

## CHAPTER II: LOOKS LIKE SOMEBODY OUT THERE DON'T LIKE US

Aeris walked into the waiting room, followed closely by Reeve, Elmyra and Zack. Reno and Rude were already there. For once Reno had a serious look on his face instead of his usual sardonic smirk. Aeris couldn't see Rude's eyes behind his shades, but his face was gray. Barret sat nearby with Marlene, his arms wrapped around her and her face buried in his chest. Cloud sat off to the side by himself. He barely acknowledged their entrance.

Barret gently pried Marlene off of him, then stood up and came over to them.

"I'm sorry we're so late," Aeris said apologetically. "We got here as fast as we could. How is she?"

Barret waved his hand, dismissing her apology as unnecessary. He looked grave.

"She's hurt real bad," he said slowly. "They don't know whether..." he stopped and hesitated for a moment, struggling for the words. "...whether she's gonna make it."

Aeris felt tears starting to form in her eyes once again.

"Where is she?"

Barret paused and took a deep breath. He wiped his hand across his eyes.

"In surgery," he replied. "Been in there for three hours now. Don't know how much longer it'll be."

Aeris nodded.

"How is he taking it?" he asked, nodding toward Cloud.

Barret shook his head slowly.

"About as well as can be expected," he replied. "In other words, terribly. He hasn't said a word to anyone since we been here. He was gonna ask her to marry him, for Christ-sake!"

Aeris nodded. She gave Barret's hand a reassuring squeeze then walked over to Cloud. He did not even look up as she came over. She slowly sat down beside him, her heart feeling like it was being torn in two. She knew the but he felt, she felt it too. She wanted so badly to have words of comfort, to be able to say something to him that would ease the pain, but she knew there were no words that could lessen the hurt he was feeling now.

She silently took hold of his hand. He did not look at her, just sat there staring at the floor, but his grip tightened on her hand until it almost hurt. His eyes were red, but he was not crying.

She looked up at the others. Elmyra had gone over and was now holding Marlene. Reeve was just standing there looking forlorn. Zack was talking softly with Barret. She couldn't hear what they were saying.

The door to the room opened and Yuffie walked in, a look of concern on her face. She looked around for a moment, until her gaze fell on Aeris and Cloud. Aeris motioned toward Barret. Yuffie nodded slowly and walked over to Barret and Zack. Barret turned to her and quickly filled her in.

Almost an hour later a man dressed in surgical scrubs walked into the room. They all stood up and gathered around him, Cloud pressing to the front. The doctor looked at him grimly.

"We've done what we can to stabilize her," the doctor said. "She's out of surgery, but the injuries are very severe. She's suffered damage to her liver and both kidneys, but it's the head injury that I'm most concerned about. She's amazingly strong. If she hadn't been she wouldn't have made it this far, but I'm not going to kid you, her situation is very grave. We're doing everything we can, but I don't know whether it will be enough."

No one spoke for a moment. A few of them looked like they wanted to ask a question, but no one said anything, they all just stood there looking at Cloud.

"Do you think she'll make it?" Cloud asked slowly.

The doctor hesitated for a moment.

"We're doing everything we can," he repeated. "I've called in a specialist from Mideel. Right now it's touch and go."

Cloud just shook his head and looked down at the floor. The doctor looked at him sympathetically but said nothing more.

"Can we see her?" Barret asked.

The doctor looked thoughtful for a moment.

"I suppose," he replied. "She's in a coma and heavily sedated, but I don't think it would hurt. But just two or three of you, okay? She needs all the rest she can get right now."

The doctor looked at Cloud, then reached out and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't give up hope," he said. Then he turned and walked out of the room.

Cloud looked up at the others.

"I'm going with you," Aeris said immediately.

"And me too," Barret spoke up.

Rude looked as if he were going to speak, but then he looked down at the ground and remained silent.

"Okay, we'll be back shortly," Cloud said to the others.

He walked out of the room, Aeris and Barret following. A nurse by the reception desk came up to them and led them down a busy corridor and into a small room.

Cloud slowly walked over to the bed and looked down at Tifa. She had an oxygen tube in her nose and an IV in her right arm. Bandages covered her head and her left arm. Both arms hung limply at her sides and her eyes were closed. The faint rise and fall of her chest the only sign of life.

Aeris stepped over to the bed. Cloud looked at her.

"Can you help her?" he asked, a pleading look in his eyes.

Aeris slowly reached out and took hold of Tifa's hand. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. For a long time she stood there in silence, unmoving. Then she opened her eyes and looked at Cloud, shaking her head slowly.

"She's far away," Aeris said softly. "I can't reach her."

Tears started to run down Aeris cheeks. She turned toward Cloud. He reached out and wrapped his arms around her as she buried her head in his chest.

"I can't help her," she sobbed. "I'm sorry, Cloud."

Cloud just held her without saying anything. His eyes were moist, but no tears fell.

Barret stepped over to Tifa's bed and looked down at her. He reached out and patted her hand gently. He tried to speak but the words caught in his throat. He took a deep breath.

"You hang in their girl," he said softly.

He turned away and looked at Cloud, who gently turned Aeris toward him. Barret took her arm and led her out of the room.

Cloud turned back to Tifa. He slowly reached down and caressed her cheek with his hand. It felt cold to the touch. He turned away.

He had failed again. He had not been there when she needed him. Just like he hadn't been there for Aeris. For all his strength and skill he could never protect the one's he cared about, the one's he loved.

He turned back toward her, then knelt down beside the bed and took her hand in his.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

There was so much he had never told her. So much he had kept locked away from her all these years. He had ignored her for so long, and now, now when he had finally opened his eyes and realized just what he had...

He couldn't lose her now.

"I love you, Tifa," he said. "Please come back to me."

His head sank slowly onto the bed beside her, and the tears finally came.

Cloud returned to the waiting room a short time later. Elmyra had taken Marlene down to the cafeteria to get some ice cream, but all the others were there. As soon as he walked in Zack came up to him.

"I know this isn't a good time, but there's some other things that are happening that you might want to know about," he said. "If you don't want to be bothered with it right now, we'll all understand, just say the word."

Cloud looked at Zack a moment. It looked like he had been crying, but his eyes were dry now.

"No, go ahead, it's okay," he said.

"We just got a call from Red," Zack continued. "He says he's sorry, but he can't leave Cosmo Canyon right now. Seems there's all kinds of strange creatures running around south of the canyon terrorizing the citizens. He's got his hands full there, and he is the protector of the canyon."

"I understand," Cloud said.

"In fact, he asked if we could help him out. We filled him in about Tifa, so he realizes this is a bad time. But apparently he really needs the help. He seems to think the whole canyon might be in danger."

"And that's not all," Zack continued. "Cid is missing."

"What?" Cloud said in surprise.

"Shera called us to tell us Cid, Vincent and Elena went for a little cruise in the Slipstream earlier today. They never returned. She thinks somethings happened to them."

Cloud just stood there with a puzzled expression on his face.

"There's more," Zack continued. He told Cloud about the attack upon them in Ifalna.

"Damn," Cloud muttered when he was done. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Don't know," Barret said. "But it sure don't seem like no coincidence."

"What are you saying?" Reeve asked.

"Cid, Vincent and Elena missing," Zack replied. "Monsters attacking Cosmo Canyon. Attacks on us in Ifalna and here in Kalm. It seems like someone is out to get Avalanche."

"So you think this was all a coordinated plan?" Rude said.

"Yes," Zack replied slowly. "I don't see how else to explain it. It looks like someone was trying to wipe out Avalanche in one fell swoop. They took out Cid, Vincent and Elena in the Slipstream. They attacked Red in Cosmo Canyon. They sent assassins after Aeris, Reeve and me in Ifalna, and they planted a bomb here to kill Cloud, Barret and Tifa."

"Hey, what about me?" Yuffie pointed out.

Zack turned to look at her.

"I don't know," he replied. "Perhaps they missed you somehow, or maybe they thought you were too young to be a threat."

Yuffie looked unhappy with that reply.

"Monsters attacking Cosmo Canyon, that might not have anything to do with this," Reeve said. "And we don't know what happened to Cid. For all we know they might have stopped at a bar somewhere to have a drink."

"So you think it's all just a coincidence?" Zack asked.

Reeve shook his head.

"No, but I don't think we should rule out the possibility."

"Still, the attacks here and in Ifalna cannot be dismissed. Someone it out to get us."

"But who?" Barret said.

No one had an answer to that.

"You said one of the assassins was from Gongaga," Cloud pointed out.

"Yes," Zack said softly. His hometown. He had been so busy, he hadn't gone back there. He hadn't seen his parents. For all he knew, they still thought he was dead. Why had he waited so long?

"Well, that's someplace to start," Reeve suggested.

Zack nodded.

"I agree," he said. "It's the only thing we have to go on at the moment."

"But what about the others?" Barret said. "What about Red and Cid?"

"We've got to do what we can for them as well," Aeris said.

"So you think we should split up?" Yuffie asked.

No one replied. They were all looking at Zack and Cloud.

"Maybe," Zack said finally. "But not right away. I think we should all go to Cosmo Canyon. Gongaga is not far from there, and Shera said Cid headed south when he left. We can coordinate things from there and decide what we're going to do."

He turned and looked at Reno and Rude.

"Are you two in on this?"

"Elena might be a pain in the ass," Reno spoke up, "but she's still a Turk, and we look after our own." He glanced over at Rude.

"Not to mention what they did to Tifa. We're in."

Zack looked at Yuffie.

"What about you?"

"Of course," she said indignantly. "I'm a member of Avalanche too. And they're got a lot of nerve ignoring me!"

Zack nodded in satisfaction. He knew there was no need to ask any of the others.

He turned and looked at Cloud.

"I can't leave her," Cloud said.

"I know," Zack replied. "Even if you could, I think it would be better if someone stayed with her. Remember, someone tried to kill you both. When they find out they haven't succeeded, they may try again."

Cloud nodded.

"All right, let's get going then," Zack said.

Aeris ran up to Cloud.

"Be careful," she said. "And let us know immediately if there's any change in Tifa's condition."

"I will," Cloud replied.

As they filed out the door Barret turned back.

"We'll find the bastard that did this," he said grimly.

Cloud did not respond. Barret looked at him for a moment, then turned and followed the others out. The door closed behind them, and suddenly Cloud felt more alone than he ever had in his life.

"Dammit!" Cid exclaimed.

"What?" Vincent questioned.

Cid crawled out from underneath the Slipstream and stood up. He flung the wrench he was holding down into the dirt with a curse.

"Some of the bolts have been torn in two," he growled. "I can't repair them. They'll have to be replaced. We're going to have to haul our sorry asses into town to get some parts or we won't be going anywhere."

Vincent just shrugged. Cid cursed again and looked over at Elena.

"Any luck?"

Elena shook her head and handed the PHS back to Vincent.

"No," she replied. "Nothing but static. Do you think it was damaged in the crash?"

Vincent shook his head. The landing had been hard, but the Slipstream herself had taken the brunt of the damage.

"I don't think so," he replied.

"So how do you explain it then?" she questioned.

"I don't know," Vincent replied. "Maybe someone is blocking communication."

Elena looked skeptical.

"Why would they do that?" she asked.

Vincent just shrugged and said nothing more.

"Maybe it's got something to do with that damn reactor," Cid suggested. "Maybe they don't want word spreading that they've rebuilt the thing. Maybe that's why they took us down in the first place. I'll tell ya, I got a real bad feeling about this one."

Cid felt silent. When he had looked out the window right before the last attack, he thought he had gotten a glimpse of something. He couldn't be sure. He had only seen it for a second, but even so it had given him the shivers.

"I wasn't going to mention this, but with all this other craziness going on maybe you better know," he said. "I think I saw what was following us. I only saw it for a second, so I can't really say for sure, but it looked like one of those Jenova things Sephiroth was always leaving behind when we were chasing him."

Elena looked at him in surprise.

"But Jenova is dead," she said. "You guys killed her in the north crater, right?"

"Right," Vincent replied.

"So..." Elena prompted.

"I don't know," Cid said. "I'm just telling you what it looked like. That's all. For all I know it could be some other freaking monster created by this new reactor."

"In either case," Elena said. "Do you think it's a good idea for us to go into town?"

"No I don't," Cid replied immediately. "But I don't know what other choice we have, unless you want to walk all the way to Cosmo Canyon."

Elena did not reply, but her face said 'not really'.

"All right then," Cid said. "Let's get going. But I suggest we all keep our weapons handy."

The other two nodded and followed Cid as he trudged off.

The Slipstream had come down in a narrow valley west of Gongaga, on a grass covered plain just past the forest that surrounded the town. In a few minutes they were in the trees themselves.

Cid looked around warily as they walked, his weapon ready in his hands. They eventually came to a trail that cut across their path. As they stepped out onto it they all suddenly looked down it to the left, their attention attracted by movement. A man was riding slowly down the trail on a chocobo, with two large insect-like creatures beside him.

The man saw them at almost the same time. Without a word he pulled out a long sword, then spurred the chocobo forward, the two creatures hot on his tail.

"What the hell?" Cid exclaimed, but he was cut off by a blast from the death penalty. Vincent saw the man jerk back, but he did not fall from the saddle.

Vincent fired again. He could hear Elena's gun as well. He was sure he hit the man, but the swordsman raced toward them still. Vincent lowered his aim and fired a third time.

The chocobo stumbled and collapsed, throwing the man to the ground. Vincent saw him scramble up, but then paid him no more heed as the insect creatures fell upon them.

One of the creatures lunged at Cid. He dodged out of the way and thrust at it with the Venus Gospel. The weapon tore into it's side just below the wing, and green gore splashed the ground. The creature gave a high pitched screech and slashed at him with a huge claw. He tried to twist out of the way, but was not entirely successful. The claw tore into his shirt sleeve, wrenching his arm and nearly making him lose his grip on his weapon. He brought the spear around again and sliced the claw off with a quick slash. The creature shrieked again and rose up onto it's hind legs, preparing to spring forward and use it's bulk to crush it's smaller opponent. Cid ducked down, knowing he could not get out of the way in time, then braced the spear against the ground as the beast lunged forward.

The creature's own momentum drove it down onto Cid's weapon. It slid into the beast, piercing it's tough hide and driving deep into it's vital organs. The monster shuddered and collapsed to the ground, and Cid pulled the spear free.

Vincent and Elena were both blasting away at the second insect while Cid was occupied. By the time it reached them it was staggering from the effects of half a dozen shots. It made one feeble attempt to strike at Vincent, which he easily dodged, before it fell to the ground.

With that they all turned their attention to the swordsman, who was now running toward them on foot. Vincent and Elena started pumping shells into him, much as they had the insect before him, but Cid could not help but notice that it was not having much effect.

The swordsman was very close now and Cid stepped forward and thrust at him with his spear. The man twisted aside like lightning and his sword flashed, intercepting the Venus Gospel and knocking it to one side. The sword flicked out again and Cid felt a burning pain in his leg. He stumbled and fell to the ground as the swordsman raised his weapon over his head, but then he too staggered back as he was hit by a blast from the death penalty.

"Shit," Cid muttered, clutching his leg. He hadn't been expecting the guy to move that fast, but as the sword had come up Cid had looked in the man's eyes, and had seen the glow.

"Be careful," Cid called to the others. "He's Mako enhanced."

Vincent, who seemed to have been unlucky enough to have now drawn the swordsman's attention, did not seem to hear, as he was too busy twisting out of the way as the man slashed at him with the sword.

Cid leapt to his feet, but then nearly fell again as his left leg collapsed under him. He looked down to see blood discoloring his pant leg from a wound just above his knee.

He gritted his teeth and, using his spear as a crutch, moved towards Vincent. But he hadn't taken more than a step of two when he felt a tingling in his leg. He looked down again to see the wound glow with a faint green light, and then the pain was gone.

He looked up to see the green glow fading from the restore materia in Elena's hand. He raised the Venus Gospel and charged toward the swordsman, who had just drawn blood with a slash across Vincent's arm.

The spear drove into the man's back. Instantly the swordsman turned, knocking the spear aside with his sword arm. The man was bleeding from a dozen wounds now, and Cid could hardly believe he was still standing. His other hand came up and struck Cid in the side of the head, sending him reeling.

Cid shook his head to clear it. He felt fury suddenly welling up inside him. He was dimly aware of a huge form looming up where Vincent had stood, but he wasn't really paying that much attention. He'd taken about as much of this shit as he could stand!

He felt a sudden rush of power, and then he sprang forward, slashing light lightning, over and over again, he wasn't sure how many times. The beast Vincent had become was attacking the man from the other side. In spite of his skills the swordsman could not defend against both of these onslaughts. Cid felt his spear tear through the man's flesh, over and over again, until Cid suddenly realized that the man was no longer fighting, but lay unmoving on the ground between them.

Cid lowered his spear and stood there panting as Vincent slowly returned to his normal form. Elena came up to stand beside him, her eyes wide.

"Remind me never to get you guys mad," she said slowly.

Cid grinned for a moment, but it quickly faded. He looked down at the body in front of them.

"The reactors rebuilt, some kind of weird creature knocks down the Slipstream, some guy from SOLDIER attacks us in league with some insect creatures. Things are just getting weirder and weirder. Can anybody tell me what the hell is going on here?"

Elena just looked at him and shrugged. Vincent said nothing at all.

Cid shook his head.

"Well, let's get on with it," he said. "I just hope there's no more of these jokers nearby. I'm in serious need of a breather. The old Cid man ain't as young as he used to be."

They followed him as he started down the trail once more. As it turned out, they weren't through being surprised. When they reached the outskirts of the town they all stopped, looking around them in shock.

Gongaga had never been a prosperous town. It was not as poor as Corel had been in its worst years, but had never been much better off. The region around the town had few resources, and most of the economy was supported by farm products. The reactor had been supposed to change that, but in this instance Shinra had not chosen well. Something in the ground had contaminated the Mako ore they had extracted, and when they tried to process it the contamination had caused an explosion, destroying the reactor, and with it Gongaga's one chance to make a name for itself. The last time they had been here dirt roads and ragged grass had surrounded the simple wooden houses of the town. But now cobblestone streets bisected neatly manicured lawns. The homes on the block all appeared to be freshly painted. Flowers bloomed along the side of the road, and they could see a fountain in the middle of the road at the next intersection.

Vincent was the first one to get over the shock.

"Things have changed," was all he said.

"I'll say," Cid commented.

Elena looked around slowly.

"It's beautiful," she observed.

"It's also damn eerie," Cid said. "I feel like I've stepped into the middle of the twilight zone."

They walked slowly down the street, looking around them in disbelief with each step. Elena was right, the town was beautiful, Cid thought. But it was an unnatural beauty. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something just didn't feel right about the whole thing. It left him with a strong impression of fakeness.

They reached the inn, but the door was closed. Cid walked up and pulled on it but it did not budge. He looked at the others, but they just shrugged. He hesitated a moment, then banged on the door. They waited a while, but there was no answer.

"Let's try the item shop," Cid said.

They walked down to the item shop, but the door was closed there as well, and banging on it again produced no response.

"Where the hell is everybody?" Cid exclaimed.

Neither Vincent nor Elena answered him, but instead just stood there looking around. A sound caught Vincent's attention. He looked down the road and saw some kids playing on a lawn.

He motioned in their direction and the others turned to look.

"Maybe they can tell us something," Cid muttered.

They walked down the road.

"Hey," Cid said when they reached the kids. "Can you tell us where everyone is?"

One of the children looked up.

"They're mostly all at the reactor, Mister," he replied. "Almost everybody in town is working on it."

"Thanks," Cid replied.

They walked a little further until they were out of earshot of the kids.

"So what do you think we should do?" Elena questioned. "Should we go check out the reactor?"

Cid hesitated before answering.

"Yes, but not right now. We're all exhausted and God knows what kind of trouble we're going to find. We need someplace to hole up and rest for a while."

"But the Inn was closed," Elena pointed out.

"I know," Cid replied. "Say, don't Zack's parent's live here?"

"Yeah, off that way," Elena replied, pointing to the south.

"Maybe we should pay them a visit," Cid said thoughtfully. "We may be able to rest there, and perhaps they can tell us something about what's been going on here lately."

The other two agreed and they were off once again. Soon they were walking up to another house on the south side of town. This one looked more worn down than the others they had seen.

When they walked up to the door they found it partially open.

Cid pushed it open all the way and stuck his head in.

"Hello?" he called out.

They walked slowly into the room, and it was obvious immediately that the place had been deserted for quite some time.

"Wonder what happened here?" Elena said.

Cid shook his head.

"Too many damn questions and not enough answers."

He walked over to the couch and flopped down on it.

"Well, it looks like they ain't gonna be back for a while. I don't think they'll mind if we crash here. Just hope there's some beer in the fridge."

"If not, I'm sure you'll manage to find some somewhere," Elena commented.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing, man?" Rios questioned.

The men pulling him roughly up the metal steps did not reply. He stumbled on the steps. His hands were tied behind his back, but the two men beside him grabbed him to steady him.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked again, anger and just a hint of fear in his voice.

The stairs were surrounded on both sides by long lines of gray metal pods. He looked up and saw another man standing two rows further up. He had long white hair and piercing black eyes. He was staring at Rios.

"Healer," Rios cried out. "What's happening? What are you doing to me?"

The men dragged him up until they stood right in front of the other man. They stopped and the Healer looked at Rios and smiled slowly.

"Do not fear, my son," he said calmly.

He nodded his head and the two men pulled Rios down the aisle. They stopped in front of one of the metal pods. One that was open.

Rios looked back at the white haired man.

"I don't understand," he said, a fearful look in his eyes. "What are you going to do to me?"

The Healer said nothing, just continued to look at him with those unreadable eyes. One of the men stepped behind him and cut his bonds, then he was thrust into the pod. Before he could turn the door was slammed shut behind him.

One of the men secured the latches on the door while the other turned a valve beside the pod. The sound of running water was heard. There was a small window in the pod, and they suddenly saw Rios through it, looking out at them in fear.

"What the hell is that?" Rios cried out, looking down. Although he was yelling at the top of his lungs, those outside barely heard him.

"What is this shit!" he cried. "What are you doing. Help me!"

Suddenly they could see liquid through the window. The level rapidly rose until it was just below Rio's face. They could see his hands pounding pointlessly on the door. The water rose higher. They heard "Help me!" once more, his voice rising to a scream, and then there was silence.

The Healer turned and walked calmly down the steps.

Zack awoke and looked around him. He was sitting in a chair, the lamp beside him giving off a warm glow. There was a bed on the other side of him, and some papers on the table next to the lamp. Another paper lay on the floor.

He sat there for a moment without moving. It was silent in the room, almost unnaturally so. The natural stone of the structures built into the walls of Cosmo Canyon did not easily lend themselves to the passage of sound. All he could hear was his own soft breathing.

What was he supposed to make of this?

He had known the man. Rios. He worked in the weapons store in Gongaga. He was sure of that.

He reached down and picked up the letter on the floor. It must have fallen from his hand as he dropped off to sleep. He glanced at the other letters on the table.

His letters.

Aeris had given them to him to help him try to remember. They had talked quite a bit about his past since they had returned from the Southern Continent. She had told him about his parents, and Gongaga, and his decision to join SOLDIER and his friendship with Cloud.

But she had not mentioned anyone named Rios.

Just like she hadn't mentioned Turner, the assassin he had somehow recognized in Ifalna.

Could it be that his memory was finally beginning to return to him? Could it be that the dream had been an actual memory? After all these years, he had given up hope that that would ever happen. But how else could he explain how he knew these people?

But something was nagging at him.

He turned his gaze to the letter he held in his hand.

*Dear Aeris;*

*I know it has been quite some time since I last wrote to you, and I am sorry. I wish I had a good excuse, but I can only hope that you forgive me and trust me when I tell you that I will be more diligent in the future. In my own defense I can only say that it has been very busy these last few weeks.*

*Now that that's out of the way I can give you the good news. My leave has been approved! It starts on the eighth and I won't be leaving for Gongaga until the tenth, so we will have two days together! I can hardly wait. It seems like ages since I last saw you. I hope everything is well with you and your mother.*

*I got a letter from my parents a couple of days ago. They say that Shinra is about to start construction of a new reactor near the town. Finally we'll have some modern technology! Maybe Gongaga won't be a backwater town much longer.*

*More news. I have been assigned to a mission out to a small town to investigate some disturbances at a reactor there. I'm not at liberty to tell you where, but I can say that the mission is being led by Sephiroth, so it's quite an honor for me to be selected to go. I should get back right before I go on leave, and by then I will be able to tell you all about it.*

*That's about it from here. Hopefully, I'll be seeing you soon. I miss you a lot.*

Love

Zack

He lowered the letter and slowly placed it down with the others. It was the last letter he ever sent her.

The town of course had been Nibelheim. Aeris had told him about that. About what had happened at the reactor...and after.

He shook his head and picked up the letter again. He reread it slowly, a puzzled expression forming on his brow. Then he stood up and walked slowly out of the room.

The corridor outside was empty. He didn't know how long he had been asleep, and there were no windows here, but he was sure it was pretty late.

Down at the end of the corridor he stopped in front of another door. He hesitated for a moment. Then he brought his hand up and knocked gently.

"Come in," he heard immediately.

He opened the door. Aeris was lying on her bed with a book in her hands. She put it down and smiled.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I?" Zack said.

"Not at all," Aeris replied. She sat up and Zack came over and sat beside her.

"Something troubling you?" she asked.

He saw her looking at him, and expectant look in her green eyes. He hesitated, gazing into her eyes. They were the same ones he remembered, the only thing he was sure he remembered.

He realized he was staring at her.

"Yes," he said, lowering his gaze to the floor. He told her about the dream he had.

"So that's good," she said slowly when he had finished. "You've remembered something from Gongaga."

He shook his head.

"No," he said. He held up the letter. "This letter was written just a few days before I left for Nibelheim. You know what happened after that. You told me I never went back to Gongaga. But the letter says that the reactor wasn't even built yet. If that were true, then this couldn't be a memory from my past."

Aeris looked at him for a moment, then took the letter and read it again, a thoughtful look on her face. Finally she looked up.

"You're right," she said. "So what, do you think it was just a dream and nothing more?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I don't think it was just a dream, but it wasn't a memory either. It was something else..."

She looked at him, but he didn't say anything more.

"What?" she questioned.

He shook his head.

"I don't know," he repeated. "There's something strange going on, but I don't know what."

They sat there in silence for a long time. Aeris reached out and put her hand on his shoulder.

"The Jenova cells inside you have a way of scrambling things in your head sometimes," she suggested. "At least, they did for Cloud. Maybe the dream was just bits and pieces of things, things that you remember but don't really belong together."

Zack shrugged.

"I suppose that's possible," he replied, not sounding convinced. He looked at her and smiled ruefully.

"I'm sorry, it's late. I shouldn't have bothered you with this now."

"I don't mind," she replied.

His eyes drifted upward. Somehow he found it difficult to keep his gaze from returning to her face.

"Aeris..."

She returned his gaze patiently.

"How...how well did we know each other?" he asked.

Aeris paused for a moment.

"We were just children Zack. I was barely sixteen when you went away. You were the first boy I ever..." she smiled at the memory, "...had a crush on."

Zack felt his face reddening. For a moment he had thought she was going to say something else.

"So it was nothing more than that?"

Aeris slowly reached down and took his hand.

"At the time, yes," she replied.

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"And now...?" he said slowly.

She looked down for a moment, then lifted her head once more and looked right at him.

"You're very important to me, Zack," she said.

He waited, but she said nothing more, and lowered her gaze once again. Zack nodded and stood up slowly.

"Well, I think I've bothered you long enough," he said. "I better let you get some rest."

She looked up at him again.

"You're not bothering me, Zack."

He nodded and smiled at her, then slowly walked over to the door. He opened it and looked back at her.

"Goodnight Aeris."

"Goodnight."

He slowly closed the door, watching her until it shut. She did not take her eyes off him. He turned and leaned against the door for a moment, then sighed and walked slowly back to his room.