said. "I think it would be best if we found someplace else to rest."

~*~

Yuffie looked around as she entered the tent. Two men stood at the far end of it. One was an older man with brown hair and beard. The other had jet black hair and carried a huge sword across his back.

The older man looked at her and frowned.

"Who the hell is this?" he barked.

"This girl says she wishes to join us," the man who had escorted her in replied.

"My name is Yuffie Kisaragi," she said, stepping forward boldly. "I an a ninja and a thief from Wutai whose name is feared throughout the western continents. Perhaps you have heard of me?"

Bennis glanced at the man next to him. The Swordsman shrugged slightly. Yuffie saw that his eyes glowed from Mako infusion.

"No," Bennis said bluntly.

"I have been training as a ninja since before I could walk," she continued, unfazed. "And have been living off my thieving abilities for years as I have roamed the countryside. I doubt if you have anyone here who could match my skills."

Bennis looked at her skeptically.

"How did you find us?" he asked.

"I heard about your altercation with the convoy from the Gold Saucer," she replied. "I tracked you from there. It wasn't difficult."

"How do we know you're not some kind of spy for them?" he asked.

Yuffie laughed.

"If I was doing that do you think I would just walk in here alone?" she responded. "You killed everyone in the convoy. If I was working with Dio I would have come in here with a squadron of men and you all would be dead already."

Bennis rubbed his chin and looked at the Swordsman again, who suddenly clutched his head and staggered slightly.

"What's the matter with him?" Yuffie commented. "Little too much to drink last night?"

Bennis looked at the Swordsman in silence. The black haired man stood for a long moment without moving, then took a deep breath and looked up again.

"It is nothing," he said.

Bennis turned back to Yuffie.

"I don't know," he said looking at her thoughtfully. "How did you find out about me, and why do you want to join us, anyway?"

"After the convoy attack, your name has become famous throughout the region," she replied quickly. "Although I do usually work along, I thought it might be interesting to work with someone else who's skills are as exceptional as mine, not to mention profitable."

Bennis stood there for a long time without saying anything, just staring at her as if trying to take her measure. She returned his gaze unflinchingly. He looked at the Swordsman one more time. Some subliminal message seemed to pass between them, but she could not tell what it might be. Finally Bennis nodded.

"Very well," he said. "We'll give you a chance. Drago," he continued, speaking to the man who had escorted her in, and had stood in silence throughout the conversation. "take her outside and show her around."

A hint of a smile passed across Yuffie's face. She turned and walked out of the tent. As Drago was about to follow, Bennis stepped up to him and said softly, "take a few of the men and get rid of her."

Drago nodded and followed Yuffie out of the tent. Bennis turned to look at the Swordsman, who suddenly bent over, his hands once more holding his head.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Bennis exclaimed.

The Swordsman looked up once more, and Bennis could see that he was having difficulty controlling the pain.

"It's just a headache," he said. "I'll be fine. I just need a little rest."

"Fine," Bennis said. "But don't take too long. We're breaking camp. If that little fool can find us, anyone can."

~*~

"Wait here a moment," Drago said. He walked over to a group of half a dozen men.

Yuffie glanced idly around the camp, not really interested. She had already found what she was looking for. That lumpy sack she had seen against the wall of Bennis' tent was almost certainly the materia orbs she had heard he had lifted from the convoy. Again a smile played on her lips. Things were going just as she had planned.

Drago walked back with three other men in tow.

"Okay, let's go," he said to her.

Yuffie found it odd they would need a crew of four to show her around.

They walked through the camp, Drago pointing out various features as they went. When they reached the end of it Drago led them into the woods beyond.

Yuffie looked back as the camp disappeared behind them.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"We've got our loot hidden in the woods. I'll show you where it is," he replied.

"Okay," she responded. Her hand slowly dropped until it was beside her shuriken. It seemed unlikely to her that they would show a newcomer where their loot was hidden so soon. Besides, she had seen what she was pretty sure was their 'earnings' stored in Bennis' tent. Perhaps things weren't going quite as she had planned after all.

She stopped and suddenly spun around so that she had them all in front of her.

"You know," she said, "I don't think it's necessary for me to see where you store your loot. Besides, I've traveled a long way and I'm kind of tired. Why don't we just go back to camp. You can show me this some other time."

Drago looked at her, then at the others, as if not sure how to respond. He did not speak for a moment.

"It's not much farther," he said finally.

"That may be but I suddenly feel exhausted," she said. She stretched her arms over her head and yawned.

"Oh, I don't know what's gotten into me," she continued. "I really need to get some rest. Let's just go back."

Drago did not reply. He looked at her and then at the others again. Then he nodded his head slowly. The group fanned out and started toward her slowly.

She backed away, looking at them closely.

"Was it something I said?"

Drago pulled a dagger from his belt. She saw that the others were similarly armed. She whipped out her shuriken and flung it at the nearest man, then turned and bolted into the trees.

"After her!" Drago shouted. They all ran after her, the one she had wounded with her shuriken falling behind quickly.

She ran in a straight line until she lost them from view, then turned sharply. She ran on for a few minutes, until she came across a narrow creek. She stopped to catch her breath, listening for any pursuit, but she heard nothing. That had been easy enough, she thought.

She heard a 'thunk' and a dagger suddenly appeared in a tree she was standing next to. She turned and darted away again as she heard someone shout "There she is!"

She ran on, turning in random directions as she went, but she could not seem to shake her pursuers.

The ground sloped up sharply in front of her. She looked around. The men had fanned out behind her again. She could see someone to her left and right, but they did not seem to be closing. They were trying to pen her in.

She put on a burst of speed and ran up the hill. She came out of the trees and stopped suddenly. The ground dropped away in a sheer cliff in front of her.

She turned to face her pursuers. Drago stepped out of the woods, no longer running. The other two came out on either side of her. She was trapped.

She turned again and looked down the cliff. It was sheer with few handholds, and the bottom was littered with jagged rocks. She couldn't escape that way.

She looked at Drago. He smiled evilly.

"You're making a big mistake," she said quickly. "My father is the Lord of Wutai. If he finds out you've killed me he'll send his entire army here to destroy you."

Drago looked at his companions.

"I won't tell him if you don't," he said to them.

They continued to close in.

"You better stay away," she said menacingly. "I'm a trained ninja. I can kill you faster than you could snap your fingers."

They were only a few paces away now. She backed up until she stood at the very edge of the cliff.

"Can we just talk about this for a minute?" she tried.

There was a flash, and suddenly Drago was hit by a blast of electric power. He cried out and fell to the ground. Yuffie looked past him to see Reno holding his nightstick, with Rude and Elena standing beside him.

Her mouth opened in surprise.

Drago's companions turned and launched themselves at the Turks, but Rude and Elena easily dodged their attacks, and quickly dispatched them. In a moment Yuffie and the Turks were the only ones standing.

"Looks like were starting to make it a habit of rescuing you," Reno observed, looking at Yuffie.

"You didn't rescue me," she answered immediately.

"Oh, and I suppose the fact that they were about to kill you was just your way of lulling them into a false sense of security," Reno observed.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"We're looking for a man named Bennis," Elena replied. "He's stolen some property of the Gold Saucer. Dio hired us to get it back, and to teach him a little lesson."

Reno looked at Elena disapprovingly.

"Elena, there's no need to tell everyone we meet what we are doing here. Especially this big mouth brat. It's really none of her business."

"I do not have a big mouth," Yuffie protested loudly.

Reno just looked at her.

"I don't have to ask what you're doing here," he stated. "You must be after Bennis' materia. Let me tell you something, you're way out of your league. Bennis is ruthless. We've been watching his camp for a few days now. I couldn't believe you were stupid enough to just walk right into it. Why don't you just go back to Wutai and leave this to us."

"I can take care of myself," she shot back defiantly.

"And you've done a fine job so far," Rude commented.

"I'm not leaving until I get what I came here for," she replied.

Reno shook his head.

"All you're going to do is get yourself killed," he said. "But suit yourself. If that's what you want, fine. Just don't expect us to come to your rescue the next time."

"I told you I can take care of myself," she repeated.

"Yeah, right," Reno said. He turned to the others. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

Yuffie stood silently as they started back down the hill. But suddenly she ran to catch up with them.

"Hey wait a second," she said. "It looks like we're both after the same thing. Why don't we team up?"

Reno looked at her like she'd lost her mind.

"Team up with you? Don't make me laugh."

"Well why not?" she replied. "I admit I'd be lowering my standards to team up with you, but I'm willing to give it a shot."

"Lowering your standards?" Reno said with indignation. "Why you conceited little twerp. The fact of the matter is the only reason you're still around to argue is that we saved your ass. And I'm beginning to regret that we ever did."

"Hey, what happened to the other one?" Rude questioned suddenly.

"Huh?" Yuffie said.

"We saw four men take you into the woods," Rude said, "but there are only three here. What happened to the other one?"

"I took him out with my shuriken," Yuffie replied confidently.

"Are you sure?" Elena said. "I though I saw four of them when we were coming up the hill."

"Yes I'm sure," Yuffie replied, as if shocked that Elena would doubt her at all.

Reno looked around.

"Well, we better get out of here. If the fourth one went back and warned the others we could have the whole camp coming down on us. Let's go."

"What about her?" Elena said.

Reno looked at Yuffie.

"You're on your own," he said firmly.

He started to walk away again.

"I've been in their camp. I know the layout of Bennis's tent," Yuffie said suddenly.

Reno stopped and slowly turned toward her. He looked at her for a long time without saying anything. Finally he nodded.

"All right, you can tag along. Unlikely as it seems, you might prove to be of some use. Just try and stay out of trouble. Remember, you're with the Turks, not on some picnic with your friends."

Yuffie saluted.

"Aye aye, Captain," she said, walking past him. She turned.

"Well, are we going to get out of here or not?"

She turned again and led the way back into the woods. Reno shook his head and the Turks followed.

"What have I gotten myself into," he muttered.

~*~

The man Yuffie had wounded had almost reached the top of the hill when the Turks had fallen upon his comrades. He stopped for a moment when he saw them, then turned and headed as quickly as he could back to the camp. Bennis wasn't going to be happy with this news. Apparently there were more people tracking them than anyone had suspected. He had to get back to tell them.

He reached the creek that Yuffie had paused by and quickly splashed across. When he reached the other side he heard a sudden sound.

The bullet struck him in the side of his head. He fell backward and landed face down in the creek. The water turned red around him.

Vincent stepped out of the nearby tress and and looked around. He slipped the silencer off his pistol, and then quickly faded back into the shadows

Cloud sat in the backroom of Tifa's bar, staring out the window. It was dark in the room, and he could see the lights in the house across the street shining in the night outside.

Things had been quiet the last couple of days. He had had some headaches, but nothing incapacitating. He actually felt a little silly about the whole thing. Because of him neither he nor Tifa were able to help Red in his search. He wondered how Aeris was doing.

He had thought about going to join them, but though the headaches were not bad, that wasn't to say that he felt fine. It still seemed to him that something was not quite right. He felt...disoriented was the best word he could come up with. There seemed to be a strange buzzing in the back of his head that just would not go away. And even though it was not painful, its constant presence was annoying.

Tifa had made sure he got some rest and had given him herbal tea whenever the headaches had been the worst, which did seem to help a little. The truth was that he was glad she had stayed with him, though he hadn't told her so.

A gust of wind stirred up a cloud of dust outside the window, momentarily dimming the light from across the street.

Something dripped onto his leg. He looked at his thigh and saw a dark stain spreading on his pants. He looked up. A red

liquid was pooling through the floorboards in the ceiling above.

He stood up, a puzzled expression on his face, and a knot of fear suddenly forming in his stomach. He walked into the next room and look up the staircase.

"Tifa?" he called out.

There was no answer.

He hurried up the steps. He stopped at the top, listening, even though he really didn't know what he was listening for.

"Tifa," he called out again, tentatively.

Silence.

He started slowly down the hall. Tifa's room was at the end of it, the door closed. A dim red light could be seen at the foot of the door. As he walked forward he saw dark red smears along the walls.

He increased his pace until he found himself suddenly running down the hall. He stopped at her door and reached out to grab the handle. He hesitated for just a moment, acutely aware of the trembling of his hand. Then he pulled the door open.

Carnage.

His friends bodies lay scattered across the room, awash in blood. He could see glimpses of some of their faces. Barret, Cid, Vincent, but some were unrecognizable, ripped...

He slammed the door and leaned against it, gasping for breath as a wave of nausea almost overwhelmed him.

He heard the sound of laughter behind him, and the sound froze his soul.

He turned and saw Sephiroth standing in the hallway. Tifa was on her knees in front of him. One of his hands grasped her shoulder, the other held his sword.

"Did you really think you could ever get away from me?" he asked, the words reverberating ominously in the narrow hallway.

"Sephiroth," he said softly.

Sephiroth laughed again.

"Did you enjoy the little display I left for you in there? They are all better off now, of course. I sent them to where you tried so hard to send me, but you cannot get rid of me that easily. You can never get rid of me. I am a part of you."

He brought his sword up and held it poised about Tifa's head.

He lifted his own head and looked straight into Cloud's eyes.

"I am you."

He drove the sword brutally downward into Tifa's chest.

"NO!" Cloud screamed and sat bolt upright in his chair.

He looked around, disoriented. The light from the nearby houses still gleamed out the window beside him.

Tifa rushed into the room.

"Cloud, are you all right?" she said.

He looked around for a moment, as if unsure of where he was, then he nodded slowly.

She knelt down beside him and put her hand on his arm. He grasped her hand in his own and squeezed it with surprising fierceness. She looked at him in surprise, but then saw the shadow of fear in his eyes.

"It was just...a dream," he said slowly, looking up at her. He sat there for a moment, just staring at her, but she could not read the look he was giving her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she suggested gently.

He shook his head.

He couldn't tell her what he had seen. Did not even want to think about it himself. It wasn't so much the dream that disturbed him, but the vividness of it. It had all seemed so very real. Not like a dream at all, but instead a vision, or a prophecy.

He shrank back from that thought, knowing that path led to madness. But one thought came to him, unbidden.

He had not had visions like these since Sephiroth...

He didn't want to think about that either.

Tifa was still staring at him. He managed a faint smile.

"I'm all right now," he said. "It was just a dream. It's all over."

He released her hand, then patted it reassuringly. She looked at him for a moment longer, then nodded and stood up. In spite of his words she could see that he was still shook up, and that the dream had left quite an impression. Since Aeris resurrection Cloud had seemed free of the shadows that had dogged him for so long. Free of Shinra and the influence of Sephiroth, and the visions. But now, for some reason and after all this time, old fears seemed to be returning. Helping Cloud piece his life back together had been one of the hardest things she had ever had to do, and now that she thought he had finally put it behind him it seemed that he was suddenly going in the wrong direction. Cloud had worked so long and hard to straighten out his life, they both had. She didn't know if she could handle him falling apart again.

She looked at him again, but he was just staring off into space, not paying any attention to her anymore. He had done that often in the past too.

She bowed her head and turned away. She glanced out the window and saw the wind kick up again, and though she could not feel it she knew it was a cold wind. A wind that blew straight through her heart, and she suddenly realized that she was very much afraid.