

CHAPTER II: LAND HO!

"We're here," Cid announced.

"Good," Barret replied. "Help us get these boxes into the ship."

There were a dozen large boxes lined up along the dock beside the submarine.

Cid looked at Barret for moment, then flicked the butt of his cigarette into the ocean.

"Hello to you too," he said as he grabbed hold of one of the boxes.

With all of them helping it only took a few moments to get the cargo aboard. Shortly after that Cid was piloting them out to sea.

"So where did you say this place was?" Cid questioned.

"All we know is that it's south of Mideel," Barret replied.

"You realize that that isn't much to go on," Cid stated.

Barret nodded.

"Yeah, I know, but it's all we got. I guess if we just go south we're bound to run into it. How hard could it be to miss a continent?"

Cid shrugged. He wasn't sure Barret quite grasped how big the oceans really were, but there wasn't much else they could do. His luck hadn't failed him yet.

As they turned south Barret leaned against the bulkhead and stared off to the west. Cid heard him mumble something.

"What was that?" he questioned.

Barret turned toward him.

"Nothin'," he replied. But then continued in spite of his response.

"Just thinkin' about Marlene. About how much I miss her."

Cid did not reply. He had never given much thought to Barret's daughter. Never given much thought to kids at all. But now that he was about to have one of his own he thought he was beginning to understand how Barret felt.

"I'm away from her so much," Barret continued. "I just hope she understands."

Cid gazed out at the ocean ahead of them. What could he say?

"I always say I'll make it up to her when I see her again," Barret said. "But there really is no way you can do that, is there? No sooner do I get back when something else seems to come up."

This was obviously something that bothered Barret a great deal.

"But what can I do?" Barret asked, looking up at Cid suddenly. "It's not like I choose to be away from her. I've got all kinds of obligations as Mayor. I have to do my best for Corel. And I couldn't take off with Cloud in trouble. I couldn't just walk away when you guys need me. Could I?"

Cid pulled out another cigarette and lit it.

"Could I?" Barret repeated.

Cid had been locked in 'listen' mode. It startled him for a moment when he realized that Barret was suddenly expecting an answer.

"Of course you couldn't," he replied.

Barret stood there for a long time without saying anything else. In spite of the fact that he had promised himself this dozens of times before, he vowed that when this was over he would take some time off to spend with his little girl.

Below deck Zack sat in a large room that served as a mess hall. Reeve, Red, Nipala and Yuffie sat together at the far end of the room, while Tifa sat by herself off in one corner. Aeris entered the room and came over to him.

She sat down beside him. He had a brooding look on his face.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"I've been thinking too much," he replied.

"About what?" she asked.

"About what's happened," he replied. "I killed quite a few people when I was with Bennis, and I know I was in SOLDIER, and I'm sure I was in my share of battles before I was shot. But all those people were able to fight back. But what I did to those people in Nibelheim and Cosmo Canyon. That was just cold blooded murder."

Aeris looked at him sympathetically.

"But it wasn't your fault," she said. "You were being controlled by Hojo."

"I know," he replied. "But I can't help thinking there must have been something I could have done to stop it."

Aeris looked at him, knowing there really wasn't anything she could say to comfort him. Hojo had been like a plague across the land, ruining everything and everyone he came into contact with. He had killed her father, imprisoned her and her mother, as well as Red. He had experimented on Cloud and Zack, as well as destroyed his own son. He had tortured Vincent. The list went on and on. Of all the people employed by Shinra, he had been by far the worst. Even now, after he was long dead, he was still destroying lives. She wondered if it would ever end.

"A lot of unpleasant things happened to all of us," she said slowly, "because of Shinra. You weren't the only one who was forced to do things against your will."

Aeris voice faded into silence, thoughts of her own captivity seeping unbidden into her consciousness. Lying in pain in a cold dark room, screaming for her mother. But Ifalna never came. She was suffering her own brand of torture at Hojo's hand. Locked up in another room, but not too far away. Not far enough so that she couldn't hear the anguished calls of her daughter.

Aeris took a deep breath.

"But it's all over now," she continued. "There's no point in dwelling on the past. None of us can change what happened to us."

Zack looked up at her and smiled faintly.

"Thank you for trying to make me feel better," he said. "But the truth is I don't know if I'll ever get over this."

Aeris nodded and couldn't help but look over at Tifa, who had often agonized over the role she had played in the destruction of the two mako reactors in Midgar. Would it help Zack to talk to her, or would that just make things worse?

Zack followed her gaze.

"She's taking this awfully hard," he said. "Do you think we should tell her what Cloud said to you before he left?"

Aeris did not answer for a moment, but continued to look at Tifa, who had not spoken two words to anyone since they had come on board.

She looked back at Zack.

"No," she said. "That's something that she should hear straight from him. I'm sure we'll all be reunited soon enough."

Zack sat back in his chair and shrugged.

Just then Vincent came into the room. He looked around for a moment, then walked over to Reeve.

"I have something for you," he said.

Reeve looked up in surprise. He saw that Vincent was holding something in his hand.

"I was talking it over with Cid and Barret," Vincent said. "We all agreed that if you're going to come with us, you'll be better off if you have some kind of weapon. I think this would be appropriate."

Vincent held a sawed off shotgun out in front of him.

"It's called the Super Shot ST," Vincent said. "It doesn't have much range, but you don't have to be much of a shot to use it. Just point it in the general direction of your opponent and it's pretty likely you'll hit em. Just make sure none of us are in

the way when you use it."

Reeve just stood there looking at the gun.

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea," he stated.

"Just take it," Vincent said firmly. "You're not going to be much use to us using only your fists."

Reeve wasn't going to argue with that. But still he felt reluctant to take the weapon. He had never been much of a fighter, and he had never used a gun before. He wasn't sure he'd be able to use it if it came down to it.

Still, Vincent didn't look like he would take no for an answer.

Reeve took the gun and held it awkwardly in his hands.

"C'mon," Vincent said. "I'll take you up on deck and show you how to use it."

Reeve followed Vincent up into the conning tower, feeling somehow like a petulant child being forced to do something he didn't want to. Cid and Barret glanced at them when they appeared but then paid them no notice.

"All right," Vincent said. "The safety is over here," he indicated "Go ahead and release it."

Reeve obeyed.

"You've already got shells in the gun. I'll show you how to load it in a minute. See that sight there, you just align that with the target."

Reeve brought the gun up to his shoulder and aimed out into the ocean.

"You don't have to be too particular. Like I said before, with this gun you can just point and shoot."

Reeve wrapped his finger around the trigger.

The gun fired. Vincent jumped back at the loud retort. He had not expected Reeve to fire just then. Cid and Barret jerked around in surprise. Reeve himself stumbled backwards, banging hard into the bulkhead, and then fell to the ground.

Vincent stood there and looked at him for a moment.

"By the way, when you fire, you might want to brace yourself. It does have a bit of a kick."

Reeve dropped the gun and folded his arms across his chest. He could see both Cid and Barret trying hard to stifle grins.

"Yeah, I'll keep that in mind," he said.

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Cloud stood on the deck of the submarine as it pulled up to the dock. Steep hills surrounded the harbor on three sides, the fourth being open to the ocean. The city of Mysteria lay on the slopes of the hill, the roofs of the houses glittering in the morning light. Directly to the south of him he saw a wide roadway leading up the hill to an enormous white tower at the top.

Magnus came up beside him.

"That's the Presidential Palace," he said, nodding toward the tower. "C'mon."

They left the ship and started up the hill. Cloud looked around him as he walked. He always liked to visit new places. The architecture was a little different from what he was used to. There seemed to be more towers and spires. The streets were crowded. Most people he noticed were short with dark hair, and the dress of choice seemed to be long flowing robes and sandals. Other than that, they looked pretty much the same as anyone he would see in Junon.

They reached the base of the tower. Cloud looked up. It rose into the sky above him, even taller than he had first realized. At the top of the hill, it must be able to be seen from miles away.

They entered and Cloud looked around. The feeling of enormity extended to the inside. The ceiling was high above him, held aloft by white stone columns.

They walked up a majestically curving staircase. Then along a wide hallway, a balcony overlooking the lower floor on their

right. Finally they turned into another room, just as ornate as the rest of the building. Two people stood in the room. One was a slightly balding middle aged man, the second a young woman with blonde hair and, Cloud noticed immediately, dark purple eyes.

The man came over to them as soon as they entered.

"Magnus, you're back," he said.

Magnus nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Vice President," he replied. He looked at Cloud.

"Cloud Strife, this is Vice President Gram."

The Vice President reached out and shook his hand.

"There's no need to be formal here," he said. "Just call me Gram. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you're coming here."

Cloud shrugged.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't really know if I'm going to be able to help you."

"I'm sure you will be quite helpful," Gram answered immediately. The woman had come up behind Gram and was now looking at Cloud carefully. Gram turned toward her.

"This is my daughter, Wisteria," he said.

Cloud nodded to her. She just stood there looking at him, a faint smile on her lips.

"I have a meeting in a few minutes," Gram said. "I just wanted to meet you. We can talk more later. Wisteria will show you to your room. If you want anything, just ask her."

"Thanks," Cloud replied. Wisteria smiled at him.

The Vice President left the room.

Magnus came up beside Cloud.

"I've got to go too," he said. "I'm sure I'll be seeing you again soon enough."

Magnus followed Gram out the door.

Cloud looked at Wisteria again. She stood there for a moment looking at him.

"I've heard a lot about you," she said. "But they didn't tell me you were so...handsome."

Cloud blushed.

"Uh...thanks," he said. He couldn't help noticing how pretty she was, but he didn't say anything.

"C'mon," she said, taking his hand. "I'll take you for a little tour before I show you your room. Unless you'd just like to go there first."

"No," Cloud said hesitantly. "A tour would be fine."

They spent the next hour walking around the palace. Then they stopped to get something to eat. Finally, Wisteria brought him to his room. It was a large room, beautifully furnished. She walked in with him and sat down on his bed.

"Will this be acceptable?" she asked.

"Of course," Cloud replied.

He unstrapped his sword and leaned it against the wall.

"How can you carry that thing around?" she asked. "It looks so heavy."

"Actually it's surprisingly light," he replied.

"I guess it would be for a strong young man like you," she said. "But it must get uncomfortable sometimes. Doesn't it ever make you back hurt?"

Cloud shrugged.

"Sometimes," he replied.

She patted the bed next to her.

"Come sit down," she said.

He hesitated for a moment, then sat down beside her. She reached behind him and started massaging his back.

"Maybe this will make you feel better," she said.

He stood up immediately.

"Uh..that's not necessary," he stammered.

She stood up right beside him.

"What's the matter," she questioned. "The shy type? I find that very attractive in a man."

She moved even closer to him, until she was just inches away. Her hair brushed up against him.

"My father told me to give you anything you wanted. So if there's anything you see that you like, anything at all, just name it, and it's yours. If fact, I'd be happy to give it to you."

Cloud stood there for quite some time before he found his voice again.

"That...that's very kind of you, but all I really..."

Suddenly Magnus appeared in the doorway.

"Cloud," he said, "I've been looking all over for you. We may have gotten a lead on your father. We're going to check it out, and I thought you might want to come along."

Cloud stepped away from Wisteria, who just stood there looking at Magnus.

"Of course," he said. He walked over and put his sword back on. Then he turned to Wisteria.

"Sorry, I gotta go."

She smiled at him.

"I'm sure I'll see you again soon," she said.

Her smile disappeared as soon as he turned his back. She glared at Magnus darkly as they both walked out the door.

"I'm sure they'll be plenty of time for us to get to know one another," she said softly.

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"There's land ahead," Cid announced. "I'm going to bring us up."

They had cruised southward on the surface for most of the day. But as evening approached the skies had grown dark with clouds and the wind had started to blow strongly from the east. Soon the rains had come and the wind was blowing whitecaps up around them. The submarine was pitched and tossed about roughly in the waves. When Yuffie had started to turn green Cid decided they had had enough and had ordered them to submerge. Beneath the surface the storm could not affect them, and the turbulence they had felt above the water immediately disappeared.

They had been running underwater ever since.

Yuffie came up beside Cid.

"Is it still rough on the surface?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so," Cid replied. "But we should be making landfall soon, so you won't have to put up with it for long."

"You better hope so," she replied.

Cid glanced over at her.

"Well, if you're going to loose it, don't aim it at me!" he exclaimed.

The submarine broke the surface and immediately started to buck violently. It seemed that the storm was worse than ever.

"Oh brother," Yuffie muttered.

Cid got up quickly and opened the hatch to the conning tower. He stepped out into the rain. It was not coming down hard, but the wind blew it fiercely around them. He shaded his face from it and looked south. He could see a darker mass in the darkness in front of them.

Barret and Red followed him up.

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

"We'll have to find a spot to land," Cid replied. "Someplace isolated. We don't know anything about this continent. We don't know where the cities or the harbours are. And we don't know whether the natives are friendly. And I don't think we want to announce ourselves until we are sure. The people who took Cloud went through great pains to conceal their tracks. I suspect that they wouldn't be happy to see us."

"I think they already have," Yuffie commented.

"What?" Cid turned toward her. She was standing behind them looking out into the darkness. She pointed.

"Isn't that a ship?"

They both turned and looked out over the water in the direction she indicated. They could all see the dark outline of a ship.

"Shit," Cid exclaimed. He grabbed the binocular and looked through it.

"Looks like some kind of military vessel," he said grimly.

Cid saw a flash of light, then they heard a whistling sound, and suddenly a geyser of water shot up to their left.

"Shit!" Cid exclaimed again. "They're shooting at us."

"We've got to submerge," Barret yelled.

"No," Cid replied. "It's too shallow here."

"Can we shoot back?" Yuffie asked.

Cid shook his head.

"The sub is designed to attack from underwater. We don't have a chance while surfaced."

"So what do we do?" Yuffie asked.

Another shell hit nearby, much closer this time.

Cid looked toward the shore.

"We'll have to make a run for the beach. We may have to abandon the sub, but we may be able to get away on land."

"Then how are we supposed to get back?" Yuffie exclaimed.

"How the hell should I know!" Cid shot back. "But if we stay here we're just going to get sunk, and we won't be able to get back then either, now will we?"

The whistling sound came again, and then there was a tremendous explosion near the rear of the submarine.

"We've been hit!" Barret exclaimed.

Cid looked back. There was a gaping hole near the stern. He could see water rushing in.

"We're goin' down!" he yelled. "Abandon ship!"

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Tifa looked up as Rude sat down beside her.

"How are you?" he asked.

She looked at him for a moment before answering.

"What, is it your turn to try to cheer me up?" she questioned, rather harshly. She took a sip from the drink she held in front of her without looking at him. It was obvious to Rude that it had not been her first one.

"You can't blame your friends for being concerned about you," he replied slowly.

She sat there staring down into her drink for a long moment.

"It's just that for the first time I finally thought it was over," she eventually said softly. "Hojo is dead, and the plots he left behind him destroyed. Sephiroth is gone. Shinra is no more. After all that struggle, I finally thought we would have some peace. Is that too much to ask?"

She looked up at him finally, a questioning look in her dark brown eyes. He had to turn away. He wanted so much to have an answer for her, but he knew he didn't.

"No it's not," he replied. "But I'm sure you'll have your peace soon enough. You've made it this far, don't falter now. You've just got to be strong for a little longer."

"You don't know that," she shot back. "You don't know how long it will take to find him. For all you know we may never..."

She stopped, and he could see she was struggling to remain in control of herself. She took another gulp from her drink.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" Rude questioned.

She looked at him, and anger flared briefly in her eyes. But then it faded.

"That's seems like an odd question, coming from you," she said.

"Well," he replied. "I admit I've had more than my fair share at times. But I've been doing it for most of my life. You feel the effects much more quickly when you don't drink a lot."

"Are you trying to tell me I'm drunk?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "But you seem to be headed in that direction."

She looked at him for a moment more, then decided to dismiss it and return to their original subject.

"Even if we do find him, who can say that would be the end? Who can say he wouldn't run off again by himself the first time something else came up? That's what really hurts, you know. I can understand him wanting to meet his father. Everyone wants to know about their family. But he just took off without a word. Why didn't he tell me? Did he think I would try to stop him? I don't see how, if he cares about me at all, he wouldn't have said something to me!"

Suddenly it seemed as if the whole vessel started to bob and pitch violently.

"Whoa," Tifa said, grabbing hold of the table in front of her. Fortunately she was holding her drink in her hand when it happened. "Maybe I have had too much to drink."

"No," Rude replied. "I feel it too. We must have surfaced."

He looked around for a moment. He thought about going to find out what was going on, but he didn't want to leave Tifa.

"I guess he just thought this was something he had to do by himself," Rude continued.

"But why?" she exclaimed. "What is it with you guys that you think you have to take on the world alone?"

"Maybe he's just trying to protect you."

"Oh, that is just so much macho bullshit," she said angrily. "How many times have we fought side by side? He doesn't need to protect me. If he's in danger, I want to be there with him."

She suddenly stopped and looked at him sharply.

"Why am I even telling you this," she said bitterly. "You're a Turk. You don't care."

He returned her gaze, and if he felt any emotion, he did not show it.

"I do care..." he said finally. For a moment he hesitated, unsure whether to finish the sentence. But it was something he needed to say.

"...about you."

She sat there for a long time, just looking at him without speaking. When she did speak, her voice was cold.

"You told me a while back that you didn't know what they were going to do to sector seven before it was destroyed. But let me ask you this. If you had known. If you had been told what was going to happen in time to do something about it, would it have made any difference?"

Rude looked down at the floor. They both knew what the answer to that question must be. He had thought that they could somehow get past the fact that he was a Turk, that she could put aside what had happened in the past. He had been hoping they could become friends. But that question crushed what little hope he may have had.

Suddenly he realized he had nothing more to say.

He started to get up, when suddenly there was a massive explosion. The ship rocked beneath them, and they were both thrown to the ground. He heard Tifa cry out.

Tifa scrambled to her feet, and saw Rude getting up as well, looking around. She could see blood on his forehead. She followed his gaze to the stern. Water was flowing into the room through the open hatch.

She grabbed hold of his arm.

"We've got to get out of here," she said, starting toward the bow, but he didn't move.

"Reno is back there," he said, looking toward the stern. "I've got to see if he's all right."

He pulled out of her grasp and ran toward the rear hatch, splashing now through the water that continued to flow in. She stood there for a second, looking back and forth between him and the forward hatch. Then she turned and ran after him.

The water was running around her ankles as she entered the rear compartment. She could see Rude up ahead, stooping over something. She ran over to him.

As she came up beside him she saw that Reno was trapped beneath a maze of pipes that had fallen from the ceiling. Rude was scrambling desperately to lift them out of the way. She joined him and they quickly pulled the last few pipes off him.

Rude looked down at him.

"Can you stand?"

Reno did not reply but started to get up. Immediately he groaned in pain and sank back down again.

"My right leg is hurt," he said.

"I'll help you up," Rude said, grabbing hold of him. He looked around. The rear escape hatch was right above them.

Tifa followed his glance. Without a word she ran over to the ladder and up the few steps until she was right beneath the hatch. She hesitated for a moment. If they had already started to sink, and she opened it...

She looked down. The water was now up to Rude and Reno's waists. They had no choice.

She spun the wheel and pushed the hatch up. Water cascaded down around her, nearly knocking her off the ladder, and for a moment she did think they were underwater. But then the deluge stopped. It had just been a wave crashing over the ship. She could hear the wind whistling above her.

"Hurry up!" she yelled.

Rude dragged Reno over to the ladder. She grabbed hold and helped hoist him up. She scrambled out onto the heaving deck of the ship. She couldn't see anyone else in the darkness around them. The deck was awash.

She reached down and pulled Reno up as quickly as she could. She lost her balance and fell down, with Reno on top of her. She saw Rude begin to emerge.

A huge wave rolled across them. The ship pitched violently, and she felt herself being dragged across the deck. She scrambled desperately for handholds, but all she could find to hold on to was Reno. Suddenly the deck was no longer below her, and she found herself completely submerged beneath the water.

She kicked desperately until her head broke the surface. Reno splashed up beside her, but she could see nothing else in the darkness. She looked around, bobbing in the waves, but saw no sign of anyone. Then a large wave lifted them up for a moment, and she saw the dark bulk of the submarine off to her right. But even as she looked it slowly sank down until it

had disappeared below the waves.

She cried out, hoping the others would hear her, but the wind blew away her words. She looked around desperately, but saw no sign of Rude. Another wave crashed over them, and she found herself being swept away. She grabbed hold of Reno again. She looked at him. In the dark rough water it was hard to make out anything, but he seemed to be conscious. He was struggling feebly to remain afloat, but when she called out his name he did not respond.

Another wave lifted them up, and this time she saw the dark mass of land ahead of them. They had almost reached shore when the ship had gone down. Suddenly she realized she could hear the crashing of the waves on the beach above the sound of the wind.

She kicked out as hard as she could in that direction, dragging Reno along. The rough seas splashed in her face, almost choking her, and the current dragged at her. But after a while it seemed that the sound of the waves on the shore was closer.

She looked ahead, but she could see nothing in the darkness. She felt her strength ebbing. Her throat was raw from drinking seawater, and her head was throbbing. Reno hardly helped at all. He seemed more of a burden than anything else, and she almost was tempted to let go of him. But she didn't. She just gritted her teeth and told herself the beach was just ahead.

She had said that to herself a dozen times, and was almost about to despair to the reality of it, when suddenly she felt herself being dragged across hard sand. She gave one last kick, and then the sea ebbed away, and she found herself with solid earth beneath her.

With the last of her strength she pulled Reno up until they were on dry land. She fell down on her knees beside him, suddenly realizing that she was going to be violently ill. She turned away from him and found herself retching into the dark sand. Then she crawled a few feet away and collapsed to the earth in exhaustion.