

SHADOWS OF THE PAST

By Frank Verderosa

CHAPTER I: OLD FEARS

"Something has to be done."

Aeris did not reply. For a long time she just stood there, first staring at the fist sized rock that lay on the floor of the church beside the front pew, then slowly following the trail of broken glass until it fell upon the hole in the stain glass window the rock had left in it's wake. Reeve could see neither anger nor surprise in her expression. Not that he had expected to. That wasn't like Aeris, but still.

"Aeris, did you hear me?"

Still not looking at him she stepped forward, until she stood right beside the stone that lay on the ground. Slowly she reached down and picked it up, looking at it as if it were some precious object instead of the dangerous missile it was, or had been a short time ago.

"Yes," she finally spoke. She turned toward him. "I don't understand Reeve. Why would someone do something like this?" She walked over to the window and touched the glass, her fingers running along the lead that outlined the angels within it. "Why would someone ruin such beautiful artwork?"

Reeve shook his head slowly. He was sorely tempted to say 'I told you so', but held his tongue. He had warned her that something like this might happen. Sometimes he just couldn't understand her. She wasn't naive. She had seen so much in her life, so much pain and anguish, she was well aware that the world could be a very ugly place, but still she was surprised when that ugliness reared its head, even when a child could have seen it coming. It was part of her appeal, he had to admit, and yet sometimes it could be a little unnerving. It always made him realize just how vulnerable she could be.

"We've already discussed this," he said. "You're a Cetra. You're different. There's always someone out there looking for an excuse, any stupid reason to tear something down. To them the fact that you're a Cetra is reason enough. Why people like that would live here in Ifalna is beyond me, but that's the case. It's that Church of Humanity. You and I both know it. Why you didn't let me shut them down..."

"No!" Aeris said with surprising vehemence. "I won't let you close their church."

Reeve looked at her in exasperation. The Church of Humanity had been founded almost a year ago, across the city from Aeris church. Reeve hadn't paid much attention at the time. Half a dozen other churches had sprung up as well, as the population grew. But this one soon got his attention because of it's emphasis on following the way of humans, and decrying everything Cetra. At first their teachings had been inoffensive enough, but gradually their anti Cetra rhetoric had increased, and Reeve had become more and more uncomfortable as their talk had become more and more inflammatory, until now they were talking openly about the evils of Cetra ways, about how it was undermining human society and must be stopped, at any cost.

Reeve had mentioned this to Aeris many times, even bringing it up at City council meetings, but when the others in the council agreed with Reeve that they should put a stop to it, Aeris had objected. She held no position on the council, and technically they could have ignored her, but as the only remaining Cetra on the planet, and the founder of Ifalna, they had bowed to her will. Now Reeve was beginning to think that maybe they had been hasty. Perhaps in this particular instance they should have gone over her head. It wasn't like it would be difficult. Reeve had found that Gilan Bradford, the founder of the church, had made some errors on the application when he applied to the city council to have their Church erected. Because of those errors, Reeve had the legal authority to close the church down. But Aeris wanted no part of it.

"Aeris, be reasonable," he said, already knowing that he was probably wasting his time, but determined to give it another try. "Gilan Bradford is speaking openly against you. Telling everyone about the evils of the Cetra. And you've done nothing to defend yourself, nothing to dissuade him. He's in the news practically every day with another shocking accusation, and what do we hear from you, what do we here from the Church of Ifalna? Not a word. All people hear all day long is how bad the Cetra were, how they are ruining the planet. With that in their ear all day long is it any wonder that they start to think their might be some truth to it? At least defend yourself! Go on the air and tell them the man's a liar! Tell the people about all the good you've done, about all the good the Cetra did. All right, we found out that they weren't saints but they still helped us a lot. Even Ellengio protected us from Jenova when it was here, and you yourself saved the entire planet, perhaps more than once!"

"They already know that," Aeris stated, walking over to him, still holding the stone in her hand.

"But they forget!" Reeve exclaimed. "People have to be reminded, Aeris. They have to be told how it really was, especially when there's someone out there shouting lies about it all. If you don't set the record straight they're all going to start believing this guy."

"Reeve, you're overreacting," she said, reaching forward and taking his arm.

"I am not!" Reeve snapped. "Someone threw a rock through the window! Doesn't that tell you something? Would you even have thought something like that possible three months ago? Aeris, you could have been standing here. That stone could have hit you..."

Aeris smiled and ran her hand down Reeve's arm.

"Is that what you're really worried about?" she asked softly. "That I might have been hurt?"

"Of course," he said, a little bit calmer. "You've been through enough, Aeris. After all you've done, you deserve some happiness in your life. Is that really too much to ask?"

Aeris looked at him with a smile on her face for a moment, then turned her head away and sighed. Her hand slid down farther to grip his. They both knew life didn't work that way.

"Perhaps," she said. "But I created Ifalna as a place for everyone to live, no matter what race or religion. Everyone here has a right to voice their opinion, even I don't happen to agree with it."

"I understand that," Reeve said, gripping her hand more tightly and pulling it toward him. She turned around, standing face to face with him now. "And I admire that. I'm sure there are many people here who came here just for that very ideal. It's a noble idea, but humans have a capacity to turn around even the noblest of ideas for their own twisted ends. We're not all saints, Aeris. In fact, none of us are, but some are less saintly than others. There is a line that has to be drawn. There are other factors involved, other rights, like the right to live in safety. When free speech is used as a cover to incite riot, that's going too far."

"Is it?" Aeris questioned. "The people won't riot unless that's what they want to do. And if that's what they want to do, then who am I to stop them?"

Reeve couldn't follow this at all.

"What?" he questioned. "Are you saying that it's all right for the people to threaten you?"

Aeris shrugged.

"If that's their will."

Reeve let go of Aeri's hand and stared at her.

"So what are you saying, that if they're going to riot then their going to riot? That it's fate? That you'll just stand here if they throw more rocks through the windows? You won't fight back, even if they come in here to kill you?"

"I've faced death before," she reminded him.

Reeve practically stamped his foot in exasperation. He couldn't believe she was talking like this!

"I have too," he said, much louder than he had planned. "And believe me, it's not something I want to repeat anytime soon!"

For a moment Aeri did not reply. Did he see a faint apologetic look in her eyes?

"I know," she said softly. "I'm sorry. I know you're worried about me. But I can't compromise on this. Ifalna is for everyone, no matter what their beliefs. If I stop the Church of Humanity from preaching what they believe, then I'll destroy everything I've worked to achieve here. I'm not going to let that happen!"

Reeve looked at her helplessly. How could he get through to her? How could he make her understand? He wanted to shake her, yell at her to snap out of it. After all she had been through, what would it take to stop her from seeing the world through her rose colored glasses? Maybe if he got angry, maybe then she would begin to understand. But one look in her soft green eyes melted away any attempt he might have made at anger. He couldn't be mad at her. Those deep green eyes, her delicate nose and soft lips, everything about her just made him melt. She was the most perfect girl he had ever seen. To cause something to mar that beauty, even something so simple as a frown, was too much to bear.

Abruptly he reached forward and swept her into his arms, pulling her tightly too him. For a moment a look of surprise crossed her face, then she relaxed and put her arms around him as well.

"I love you Aeris," he whispered. "I sorry, but I can't bear the thought of anything happening to you. You're more precious to me than any ideal. I'm not going to stand by and see you hurt if there's anything in my power that I can do to prevent it."

Aeris rested her forehead against his chin for a moment, then looked up at him.

"I love you too," she said. "But if you truly love me, you won't interfere, for this is more important to me than my life."

For a moment he looked away. What about what was important to him? Didn't that matter? But when his eyes returned to hers he knew there was only one thing he could say.

"Very well. I won't close the church down," he conceded. He couldn't argue with her. In spite of his talents as Mayor, at getting things done, at getting people to see things from his point of view, he was helpless when it came to her. But he still felt the need to salvage something from this. "But at least reply to his attacks. Go on the air or in the papers and tell the truth. Prove that the man is a liar."

"You know I'm not very good at that sort of thing," Aeris replied patiently. "I've always believed that actions speak louder than words."

"Maybe you should go out and crack Gilan Bradford over the head with the Princess Guard then," Reeve suggested.

"Reeve," she admonished.

"Sorry," he said. "But it's not that simple. Your actions are wonderful, but they're not news. Like I said, everyone sees Gilan everyday. He gets plenty of press, because what he says is news, even if it isn't true. If you're not going to say anything, then at least let me. I won't close him down, but I can at least set the record straight, can't I? At least let me do that."

Aeris hesitated a moment.

"I don't know," she said.

"Why not?" Reeve replied. "Someone's got to get your message across. If you're not going to do it then why not me?"

Aeris said nothing for a moment, fingering the stone that she still held in her hand. Finally she looked up at him.

"All right," she said. "You've got a right to say what you want too."

"Good," he said, not able to suppress a grin.

"Thank you Reeve."

His grin faded.

"I just don't want anything to happen to you."

"I know. And I'm grateful. And you be careful too. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you either."

"Oh don't worry about me," Reeve said dismissively. "I'm not that easy to get rid of. I plan to be around for a long time, as long as you're here."

Aeris smiled.

"I'd like that."

Reeve just stood there for a moment, a serious expression on his face now.

"You still haven't changed your mind about..."

The smile faded from Aeris face as well, replaced by a troubled look.

"No," she said after a moment.

Reeve turned away. A month ago he had asked Aeris to be his wife. She had declined, telling him she loved him but she wasn't ready yet. It had been hard to accept, he had to admit. He kept trying to think of reasons why she would feel that way, but he couldn't come up with any good ones. Still, there didn't seem to be much he could do about it expect take her at her word.

"All right," he said. "I won't press you. But I'm telling you, I'll wait forever for you, if I have to."

Aeris looked at him sadly. She knew he would. Why did that trouble her so much?

For a moment they stood there in silence.

"All right, guess I better get at it," Reeve said, turning back toward her abruptly. "I'll have someone come by and repair the window. Just please, be careful."

"I will," Aeris replied, the smile returning to her face.

"All right," he said. He stepped forward and they kissed. Then he turned and, without another word, walked swiftly out of the church.

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Yuffie sat cross legged on the grass. Beneath her the ground sloped gently up toward the imposing Da Chou figures carved in the mountainside behind her. The sun was low on the horizon, casting long shadows and turning the stone features on the figures above her a golden color, as if the entire mountainside was made of that precious metal. The mountains of Da Chou were truly and awe inspiring sight, especially at sunset.

But Yuffie was not here to take in the sights. Her eyes were closed, and she was facing away from the figures. Her elbows rested comfortably against her sides, with each hand extended outward. In the palm of each of her hands she held a glowing green materia.

She wasn't moving, but lines of concentration were etched on her face. She had been sitting immobile like this for many minutes, first clearing her mind, using all the techniques she knew to filter out all the distractions around her, then to focus on the materia. She could feel the warmth of them in her hands, though she ignored it. But she did not ignore the feeling of power building up inside them. No, that she nurtured, that she fed with her mind, doing all in her power to make it grow, make it strong.

The materia had been getting brighter for some time now, and she could tell they were near release. Just a little bit more. She tried to focus her mind even more sharply, blocking out all else in one final effort. She almost had it, she knew she did!

And then she felt the power pour out of the materia. Immediately she opened her eyes to see a flash of fire rake across the grass not far from where she sat.

A moment later, as quickly as it had come, it faded away.

"Damn!" Yuffie exclaimed in frustration.

A subtle change in the shadows made her twist around. She immediately recognized the man who was just a few feet away from her, slowly walking toward her.

"Reno!" she snapped.

"Hey pest," he said with his usual smirk.

"What are you doing here?" she said, hopping to her feet.

Reno twirled his nightstick idly in his hand then laid it to rest across his shoulder.

"Just happened to be in the neighborhood," he replied. "I heard a new bar opened up in town."

"You mean the Silver Dragon?" she said. "It's a restaurant, not a bar."

"They serve drinks, don't they?" he pointed out.

Yuffie just looked at him, realizing immediately there wasn't any point in arguing about it. It was an argument she couldn't possibly win.

"If you're planning on going there I hope you brought plenty of gil with you," she said. "It's very expensive."

Reno shrugged.

"I'm the head of the Turks," he reminded her. "I've got plenty of gil to burn. We've been doing quite well lately, thank you very much."

"So you've told me MANY times," she commented. "But how did you get a reservation? I've heard that they're booked up for months. It's the 'in' place to be in Wutai."

"Well," Reno replied, tapping his nightstick on his shoulder. "I don't exactly have one."

Yuffie's eyebrows raised.

"And just how do you expect to get in then?" she questioned. "You're certainly not going to manage it with your charm."

"That's what I like about you," he observed. "You've always got a kind word for everyone."

"I do try," Yuffie replied with a gracious smile.

"As for how I'm going to get in...I was hoping you could help me out in that regard."

Yuffie stared at him for a moment.

"After all, I'm sure the daughter of the Lord of Wutai wouldn't have to worry about anything so mundane as a reservation," he continued.

It took Yuffie a moment to digest this. She rested her hands against her hips.

"And what makes you think I have any inclination whatsoever to accompany you?" she asked.

"Well, it would be a sacrifice on my part," he replied. "But I would think the advantages to you would be obvious. To be seen at the 'in' place in Wutai, as you so succinctly put it, with someone as prestigious as the head of the Turks, a man know the world over for his charm and grace. I would think that any girl would jump at the chance."

Yuffie just shook her head.

"You know Reno, with that swelled head of yours, its a wonder you can fit through the door of ANY building. I think I'll pass."

Reno gave her a look.

"Pass? Why would you want to do that? You'd rather sit here playing with your materia?"

"I wasn't playing," she retorted. "I was experimenting. I was trying to use two materia at the same time."

"Huh?"

She held up her hands, showing him the materia.

"I have an ice and a fire materia. I was trying to cast them both at once."

"Why would you want to do that?" he questioned.

"Just because I can!" she exclaimed. If he wasn't sharp enough to realize the benefits of using two materia at once, she wasn't about to explain it to him.

"But nobody can do that," he stated.

"How do you know?" she replied.

"Well, no one's ever done it," he said doubtfully.

"Just because no one's done it before doesn't mean it's not possible," she replied. "I'm close to doing it. I can feel it."

Reno just gave her a skeptical look.

"It's true!" she stated.

"How long have you been trying?" he countered.

"Today? A few hours. But I've been working on it for months. If I can pull it off, I'll be famous. No one else can do that."

"Good for you," Reno said, obviously not very impressed. "But you can do that anytime. C'mon Yuf, I really need your help here."

"All the more reason for me to say no," she replied.

He growled.

"I can't believe you won't help me out here," he protested. "Especially after all the things I've done for you."

Yuffie eyebrows shot up.

"All the things you've done for me?" she exclaimed. "What did you ever do for me?"

Reno glared at her.

"My, how quickly we forget. I've only saved your life about a dozen times."

"You didn't save my life," she countered. "I could've gotten out of all those situations without anyone's help."

"I did too save your life," he retorted. "You even admitted it once."

"I only told you that to lull you into a false sense of security so I could steal your gil," she replied with a smile.

"What about the time you got me thrown in jail for entering your father's garden? You owe me for that. And I didn't even fry you with my nightstick when I got out."

Yuffie still looked unimpressed.

"And afterwards I convinced my father to hire you as a mercenary at a very lucrative rate of pay," she reminded him.

Reno stared at her for a moment. He couldn't think of any other logical reasons to convince her to come, so he did what came natural, he resorted to whining.

"C'mon," he pleaded.

Yuffie dropped her materia back in her pouch and folded her arms across her chest.

"What's in it for me?" she demanded.

Reno paused for a moment.

"You mean besides getting to be seen with me?" he questioned.

Yuffie didn't even deign to reply to that.

"You get a free meal out of it," he suggested.

Yuffie considered that.

"And you get to piss off your old man," he continued. "I'm sure he won't be pleased to hear you went out with me."

Yuffie didn't reply for a moment. She had to admit that argument had merit. Godo knew what Reno was like, and after seeing them together a few times he had told her exactly what he thought of the idea of her having anything at all to do with him. She was on better terms with her father since she had almost been killed by Vernon, but that still didn't mean that her rebellious side was gone for good. It might be worthwhile to go along just to see the look on her old man's face.

She sighed.

"Well, I suppose."

"Really?" Reno said, surprised.

"Yeah," she said. "As long as you're paying."

"Uh huh."

"And I can have anything I want."

"Fine."

"And you don't call me pest."

"Okay pest," he agreed.

She gave him a look.

"Pick you up at seven?" he questioned.

"Make it eight," she replied. "Seven wouldn't be fashionably late enough. And I hope you have something decent to wear. They do have a dress code you know."

"Of course I know. I am wearing a suit," he pointed out.

Yuffie eyed his clothing with obvious disdain.

"Yeah, except that I heard you actually have to button that top button there and tie that tie properly. And I don't know whether it's actually true, but rumor has it that they even expect you to keep your shirt tucked in, hard as that may be to believe."

"Hey, I know how to get dressed up," he responded. "You just wait and see. I'll look so sharp you'll have to fight to keep all the other girls away from me."

"Yeah right," she replied.

"So eight o'clock then?"

"Yes," she said.

Reno nodded.

"Okay, I guess I'll see you then."

He turned and started to walk away.

"Don't be late," she said.

"Oh I won't be," he replied, turning to look at her again. "And I hope you've got a nice dress stored away in your closet somewhere. They've got a dress code for women too, you know."

He turned and strode off toward the town. Yuffie looked down at the tank top, shorts and sneakers she was wearing. When she looked up again there was true fear in her eyes.

"A dress?" she blurted out.

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It was dark. Cloud lifted his head slowly, looking around. The window could clearly be made out, faint light seeping into the room through it. Enough for him to make out the familiar objects of the furniture that surrounded his bed. For some reason he felt puzzled. Something had happened. Something had woken him up. But what?

He had heard something. Hadn't he? He turned to see the dark form of Tifa beside him. She was on her side, facing away from him, her dark hair spilling out on the blanket between them. He smiled.

She moaned.

He frowned, concern etched on his face. He was fully awake now. He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. She flinched back and moaned again. He could feel her body trembling in the second they had been in contact.

"Tifa?" he said tentatively.

She did not respond. Her hand twitched convulsively, as if pushing something away. She moaned again, then spoke. It wasn't clear, but he thought she said the word 'no'.

"Tifa!" he said, more firmly. He rolled over and grabbed hold of her.

She jerked in his arms, again trying to pull away, but this time he had her firmly. She was shivering, but not from cold. In fact, her nightgown was soaked in sweat. She moved convulsively in his arms and cried out again, quite clearly this time.

"No!"

"Tifa, wake up!" he exclaimed.

Her eyes opened. For a moment more she struggled against him. He could hear her breath coming in short gasps. Then suddenly she stopped, finally realizing where she was, and just as quickly she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him to her.

"Oh Cloud," she managed to say. The words came out as an anguished cry.

She clutched him tightly, her arms pulling him so close that she could have given Barret a lesson in hugs. Cloud could feel her heart pounding in her chest. Her body was still trembling. For a long time they said nothing at all, just lay there with their arms around one another, his hand slowly stroking the back of her head, trying to soothe her. Gradually her pounding heart slowed, her breathing became more regular. When Cloud thought she had calmed down enough, he spoke again

"Was it another dream," he hesitated a moment, "about the baby?"

She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. She nodded. She was resting her head on his chest, facing the window. He couldn't see the anguish in her eyes. But he didn't really have to. He pulled her tightly to him.

"The same thing?"

"Uh huh," she said.

For a long time they were silent. His hand slid down and ran along the thin fabric that covered her stomach. How long had she been having nightmares about this now? Months? It had been rare at first, but it had become much more frequent since they had found out that Tifa was pregnant. It had been over a year since they had defeated Jinn, had locked Jenova up on it's home planet, had removed the last threat of it's return. He had thought they were finally done with it. That they could finally put Jenova behind them.

Yet somehow things weren't turning out that way. Jenova was gone, was no longer a threat, but the effects lingered on. Jinn had planted a seed in their minds with his predictions. They hadn't been true. Cloud was sure of it. Red had reassured him over and over. Aeris had told them it had all been a lie. When asked, every one of them said it was nonsense. But still it was obvious the doubts lingered, especially for Tifa. He wasn't sure why, maybe because of what had happened to her. Perhaps Jinn had made a stronger connection with her because it had been her mind he had violated.

Damn Jinn! He was dead. They had beaten him. Or Sephiroth had. In either case he was gone, he was no longer a threat. They should be at peace. They certainly shouldn't have to worry about someone who had died on a planet millions of miles away.

But they did. Somehow Jinn was still affecting them, even after his death, even across all this distance. And what could be done about it? Cloud had no idea how to fight this kind of battle. Give him an opponent in front of him and room to swing his sword and he would stand up against anyone, but what could he do to help Tifa now? How could he fight something that was only in her mind?

And it was all his fault. He hadn't been able to help Tifa on Grouchoon, he hadn't been able to stop Jinn from entering her mind, he hadn't been able to defeat Jinn before he showed them those visions. Even before that he had gone wrong. Tifa wouldn't even have to worry about this in the first place if he hadn't let them infuse him with Jenova cells.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She turned around to look at him.

"What for?"

He shrugged.

"For not being able to help you," he replied bitterly. "For letting Jinn do what he did to you. For having these damn Jenova cells inside me in the first place."

She lifted herself up until she was face to face with him.

"No," she said. "Please don't blame yourself Cloud. There was nothing you could have done about any of that. It's just a dream. It's just a nasty stupid dream. I'm just letting my silly imagination get the better of me. I know nothing is going to happen to our baby."

Even in the dim light he could see her eyes. In spite of her reassurances he could see a shade of sadness there. He hated that. More than anything in the world he wanted her to be happy. He pulled her to him and kissed her. Slowly, longingly,

hoping that somehow that simple act would wipe away all her fears, would make the world all better again. That might not be true, but when their lips parted the sadness in her eyes was gone.

"You just wait and see," he said, patting her stomach. "Our little Cloud is going to be perfect."

A hint of a smile flickered on her face.

"You mean our little Tifa," she responded.

Cloud gave her a look but said nothing, satisfied that she seemed to be feeling better. He pulled himself up, until his back was against the headboard. She turned over, lying on top of him with her back to him. He wrapped his arms around her waist.

"I know I shouldn't worry so much," she said more seriously. "I know Red said the Jenova cells weren't inheritable. I know Jinn was just trying to mess with our minds. I'll try to be strong. I'll try not to think about it."

"It's alright," he replied. "It was just a dream. You can't help what you dream about."

She sighed once again and nodded. For a moment they were silent again.

"Aeris is having trouble in Ifalna," she said slowly.

Cloud did not reply at first. He already knew what was going on in Ifalna. Reeve had been in touch with him quite a bit lately to discuss it. But he hadn't mentioned that to Tifa. He didn't want her to worry about it. He should have known she would have gotten the news from Aeris.

"Yeah, Reeve mentioned something about that to me," he said. "The Church of Humanity, I think he called it."

"They've been making trouble," Tifa went on. "Saying all kinds of nasty things about the Cetra. Saying how they were evil and created Jenova on purpose and had really been trying to enslave the human race themselves."

She turned her head to look at him.

"I know it's nonsense, I know we've been saying that Jinn's visions were not true, but it does seem like a strange coincidence."

They had all shared the visions Jinn has showed them. They all knew that Jinn had shown Aeris the people turning against her because of her Cetra heritage.

"I suppose," Cloud said slowly. He didn't like the turn this conversation had suddenly taken, just when she seemed to have snapped out of it. "But that's not really much of a stretch to make a prediction like that. Given human nature, and our suspicion of anything different, even I probably would have been able to predict that some people might not like the idea of Ifalna."

Tifa nodded slowly without replying.

"Besides," Cloud continued. "He also predicted that Aeris would dump Reeve, and I don't see that happening."

The way Tifa just turned away from him made him frown.

"What?"

For a moment she didn't reply.

"I'm sorry, I should have told you, but she asked me not to mention it," she said slowly.

"Mention what?" he said, with some urgency in his voice, understandably.

She turned to look at him again.

"He asked her to marry him, and she turned him down."

"What?" Cloud said. This was news to him.

"She told him she wasn't ready," Tifa continued.

Cloud didn't know what to say. This was certainly a surprise. He would have never thought Aeris would say no if Reeve asked her to marry him. They certainly seemed in love enough to him. But Aeris had always been the most unpredictable of all of them.

"Well," he said slowly. "You know Aeris. She's always walked to the beat of her own drummer. At least it was only 'I'm not ready'. That's certainly better than 'Go away you pathetic slob.'"

Tifa gave him a look.

"You think Reeve's a pathetic slob?"

"Of course not!" he replied. "I was just using that as an example. It still doesn't mean that she has any intention of breaking up with him."

Tifa thought about that for a moment.

"I suppose," she said doubtfully.

"How did Reeve take it?" he questioned.

"I don't really know," she replied. "I've only heard Aeris version of it. I would think he'd be pretty unhappy about it, considering all that's happened and how he obviously feels about her. He didn't say anything to you?"

Cloud shook his head.

"No, but now that you mention it, he has seemed a little bit down for quite some time now. I just figured he was overworked."

Tifa nodded.

"I hope he's okay," she said.

Cloud did not reply. There really wasn't much he could say.

"I'm sure she'll come around, eventually," Tifa said, almost as if to herself.

"I hope so," he replied. He had started to think so much in terms of Aeris and Reeve being a couple that he really couldn't picture it any other way anymore.

"But still, that doesn't prove anything," Cloud continued, getting back to the matter at hand. "There was another prediction Jinn made. Remember? Mine. And I can tell you honestly that I have had no inclination whatsoever to chop you up into little pieces."

Tifa smiled.

"That's very reassuring."

He looked straight into her eyes.

"I mean it," he said.

She nodded and rested her head against his chest once more.

"Maybe we should go pay them a visit," she said.

"Reeve and Aeris?" he questioned.

She nodded.

"It's been a while."

Cloud nodded. They hadn't seen Aeris or Reeve in a couple of months. It might be nice to pay their old friends a visit again, especially if it would cheer Tifa up.

"Sure," he said. "Why not."

He ran his hand slowly through her hair.

"We'll get through this, no matter what happens," he continued. "We always have." His hand locked on hers. "And we always will, as long as we're together."

She looked at him again and smiled, then lowered her head once more.

"As long as we're together," she repeated softly.