

CHAPTER XI: THE INTRUDER

Since the fall of Shinra Wutai had become a congested city. And the market district was the most congested part of that congested city. Stretching from the docks to nearly downtown, the market district covered almost a fifth of the entire city. Since the opening of the harbor and the airport, commerce had exploded, and businesses from all over the world were scrambling to find storefronts and offices along the streets of the district, streets that these days were constantly crowded with traffic. Wutai seemed a city of infinite opportunity, and as such drew people of all trades like a magnet. It was a place where an honest businessman could make a tidy profit, and a not quite so honest businessmen, if he was clever, could do even better.

Altim had been following the group of tourists for almost an hour now. Since the establishment of the ferry service, Wutai had seen an increase in its tourist trade as well as commerce. Large groups were always departing from the ferry to wander around the town, gawking at the unique architecture of the city and the towering figures carved in the mountains overlooking it. Altim already had his mark picked out, an older man in a grey suit and baggy matching trench coat. He was accompanied by a young woman. The couple had probably not been here before, for they stopped a number of times to look at the sights, and the woman was constantly pointing at buildings and dragging the man over for a closer inspection.

The fact that they were new in town wasn't the only reason he had singled them out, however. They seemed singularly inattentive to the people around them. Altim had been following them for quite some time now and neither one had so much as glanced back at him. They had gone into a couple of shops already and the man had purchased the woman a few baubles, some of them rather expensive. Altim had stood right behind them on one such occasion and had seen that the man had quite a wad of gil with him, kept in the right hand pocket of the trench coat.

Down at the end of the street the Pagoda of the Five Gods came into view, towering above the other buildings. The couple saw it and starting down the road. Altim glanced at his watch and followed, closing in so he was walking directly behind them. All he needed was a little distraction. Ordinarily, that would be provided by a partner, but Shue was busy elsewhere, and Altim liked to work alone. It provided more of a challenge, and was subsequently more satisfying when he succeeded.

He glanced at his watch one more time. In a few moments the distraction would be provided for him.

Right on cue the sound of the enormous gong stationed in the house beside the temple reverberated down the street, startling everyone who was unaware that the gong rang out the hour in the temple square. Both the man and the woman looked up, the woman gripping the man's arm. At almost the same instant Altim's hand slipped into the pocket of the man's coat.

A moment later he was walking away, the man's gil safely stored away in his own pocket now. The couple behind him relaxed, unaware that anything out of the ordinary had taken place, and continued down the street toward the temple.

Altim looked around, making sure he hadn't drawn the attention of one of the many members of Wutai's plain clothed security force. The tourists who came here might be unaware of the danger of thieves, but the city of Wutai certainly wasn't. It wasn't exactly a boon to the tourist trade to have people robbed, and since Wutai still depended heavily on tourism, they were always on the lookout for light fingered people. But no one seemed to have noticed him.

He sat down on the stoop of a small clothing store and counted his 'earnings'. Almost five hundred gil. Not bad for an hour's work, but he knew there was a lot more where that came from.

He stood up again, scanning the crowd for another potential mark. His eyes fell on a large group of people working their way through the crowd. They were led by a blonde man with a huge sword strapped to his back. Beside him walked a black man that towered head and shoulders over most of the others in the crowd. And next to them was a woman, with long brown hair that fell past her waist. He studied her for a moment, sure he had seen her someplace before, and then his eyes widened. He instantly stood up, trying to get a better view, but the crowds around him got in the way, and he didn't get another clear view until they were past him. But even so, he felt his heart suddenly beating faster when he caught a glimpse of a chestnut haired girl near the back of the group.

He slipped into the crowd, following as best he could. A couple of times he thought he lost them, but each time he managed to spot them again. He was catching up.

The crowds started to thin out, and he could see the party plainly now, although they were still walking away from him, and he could not see their faces. Yet he was absolutely certain it was her.

He trotted to catch up, then stopped as he saw them turn and enter Lord Godo's residence. He slowly walked up to the entrance, eyeing the guards standing by the doors, who eyed him in return. After a moment he turned and started back down the street.

Didn't seem likely he could just walk in the front door. It had been a long time, he didn't even know if she would remember his name.

Aeris...

Not that he could ever forget hers. That night he had met her on the road, and saved her from his fellow thieves, was a moment he would never forget for as long as he lived. He had thought about her constantly since they had parted ways, wondering if he would ever see her again.

He turned the corner and headed back up the street until he was directly behind Godo's residence. There was a large garden area backing Godo's house surrounded by a low stone wall. A guard stood at the entrance to this as well. He walked slowly along the wall, watching the guard until the man looked the other way, then he quickly slipped over the wall. He found himself surrounded by tall elm trees and thick well manicured shrubs. There was a patch of purple flowers to his left, the only plant producing flowers this late in the year. He saw no one.

He made his way quickly toward the house. The garden was not guarded, except for the man he had seen at the entrance. He reached the back of the house, stealthily checking the windows to see if any could get him inside, but all were secured. Through one window he saw the group of people he had followed, and he quickly ducked out of the way.

He looked up, scrutinizing the upper floors and the roof. Perhaps there would be a way in up there. He walked over to a wooden latticework he had seen earlier. and grabbed hold of it, testing his weight. It didn't look strong enough to hold a grown man, but Altim had always been light of frame. Deciding that it would do, he quickly scampered up onto the roof. The upstairs windows were closed too, but the latch on one was unsecured. In a moment Altim was inside the building.

He found himself in a bedroom. He stood there for a moment listening for any sound, but he heard nothing. Then he walked slowly over to the door. There was a table and dresser in the room, both containing intricately carved ivory statues and other obviously expensive items, but Altim did not touch them. It was one thing to pick the pockets of some tourists in the city, it was quite another to steal from Lord Godo's residence itself. Just being here, if he was caught, could get him sentenced to death. Hopefully he could get in and out without being noticed. If he took something along with him, the city guards would be combing the streets to find the one who did it.

He opened the door to the bedroom a crack and peered out into the hallway. It was deserted. He stepped out into it and walked cautiously down the hall. He could hear faint voices coming from downstairs.

He reached the staircase and made his way down. It led into a room that looked like a large study. There was a mahogany desk near the entrance, with a computer perched on it. Altim walked over to the door. He could hear the voices plainly now.

"It's absolutely out of the question," Barret's voice boomed.

"But I don't want to be left behind," Amanda pleaded. "They'll find me here."

"I told you you'll be safe," Barret said. "No one from Corel knows you're here."

"You don't know that!" Amanda shot back.

Barret rolled his eyes.

"All right, maybe I don't, but I do know that you'll have plenty of protection here. More than you would have in Corel."

"I don't care," Amanda replied. "I don't trust them. I trust you. Besides, I don't want to stay here while you all go. You're the only friends I have!"

"Amanda," Barret said, rather impatiently. "It's one thing to run off with us to the northern crater, it's quite another to be shooting off into space to another planet. We don't know what we're going to have to face, don't know what dangers we'll meet. But we're certain to run into Jenova again. We've fought Jenova before, we know how dangerous it can be. It's no place for a young girl like you."

"I'm not that young!" Amanda exclaimed.

"You're just a kid, for christ sake!" Barret retorted.

"C'mon, Barret, give her a break," Yuffie interjected. "She's just about the age I was when I went off on my own."

"You stay out of this!" Barret snarled at Yuffie. She shut her mouth, surprised for a moment by his vehemence.

"This isn't some picnic we're going on here," Barret continued. "There's a good chance that none of us are going to return. I'm not going to be responsible for a young girl losing her life because of some whim."

"It's not a whim!" Amanda said.

"Hey, you got some nerve talking to me like that!" Yuffie exclaimed, recovering.

Barret stopped for a minute and looked at the both of them.

"It's too dangerous!" he repeated.

"Well, if that's the case, then why do you have to go at all?" Amanda tried. "Why can't you just stay here and leave Jenova to it's own planet?"

"You know why," Barret retorted. "You were here for Ellengio's little lecture. It's the only way we can guarantee that Jenova will never return to this planet."

"I know that," Amanda replied. "But even if Jenova does return, it might not be for thousands of years. By then, we might have come up with a simple way to defeat it. Why does it have to be now?"

"We don't know what the future holds," Ellengio said. "But we do know we have the capacity to make the attempt now. If we do not, then perhaps what you say is true, and in the future we will have weapons that Jenova will not be able to withstand if it returns, but we don't know that. For all we know, the next Jenova that comes here could be more powerful than any other, and we might not be able to defeat it at all. Given the opportunity, we have to take the chance."

"So take me with you!" Amanda said. "I can help you, I know I can!"

They stood there silently for a moment. Most of the others looked skeptical.

"C'mon, Barret, give her a chance," Yuffie tried again.

"I told you to stay out of this!" Barret growled.

"You can't tell me what to do," Yuffie retorted, getting angry.

Barret turned toward her.

"Like we should take your advice!" he spat out. "We all know how responsible you are. She's just a kid. How would you feel if we took her along because you talked us into it and something happened to her?"

"Nothing going to happen to her," Yuffie said, a little less firmly.

"You don't know that," Barret replied.

"I'll keep an eye on her," Yuffie said.

"Oh, that's reassuring," Barret replied sarcastically.

"Barret, I'm not an irresponsible little kid anymore," Yuffie said acidly.

"Then quit making decisions like one," Barret retorted.

Yuffie stepped forward.

"I don't have to take that from..."

"Now, now," Ellengio said calmly, stepping in between them. "There's no reason for this to degenerate into a brawl. I'm sure we can come to a decision rationally."

"Not with those two here," Elena commented.

"Well, what do the rest of you think?" Barret said, looking around. "Do you want to be responsible if something happens to this kid?"

"I'm not a kid!" Amanda exclaimed again.

Barret just gave her a dark look, then turned to the others.

Ellengio walked over to Amanda.

"I understand the way you feel," he said in a conciliatory tone. "It's difficult to be left behind when all your friends are going. But I'm afraid I have to agree with Barret. This is no place for a young girl like yourself. It would be better if you did not come."

Amanda looked ready to burst into tears. She looked at the others, but from their silence it was apparent that they agreed. She looked at Yuffie, who put a reassuring hand on her shoulder but said nothing.

Ellengio suddenly turned toward Lai Li.

"And that goes for you too," he said.

Lai Li hesitated for a moment.

"I think I'm old enough to make my own decisions," she replied coolly.

"That may be true, but that doesn't mean it's your decision to make. The fact still remains that this is very dangerous, and we don't want to put anymore people in danger than is absolutely necessary."

"So how many people are necessary?" Lai Li questioned.

"I don't know," Ellengio replied. "As few as possible, I suppose. No one here is being forced to come, and if anyone wishes to remain behind he or she has my blessing."

He paused for just a moment, but of course, no one said anything.

"All the others here have fought Jenova already and they all have a stake in the outcome of this."

"So do I," Lai Li countered. "If what you say is true, Jenova is a threat to me as well. To everyone on this planet in fact. This mission is just as important to me as it is to any of you."

Ellengio shook his head.

"I don't think it's a good idea, and I don't see any reason to start this argument all over again."

"Wait a minute," Cloud spoke up. "I agree that we shouldn't bring anymore people than necessary, but like she said, we don't know how many that will be. And besides, what about the language thing? Lai Li said a translator might come in handy on another planet, and I tend to agree."

Red spoke up for the first time.

"So you think she should come along?"

Cloud did not reply for a moment, looking at Lai Li, who calmly returned his gaze. She hadn't been involved in any of the fighting in the northern crater, but she had done as well on the Gaea cliffs as any of them. She had kept her mouth shut and done as she was told, and though he knew she had been scared in the cave when those creatures attacked, she had kept her head and not panicked, and she hadn't done anything foolish like get into the fight when she knew it was better left to others. And besides that, there was just something in the way she was looking at him...

"I think it should be up to her," he said finally.

"So she gets to go and I don't?" Amanda cried out.

"Nobody said she's going along," Ellengio replied.

"Yes you did," Amanda countered. "Cloud said so, practically. How come she gets to go and I don't?"

"Amanda, it's different," Nipala offered. "She's older than you and she has a lot of expertise that can be helpful to us. I know it sounds like we're picking on you, but we're really just looking out for your best interests."

Amanda looked around, tears in her eyes. Everyone looked sympathetic, but it was obvious that no one was going to come to her defense. She looked at Yuffie, who just shrugged disgustedly.

"It's not fair!" Amanda cried out and ran from the room.

They stood in silence for a moment. Yuffie gave them all a smoldering look.

"Jerks," she muttered, then ran off after Amanda.

Ellengio shook his head slowly.

"I don't think either of them should go," he reiterated.

"So you don't think that Lai Li's abilities with languages could come in handy?" Red asked.

Ellengio looked at Lai Li once more, his gaze thoughtful. He hesitated for a moment.

"I suppose," he conceded finally. "I just have a bad feeling about her coming along."

"I have a bad feeling about the whole project," Cid stated.

"Well, enough of this," Tifa said. "What say we all sit down and have some lunch? Maybe people will be a little more reasonable after we've had some time to think about this."

No one objected, and they all retired to the kitchen while Godo's personal chef whipped them up some food. Yuffie came in as they were being served. She sat down and ate her food silently, glaring at everyone, but Barret in particular.

"Yuffie, it's for her own good," Aeris tried to make peace.

Yuffie just snorted, obviously not in any mood to accept peace.

"Well, we're not leaving for two weeks, right?" Tifa said. "There's no reason we have to make this decision now, is there?"

"Yes there is," Cid replied. "We have to have some idea how many people are coming so we can bring the proper amount of supplies and fuel. The sooner we make the decision, the better."

"As far as I'm concerned the decision has been made," Ellengio stated. "Let's just leave it at that."

They fell silent again. Yuffie left the table as soon as she was finished eating. She went into the kitchen, then walked upstairs with a plate of food. Ellengio excused himself soon after.

"I really hate doing this to Amanda," Tifa said.

"I know," Cloud replied. "But you have to admit Barret is right. She has no place coming with us."

"I know," Tifa replied. "I just...fell bad."

"We all do," Cloud responded.

Slowly casual conversation started to break out again. When they finished their meal Lai Li started back to the study. Vincent and Elena came up behind her.

"I'd like to take a look at the computer translation of the book," Vincent said.

"Sure," Lai Li replied. She enjoyed it when others took an interest in her work, though she was kind of surprised that Vincent would ask. He didn't really seem like the type.

"Looking for anything in particular?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he replied. "Just how much of it have you read yourself?"

"Not much," she replied. "I didn't really have time to take a good look at it before we left for the northern crater. And Ellengio was kind of hogging it before that. I can't wait to sit down and read the whole thing."

"Uh huh," Vincent replied rather absently.

"Why do you want to look at it anyway?" Elena asked.

Vincent just shook his head.

Elena stopped suddenly.

"Fine," she said angrily. "If you don't want to tell us, then don't. What the hell, you never say anything anyway. Go ahead, keep your little secrets. You can rot with them as far as I'm concerned!"

Elena stormed off down the hallway, leaving Lai Li opened mouthed, staring at Vincent, who just stood there, his face expressionless. He watched Elena until she vanished up the stairs, then turned to Lai Li.

"What brought that on?" Lai Li questioned.

Vincent shrugged.

"She's been acting very strangely lately," he replied. "Shall we go?"

Lai Li gave him an odd look, then turned and walked into the study. She sat down in front of the computer and turned it on. Vincent stood silently behind her as the program loaded. When it was done Lai Li tapped a few keys. She stopped, then tapped a few more, a frown creasing her brow.

"What the..." she mumbled.

"What?" Vincent said.

"Something's wrong," she said slowly. "I can't find the translation."

"What?" Vincent repeated.

Lai Li continued to tap the keys, more quickly now.

"I can't find the translation," she repeated. Her fingers ran over the keyboard a few minutes more. Then she stopped and stared at the computer.

"It's gone," she stated, disbelief plain in her voice.

"The translation?"

"Yes," she said. "I can't access it. The file it was in is gone. It got erased somehow, and I can't even bring it back."

"Erased?" Vincent said. "Can that happen accidentally?"

"Perhaps," Lai Li said. "But there should be something left. If it was an error on the hard drive I should be able to recover it, or at least pieces of it. But there's nothing left. It's completely gone, as if it had never existed. I don't see how that could have happened by accident."

Vincent looked at the computer for a few moments.

"I suppose we should tell the others," he observed.

"I suppose so," Lai Li exclaimed. She got up to get them, and a few minutes later most of the others were gathered around her and Vincent as she explained the situation.

"So we have no translation of the book at all?" Reeve questioned.

"Speaking of the book, how is..." Cloud said, turning toward Ellengio.

"It's safe," Ellengio replied. "It was the first thing I checked."

"No we don't," Ellengio continued, turning toward Reeve.

"So we've got to rescan the book into the computer?" Tifa said, looking none too thrilled with the idea.

"That won't be necessary," Ellengio replied. "Actually, it's not as bad as it seems. We still have the book, and now that we know how to translate it I can do it myself. Technically, we really don't need the computer at all anymore. I'm more concerned with what happened to the computer file."

"It must have been erased intentionally," Lai Li replied. "There's no other explanation."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Zack said. "Who would do something like that?"

"I don't know," Ellengio stated. "But it don't like it. Someone must have snuck in here, probably while we were at the northern crater. Apparently someone else has an interest in what we are doing. And we have no idea who they may be or what their purpose is. Whatever else happens, we're going to have to be more careful. It might have just been luck that the person who did this did not get their hands on the book as well. I'll have to keep a close eye on it."

"So what do we do now?" Zack asked.

"I don't think there is really anything more we can do," Ellengio replied. "Unless we can find out who did this, and whoever it was is probably long gone by now, there isn't much we can do. I couldn't even begin to speculate why someone would do this, or if this person will try to interfere with our plans. Cid, you said two weeks. Can we launch any sooner?"

"I'll have to get back to Rocket Town and see," Cid replied. "Even if we can launch early, it won't be more than a day or two, and if we have any problems, it might take longer."

"All right," Ellengio replied. "I can finish making what preparations need to made here today, and we can head for Rocket Town tomorrow morning. We'll tell Godo about what happened here, and see if he can find out anything about who might have done this. It could be that this could work to our advantage. Whoever did this didn't really do us any harm, and at the same time tipped his hand. Now at least we will be on guard in case he tries something else. The rest of you can go back to your homes, or come to Rocket Town as you choose. We have about two weeks to get everything in order before we launch."

~*~

Elena sat looking out the window, tears in her eyes. She really hadn't meant to snap at Vincent, but now that she had done it she was glad she did. All this time she had been patient, but how patient could one person be? All this time she thought that she could eventually get through to him, break down the barriers that he had so carefully erected around himself. But now she was beginning to realize that would never happen, that it had all been for nothing, that she was just wasting her time. He would never let her in, he would never trust her, and without that, what did they really have?

It felt so good when he held her in his arms. She could see the love in his eyes sometimes, she just knew she could. But instead of finding enjoyment in it, basking in it, he treated it as some kind of disease, something unnatural, something that had to be eradicated. She could understand, she really could. Every time he had loved, anytime there had been anything precious in his life, it had been torn from him. She knew it would be hard for him to love after that, after he had given it up, removed it from his life. But that was no way to live. She knew that, and deep down inside she had thought he did too. But no matter how hard she tried she couldn't reach him. And after what Vernon had told her...she just didn't know what to believe anymore. It seemed like even the little she know about him was a lie.

Even now it wasn't too late. Would it be so hard for him to come and talk to her? She had made it obvious how upset she was. Maybe this would be best. Maybe if she walked away, he might realize just what he was losing. Perhaps even now, before it was too late, before the damage was irreparable, he would come to her. She would be happy with just that little sign that he cared!

She put her hand over her mouth and choked back a sob.

Who was she kidding? He had had so many chances to talk, so many opportunities to show how he felt, but he had squandered them all. She had seen his face before she walked away. No shock, no worry, nothing at all. It had probably barely registered to him that she had left. The possibility that she might just need some comforting probably hadn't even entered his mind.

"Elena."

Elena took a deep breath, but did not turn around. That was not the voice she wanted to hear.

"Elena," Aeris said again, coming up beside her.

Elena turned away.

"Go away."

Aeris did not move.

"I was standing in the hallway," she said. "I heard what you said to Vincent."

Elena still did not look at her. She didn't want anyone to see her like this, least of all Aeris. The last thing she needed was a lecture from little miss goody two shoes.

"Leave me alone."

"Look, I know we haven't been the best of friends," Aeris said. "If our personalities are incompatible, well, I can accept that. But I just want you to know that I don't think of you as an enemy. If there's anything I can do for you..."

Elena shook her head.

"There's nothing anyone can do. It's my own problem," she said forlornly.

"It doesn't have to be," Aeris said. "Maybe I can talk to Vincent for you."

Elena suddenly turned toward her.

"You stay away from him!"

Aeris took a step back and looked at Elena in surprise.

"Umm...sorry, it was just a suggestion," she stammered.

Elena turned away again, embarrassed and angry at the same time. She hadn't meant to show such anger, but didn't want Aeris anywhere near Vincent.

"Just stay out of it, okay," she said in a calmer voice.

"Of course, if you wish," Aeris replied slowly. She didn't understand why Elena had responded like that to her suggestion. "I just wanted to let you know that if you needed to talk to anyone, you could. Whatever you want to say, I'll understand."

Elena turned toward her again, and slowly stood up, the anger welling up inside her again.

"Understand? How could you possibly understand? What could Miss Perfect know about what I'm going through? Every guy you've ever met has practically fallen at your feet in worship! You walk into a room and every eye follows you. The men stumble over themselves to be near you, to talk to you. You don't give anyone else a chance! You don't know what it's like to have to struggle to get a man to notice you. You don't know what it's like to have a man who you care for deeply completely ignore you! You don't know what it's like to feel so strongly about someone that you know you can never live without them, and have that person totally ignore you for someone who doesn't give a damn about him at all! How could Tseng..."

She stopped and turned away quickly, overwhelmed by embarrassment. She hadn't meant to say that. The last person in the world she wanted to tell her troubles to was this girl in front of her now, and yet here she was, blurting everything out like a child. How could she be so weak? Maybe Reno was right about her. She didn't deserve to be a Turk. It seemed that everything in her life was slowly falling apart.

"Just leave me alone," she said, her voice choked.

Aeris stood there in silence, totally unprepared for Elena's outburst. She had no idea that Elena felt that way, or that she had felt so strongly about Tseng. This went a long way towards explaining things.

She was tempted to say that Elena was wrong, that she did understand what it was like to lose someone to another person. She had been hurt when Cloud had chosen Tifa, she couldn't deny that. But she didn't think Elena was in much of a mood to listen.

"I'm sorry," Aeris said.

Elena did not reply, just sat there on the couch, facing towards the window. Though she was trying mightily to hide it, Aeris could tell she was crying.

"I'm sorry," Aeris said again, then turned and walked out of the room.

She found the others quickly. They were gathered in the study, standing around the computer.

"I guess we'll come with you to Rocket Town," Cloud was saying. "With the bar gone, there really is no reason for Tifa and me to return to Kalm."

"I might as well go to Rocket Town too," Barret said. "Might be best to keep Amanda out of Corel before we leave. Don't want anyone picking up her trail again, especially if I'm not gonna be there."

"Well, I've got to get back to Ifalna," Reeve stated. "I want to try to get Cait working again before we leave. Who knows, a robot may come in handy up in space."

"Fine," Cloud said, "But just make sure he behaves himself."

"Don't worry," Reeve replied. "I'll make sure there are corrections to his circuitry that will prevent a repeat of that last incident."

Cloud turned and noticed Aeris walking toward them.

"We were discussing what to do while waiting for the launch," he said to her. "Are you going back to Ifalna?"

Aeris ignored him and walked right up in front of Vincent. He looked at her impassively.

"You are such a jerk!" she exclaimed, then turned and walked quickly out of the room.

The others all stared at Vincent in silence. For a long time no one said anything.

"What the hell was that?" Cid finally blurted out.

They were all still staring at Vincent. Finally he shrugged and without a word walked out of the room himself.

Cloud turned and looked at the others, and it was plain from the expressions on their faces that they didn't have anymore of a clue than he did.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who doesn't know what the hell is going on!"