

CHAPTER II: TROUBLE IN WUTAI

The dark object came hurtling directly at Cloud's head. With cat like reflexes he dodged aside. His sword flashed through the air, and the dark object was split in two. He held his sword balanced lightly in front of him as twice more a dark object flew at him, and each time he neatly divided it in half.

"I told you you couldn't hit me," he said with a smile.

Tifa pulled two more apples off the tree. In quick succession she threw them both at him as hard as she could, one high and one low, and almost faster than could be followed he swung again and neatly cleaved each one in two.

"Give up?" he said smugly.

They stood about fifteen feet apart on a tree shaded lawn in back of Tifa's bar.

"What are you kidding?" she questioned. "I haven't even started yet."

She reached up to pluck another apple from the tree just as the back door of the bar opened. Cloud turned and saw a young woman with chestnut brown hair and dark green eyes step out onto the lawn, a warm smile on her face.

"Aeris," he said, smiling back at her. "You're back."

The apple whistled through the air and caught him solidly on the side of the head.

"Owww!" he exclaimed. He looked over at Tifa, who stood with her hands over her mouth, a shocked look on her face.

"Oops," she said, and quickly ran over to him.

"Are you okay?" she asked. Both girls tried to look at him with a serious expression, attempted to suppress their laughter, and failed miserably.

"Thanks for the concern," he said, rubbing his head.

"I'm sorry," Tifa said when she had finished giggling. "But I told you I'd get you!"

Cloud resisted the urge to argue that he had been distracted, knowing that it would just sound like whining. He turned to Aeris.

"So what brings you back so soon?" he asked. "I thought you would be in Cosmo Canyon for at least another week."

After her resurrection, they had returned to Kalm, and Aeris had wished at the time for nothing more than to return to the simple life of a flower girl she had led before their adventures started. But after a while she had come to realize that after all that had happened to her she could never again go back to that life. Things around her, and especially she herself, had changed too much. She found herself thinking more and more about her real mother, and the heritage she had as the last of the Ancients, the last of her race. And quite suddenly she felt a desire to know more about them. She had so many unanswered questions, and the desire to find answers grew day by day. She buried herself in books and talked to everyone in Kalm who might have had knowledge of her ancestors, but the store of knowledge in Kalm was limited, and she did not find out nearly enough to satisfy her. So two weeks ago she had set off for Cosmo Canyon, hoping to find there what she was looking for.

Aeris nodded, her face turning serious.

"I was," she said, "but I received a disturbing message from Godo. Yuffie is missing."

"What?" Tifa exclaimed.

"Something strange is happening in Wutai," she continued. "They're having some kind of problem with their materia. Godo sent Yuffie to investigate, and she disappeared. Now he's worried sick."

"How long ago was this?" Cloud asked.

"He last heard from her a week ago," Aeris replied. "Actually, he heard from Staniv, who he sent along with her to keep an eye on her. I guess he figured Yuffie wasn't reliable enough to keep in touch herself. Staniv was supposed to report in every few days."

"Where were they when he last heard from them?" Tifa asked.

"I don't know," Aeris replied. "He didn't say. He just asked to get you and come to Wutai as quickly as possible. He made it

seem like something big was going on, something much more than just the disappearance of his daughter."

"What did Red make of it?" Tifa asked.

"Well, he was concerned of course, but we didn't have any details. Still, he thought it serious enough to head on to Wutai ahead of us while I came back here to get you."

Cloud pondered this for a moment.

"I wonder what could be going on? When did you get the message?"

"This morning," Aeris said.

"This morning?" Cloud repeated. "You were in Cosmo Canyon this morning? How did you get here so fast?"

Aeris smiled.

"I forgot to mention, I got the message from Shake. Godo sent him in a helicopter. He's waiting for us right now. If we hurry, we can be in Wutai before nightfall."

The sun had sunk below the horizon, and one or two of the brightest stars could just be made out in the darkening sky above Rocket Town. Cid sat on the cool grass beneath the wing of the Tiny Bronco looking up at them. A cigarette hung from his lip, and the stubbed out butts of half a dozen others lay in the grass around him.

His gaze dropped and he shook his head. He took the cigarette out of his mouth and crushed it out also. He got up slowly and turned toward the house. He looked up to see a figure standing not more than five feet in front of him.

Startled, he stepped back, and banged his head sharply against the wing of his plane.

"Damn!" he exclaimed.

The dark figure stepped forward, into the light that streamed out of the window of the house beside them, and Cid immediately recognized him.

"Vincent," he said. "Must you sneak around like that all the time? Why can't you stumble around like a normal person. You almost gave me a heart attack!"

Vincent came up beside him. With his dark cloak and shrouded features, Vincent could put a scare in someone even in broad daylight. In the dark his appearance was even more frightening. But Cid knew he had nothing to fear. In spite of his appearance, Vincent was a loyal ally to his friends.

"I apologize," Vincent said. "It's just that you looked so contemplative, I didn't want to disturb you."

"Contemplative?" Cid repeated. "I was just looking at the freaking stars."

"Of course," Vincent replied with a shrug.

Cid waved for Vincent to follow him and stepped into the house. He led them into the living room and motioned for Vincent to sit down while he went into the kitchen. He came back in a moment with two drinks.

"So what brings you to Rocket Town?" he asked, sitting down beside Vincent and handing him one of the drinks.

"A chance meeting," Vincent replied. "I was on my way to Gongaga when I happened to run into Nanaki just west of Cosmo Canyon. Apparently Yuffie has gotten into some kind of trouble."

"That isn't much of a surprise," Cid responded.

"But there is more to it than that," Vincent continued. "Godo wanted us all to come to Wutai as quickly as possible. I told Nanaki I would stop to get you along the way. If you are willing to come, that is."

"Why the hell wouldn't I be?" Cid questioned.

"Well, I know you have a lot to do around here," Vincent replied quickly, almost apologetically. "What with you're building a new rocket and all."

Cid waved his hand dismissively.

"The rocket is fine. It's moving along nicely. It's practically building itself, in fact."

He got up.

"No, they don't need me. Actually, it'll be good for me to get out of this dive for a little while. Just let me get a few things together and we can be on our way."

He walked off into another room. Vincent was a little surprised. He knew Cid had always been fond of Rocket Town, and his rocket was more dear to him than life. When he had come into town looking for Cid the first place he had gone was to the rocket site, and he had been surprised to find that Cid was not there. He was such a perfectionist (at least, when it came to his vehicles) that he usually oversaw every detail of their construction. This was not the Cid he knew.

Vincent stood up and looked around.

"Where's Shera?" he asked. Perhaps she could shed some light on Cid's odd behavior.

There was no response for a moment.

"Who cares," he heard Cid reply gruffly from the other room.

Vincent's eyebrows went up. He walked into the bedroom. Cid was pulling some clothes out of a dresser and stuffing them into a backpack.

"What happened?" Vincent questioned.

Cid continued rummaging through his dresser for a moment. He gave Vincent a look like he did not want to talk about it, but then he sat down on the bed and stared at the wall. He lit up a cigarette but did not speak for some time.

"She took off on me," he said finally. "About a week ago."

Vincent just looked at him thoughtfully.

"She's living with her sister on the other side of town," Cid continued. "She was nothing but a pain in the ass anyway. I'm glad to get rid of her."

Vincent still did not speak, but looked at Cid skeptically. Cid returned his gaze for a moment, but then turned away.

"All right!" he said sullenly. "All right, I admit it. I...I miss her. There, I said it. Does that make you happy?"

Vincent shook his head.

"Have you told her that?" he asked pointedly.

Cid took a long drag on his cigarette.

"Hell no," he replied.

Cid looked at Vincent again, but his friend only stared at him with those piercing eyes. Somehow that made Cid more uncomfortable than anything Vincent could have said.

Cid stood up and grabbed his backpack.

"Stop looking at me like that," he exclaimed. "I'll tell her. Eventually. Now let's get going. Whatever is going on in Wutai is probably more important than anything that's going on here."

"I'm not so sure," Vincent said.

"Don't tell me how to run my life, Goddammit!" Cid said angrily. "I'll straighten everything out with Shera when we get back, so just drop it, okay?"

Vincent shrugged, but Cid still couldn't bring himself to look his friend in the face.

"Let's get going," he said quickly, walking past Vincent. "C'mon, I've got something to show you. The rocket isn't the only thing I've been working on lately. I've got a new toy you might want to take a look at."

He walked out the door without looking back. Vincent shook his head again and followed.