

CHAPTER IX: A DESPERATE DECISION

The rain came down softly. The cave was surrounded by deep forest and the canopy of leaves above Aeris' head partially shielded her from the shower. Partially but not completely. Her hair was limp with moisture and she could feel the wetness of her dress around her shoulders. It was not very comfortable, but she remained where she was, on her knees sifting carefully through the plants not far from the cave entrance, trying to find the ones she needed.

It had been raining since late last night. Not hard, but steady. Aeris wasn't sure exactly when it had started. She had woken up during the night to hear the soft patter of drops through the leaves outside. She wasn't sure what exactly had awoken her. Not the rain surely. She had looked over at Cloud, thinking perhaps it had been him. He had been restless earlier in the night, but when she looked he was quiet. She had lifted her head and looked around, but had seen nothing out of the ordinary. Too tired to worry about it, she had gone back to sleep.

She had hoped Cloud would feel better in the morning, but that hadn't been the case. If anything, he seemed worse. Though the pain in his hand had lessened, he had a fever. When he tried to get up he could barely stand. She had made him rest, telling him it would pass, but inwardly she was concerned. She had never encountered anything quite like this. The wound on his hand had been small. It was closed now, should be well on its way to healing, but his arm was still red and inflamed. He couldn't use it at all. There was obviously something seriously wrong, something her herbs, though they could lessen the symptoms, could not heal. Not quickly anyway. It seemed it would be some time before he recovered, if he recovered at all. She didn't want to think about that, but she had no choice. What would she do if his condition continued to worsen?

She didn't know. She could only hope that her poultice would eventually work. He was weak, but he didn't seem on death's doorstep quite yet. Given some time he could still recover.

Of course this did put a crimp in their search for their adversary. Cloud was in no condition to walk, much less wander around the island, and if they ran into their pursuers he obviously wouldn't be able to fight. Their goal had narrowed from actively seeking out the enemy to just surviving, but she wasn't sure how long that could continue. Things just seemed to be going from bad to worse.

She managed to find a few green stalks of the plant she was looking for. Gathering them up she stood up again, satisfied that she had enough.

There wasn't any point in worrying about it. She didn't know what the future held. They'd get by, somehow.

She walked back to the cave. Cloud lay near a small fire where she had left him. The air was damp and cool, and she wanted to keep him warm. She sat down by the fire, dropping her herbs beside her.

"You shouldn't go out in the rain like that Aeris," Cloud said. "You're all wet."

She shrugged, sorting through the plants she had collected.

"We needed more of these herbs," she replied. "They have to be reapplied periodically if they're going to do any good."

Cloud nodded. He wasn't happy with his condition. He wasn't happy seeing Aeris out in the wet, exposed to potential enemies, to try to help him. He was mad, in fact. Mad at himself for getting in this condition, for being so clumsy. Yes, he knew it was silly, but he couldn't help the way he felt. They were supposed to be looking for their enemy. They didn't have forever. It was only a matter of time before their pursuers found them, or they starved to death. Instead of being helpful he had turned into a hindrance. Not only couldn't he search but Aeris had to waste time taking care of him. Here she was, out in the rain, finding herbs to make him feel better, taking a chance on getting sick herself. And all the time the clock was ticking.

He smacked his hand against the ground beside him in frustration.

"What's wrong?" Aeris questioned, noting the look on his face.

He didn't reply for a moment. Just looked at her. Then he sighed.

"Nothing," he said. "Well, nothing we can do anything about. I'm just sorry I got you into this."

"You didn't get me into anything," Aeris replied. "I was the one who got you into it, if you remember. I was the one who got on the gold chocobo. If anyone should be sorry, it should be me."

"No, don't say that," he responded. "It wasn't anyone's fault, I guess. You were doing what you thought was best. Besides, you didn't drag me onto the bird, I jumped on of my own free will."

"You were doing it to try to protect me," she said.

He couldn't deny that. He stared off at the far wall for some time.

"I'm just frustrated, that's all," he finally said. "All these bad things are happening. When are we going to have some good luck?"

Aeris didn't have an answer for that. She shivered. She was sitting right next to the fire but she was still wet and cold. The problem with the fire was no matter how she sat there was always a part of her that was facing away from it. She wished she had a change of clothes, or at the least a blanket to wrap around herself.

She could wish all she wanted, that wouldn't make it happen.

Finally satisfied with her concoction she scooted over beside Cloud. She carefully removed the old dressing. His arm was almost hot to the touch. Inspecting it she saw the lines of red still ran up it almost to his elbow, which was about as bad as they had been before she had started her treatment. At least it didn't seem to be getting worse.

Cloud sat up with some difficulty, trying to get a good look at his arm, but as soon as he managed it he felt a wave of dizziness. He held his head with his good hand, closing his eyes. Dammit! He could barely move. How long was he going to have to endure this?

"Are you all right?"

Aeris voice barely registered. It was as if he was hearing her from some great distance, and not right beside her. He shook his head slowly and tried to tell her he wasn't feeling well at all, but he was not sure whether he actually said anything at all. He needed to rest. His head sank down until it encountered something soft and cool.

Aeris just looked at Cloud as his head came to rest on her shoulder. His eyes were closed. He almost looked like he had fallen asleep.

She placed her new poultice on his arm, trying not to disturb him, though it was difficult with him leaning on her. He needed some rest. She could feel the heat coming off his forehead. He was burning up. Probably the best thing for him was to get some sleep.

Aeris shifted herself slightly so that her back was against the cavern wall. That was a bit more comfortable. She sat there for a long time, looking down at the top of Cloud's head. Occasionally he shifted restlessly but he didn't wake up.

She smiled, looking at him. He almost seemed like a small child in her arms. He had always had a childlike quality. He probably wouldn't appreciate it if she ever told him that, but it was one of the things that had attracted her to him in the first place. Even when she had first met him, when he had acted so tough and unfeeling, she could tell that wasn't really him.

He hadn't known what he wanted then. Hadn't even known who he was for sure.

And then she had made him make that stupid promise. To be her bodyguard. To protect her.

It had only been a whim at the time. She hadn't really meant anything by it. She hadn't meant for him to take it so seriously. She hadn't known what they were going to be getting themselves into. She had to admit it had been nice to have him say it, to have a protector. To have someone be her knight in shining armor. Wasn't that what a lot of girls dreamed of?

She had been so naive.

And then the whole thing with Sephiroth. She didn't think any of them really understood what they were getting themselves into at first, didn't think any of them understood the danger. She certainly hadn't, not until the Temple of the Ancients. It was only then, after she spoke to the planet, that she realized just how great their peril was. By then she thought of the others as her friends. She didn't want to see any of them get hurt. She could see the way, she knew what she had to do, get to the city of the Ancients and pray for Holy. She also knew she was the only one who could do it. Bringing the others along would have just subjected them to unnecessary danger.

So she had tried to do it alone. Who could say what would have happened had she taken a different course. Sephiroth had found her, and it had cost her her life, but in the end her friends had succeeded in defeating Sephiroth, and she had been

in the lifestream and able to help them against meteor. Who knows if they would have been able to do that if she lived. And in the end they'd managed to bring her back. It had all worked out for the best.

Yet she knew Cloud had blamed himself for her death, and it was all because of that stupid promise. It was all her fault. She had asked him to be her bodyguard, then, through her own actions, had made it impossible for him to keep his word.

It was over now, it had all been put to right. Cloud *had* saved her, in the end, but even now, she didn't think he ever really forgave himself.

Cloud moved again, his head turning against her. He said something, softly. She couldn't make it out. He didn't sound like he was in pain.

Why was she even thinking about this? It was all water under the bridge. It was over now. They had all made mistakes. She had to keep telling herself it had all worked out in the end. Cloud was happy now. He was married to Tifa. He had a child.

Yet here he was, still trying to protect her. Still trying to fulfill his promise. He didn't have to jump on the chocobo. Did he consider protecting her a life time vow?

She couldn't help but wonder if he would have done it for any of the others.

Would he have done it for Tifa?

She leaned her head back, staring at the far wall.

What a stupid thing to think. Of course he would have done it for Tifa. She was his wife. He loved her.

She could feel Cloud's breath against her arm as he breathed. She couldn't hear the rain anymore. The whole world seemed to have gone completely quiet.

He loved Tifa and yet... she would never forget the words he had said when he had told her he loved Tifa, upstairs in the bar so long ago.

I love you but...

Aeris knew he had feelings for her, and it was mutual. She had told him she had loved him too. Now he was here with her, and Tifa was far away...

Abruptly she realized where these thoughts were taking her. She stiffened. What *was* she thinking? This was somewhere she didn't want to go. It was somewhere she didn't want to go at all!

She looked at Cloud beside her, and suddenly she felt uncomfortable sitting there with him.

She gently disengaged, trying not to wake him, laying him down on the sandy cave floor. He didn't wake up. She stepped away, feeling somehow dirty. Tifa was her best friend. She would never never hurt her. Cloud had made his choice, and it had been the right one.

Hadn't it?

She stood up, folding her arms around herself. She walked away, over to the entrance. She didn't want to think about this anymore.

It was still raining, a bit harder now. This close to the entrance, she could hear the patter of the drops on the leaves. She stood there in the entrance looking out for some time. She felt depressed. Stepping away from Cloud, trying to free her mind of those thoughts, brought her back to reality, and just how precarious their present situation was. Cloud was seriously ill, and she could tell it was going to be a long time before he got better. There was no where to go, no where to get help. She needed to get more food, but the only way to find more was to go out in the rain, something she was reluctant to do again. She had no clothes to change into if she got these soaked.

She turned away, walking back by the fire. She wasn't hungry, but Cloud had to eat to keep his strength up.

He was still sleeping by the fire. She looked around restlessly. She didn't want to stand here beside him. Not right now. She looked farther back, back toward the rear of the cave. She couldn't see much. The light was dim back there. In all the time they had been here she had never taken a look back there.

She walked away from the fire again, heading in the opposite direction this time, toward the rear of the cave. For some reason she had assumed it wouldn't go very far and at first she thought that assessment was accurate, but as she got closer

she saw the wall of stone that made up the back of the cavern was rough and irregular, split with many cracks, some big enough for her to fit through.

She had no desire to fit in any of them, of course. The light from the fire did not extend very deeply into them, and most of them just looked like yawning black holes. She didn't know where they led and didn't want to know. Exploring them just seemed like a good way to get hopelessly lost.

However, she did see something in one narrow split that caught her eye. She couldn't see very far into the tunnel, but she could see well enough to make out small white circular objects on the ground not far within.

She stood there a moment. She could only see a few feet into the tunnel before it faded into darkness. She didn't know how far back it went or what could be lurking there. It made her nervous just looking in there.

Still, that seemed silly. They had been living in the cave for days now and nothing had disturbed them. It was foolish to let some vague fear of the dark stay her, especially if those were what she thought they were.

She made her way forward. The tunnel quickly closed in around her until it brushed up against her on either side. She hesitated. She wasn't normally claustrophobic, but the tight fit made her nervous. She was tempted to turn back. She looked behind her and saw the reassuring flicker of the fire on the walls. That seemed to help diminish her fears. Turning forward again she could barely see more than a few feet in front of her in the darkness, but peering ahead, she saw that her initial assessment had been correct. Lining the floor ahead of her she could see a group of white mushrooms growing.

She tentatively moved toward them again. The tunnel had narrowed to a mere crack, fading into the darkness above her head, but barely wide enough for her to squeeze through. She bent down, reaching forward. She could almost reach the mushrooms now. Looking at them closely she was delighted to see that she was familiar with the type, and they were of a rather tasty variety. It wouldn't exactly be five star restaurant material, but it would be a good change from the green vegetables and fruits they'd been subsisting on up to this point.

She could feel the rocks pressing against her sides, but her hand reached out and gasped one of the mushrooms. She quickly gathered all those within reach. She could only get a few, but she forced her way farther forward, crawling along the ground until she could reach more, only stopping when she felt the stone wall scraping painfully along her hip.

She reached as far as she could, managing to pluck up one last one. She could see quite a few more, but she didn't think she could squeeze forward far enough to reach them. She had enough for one meal anyway. She could save the others for another time.

She started to wiggle backwards, but stopped immediately as a sharp pain shot through her hip. The rock walls were rough and jagged, made of an almost volcanic like substance. She already had half a dozen small scrapes from where her flesh had met the wall. She was beginning to wonder if the mushrooms were worth the effort.

She tried to turn on her side. She heard a tearing sound of her dress ripping and pain laced through her hip again, and she felt like she was just wedging herself in more tightly. At first she had just been irritated with the situation, thinking how stupid she was to get herself in such a position, but now she was beginning to worry. What if she couldn't get out?

She thought about calling out to Cloud, in spite of the potential embarrassment, but he was asleep, and even if he wasn't, he wasn't in any shape to help her.

What a stupid thing to do! She twisted again, trying to force herself backwards in spite of the pain. She could feel the rock cutting into the thigh. She cried out in pain and stopped. This was ridiculous, she thought in frustration. How could she get stuck? What would she do if she couldn't get out?

She pushed against the rock wall in front of her with all her might, more out of frustration than anything else.

Thus, it was quite a shock to her when the wall suddenly gave way.

Aeris raised her hands over her head and cried out as rock suddenly came tumbling down all around her. All light vanished and she found herself in complete darkness, covered with dirt and stones. She turned her head away, trying to protect herself as best she could. She suddenly couldn't breathe. Panic welled up in her as she thought she'd be buried alive.

The rumbling sound of the rocks faded. She lay there, choking and gasping for breath. She realized, with relief, that she wasn't completely buried. The cave in had spared her, though she continued to cough for some time before the dust began to clear.

She sat up, blinking. The wall to her left was gone, freeing her, to her great relief. Still, she still couldn't tell the extent of the collapse. If the tunnel behind her had been sealed, being freed from her trap would be small comfort.

Slowly the darkness around her resolved itself into darker and lighter shades. Again she was relieved when the orange red glow of the fire became evident in the distance. The tunnel was still open!

She gathered what few mushrooms she could find in the rubble and started to get up, but immediately dropped back down to the ground with a cry as pain shot through her right thigh.

Her hand automatically went to her leg. She could feel the tear in her dress, and the wound beneath. She couldn't see any detail in the darkness, but her hand came away wet.

Almost out of reflex she lowered her head and concentrated. A moment later a soft breeze stirred the loose ends of her hair. She felt a refreshing warmth pass through her, fading away again almost immediately.

She touched the wound again, probing the spot. There was no pain.

It had worked.

It had worked! She felt a surge of elation. Her healing powers were back!

She pulled herself up, ignoring the host of minor bruises and scrapes she had received from her ordeal. It was all forgotten now that she knew she had her powers back.

She turned to rush back to Cloud, but then stopped. The cavern she was in had been narrow, with her barely able to fit. Now there was a gaping hole where the wall had been. She couldn't see much of what was revealed there, the light didn't penetrate that far, but she could tell there was a new opening there. The air had a musty smell to it, and she could feel a faint breeze touching her face from somewhere in the darkness beyond. For some reason, she got the impression of an enormous emptiness. A space that was huge, huge and old. Even so, it wasn't any impression that has stopped her.

She could have sworn she'd heard something back there. Somewhere.

She stood perfectly still, straining her ears to listen, deliberately suppressing the wild thoughts that tried to spring into her mind.

Even if it had been something, it was probably just some harmless animal. She didn't like the idea of bats flying around in the darkness back there, but she knew they were relatively harmless, and as long as they stayed away from her she could live with them. Or any small animal. She didn't want to think it was something larger than that. She had to keep telling herself they had been here a long time. If there was something dangerous back there it would have made itself known by now.

Or so she hoped. Maybe it hadn't been able to get to them until she had conveniently opened the way.

She stood up slowly. She heard it again, or something, and she felt her nervousness grow. It didn't sound like an animal. It sounded like...

Footsteps.

She stared into the darkness. She wasn't one to scare easily but she had to admit this was spooking her. Her weapon was back by the fire. She wanted to turn and run back there, she wanted to shout to Cloud for help, but he was sick. He needed to rest. He didn't need to be woken up because she was scared of the dark. And in his condition, what could he do even if he was awake?

"Is someone there?" she found herself calling out. Immediately she regretted it. There was no one the island except their enemy. Did she really think they would answer? She didn't honestly think letting whoever it was know that she knew they were there would scare them away, and it had certainly given away the fact that *she* was here.

She listened intently. She heard no reply, but instead, the sound of a groaning cry from behind her.

She turned and ran back into the main cavern, Cloud's painful cry making her forget the footsteps she might or might not have heard, and the mushrooms that slipped unconcerned out of her hands.

Cloud was writhing on the ground beside the fire.

"Cloud, what's wrong?" Aeris cried out.

He didn't respond. She felt panic begin to well up inside her as she realized he was having some kind of seizure. His whole body shook as the spasms ran through him.

She dropped down beside him, grabbing hold of his arm she closed her eyes and concentrated with all her might.

She waited.

And nothing happened.

She felt nothing. Just like before! She opened her eyes and cried out in frustration. What was going on? She knew her powers worked now. Why couldn't she help him?

She looked around, not sure what to do. Cloud continued to writhe. Just looking at him sent a knot of fear and desperation through her. He was desperately ill. Her meager efforts to help him had been to no avail. Was he going to die?

She touched his forehead. He was still burning up with fever. She knew a high fever over a prolonged period of time was a bad thing. It could cause brain damage, or something like that, or was that just in children? She didn't know for sure, but it seemed quite likely that the seizures were being caused by the high fever. She had to get his temperature down somehow.

She looked around, then scooped up some sand and threw it on the fire, extinguishing it. She stood up and ran over to the entrance, pulling the ribbon out of her hair.

It was still raining. In fact, it was coming down harder now. She paid it no heed. She stood at the entrance looking around for a moment. The rain had pooled in spots in the forest, forming puddles. She ran over to one and dipped her ribbon in it. She turned around and ran back inside. She dropped down to her knees beside Cloud and placed the cloth on his forehead. It wasn't much but it was all she had, and it might provide a bit of relief. She couldn't think of anything else to do.

For what seemed like the longest time he continued to writhe, and she feared her efforts would be for naught. Eventually, however, after what seemed like at least forever to her, and she had gone out twice more to rewet the cloth, his spasms faded, until eventually he lay quiet beside her, though whether the seizures had stopped by her efforts or the own accord she could not say.

She lifted up his head, resting it in her lap. His eyes remained closed, but the seizures did not start again, and he mumbled something. She couldn't make out what it was, but it seemed he was resting comfortably again.

This didn't comfort her much. The seizures had terrified her. She felt something was seriously wrong. She knew her powers worked now, but she hadn't been able to heal him. Why? Whatever he had it was no ordinary affliction. There was something wrong about it. Her healing powers didn't work, and though her herbs seemed to alleviate some of the symptoms, they didn't seem to be healing him either. Whatever he had there was nothing ordinary about it.

The more she thought about it, the more likely it seemed to her that she wasn't going to be able to help him. She couldn't do it alone. She needed help, and there was only one possible source she could turn to. She was almost sure the Cetra here would be able to help him.

She just sat there, looking down at him. He was peaceful now, his face calm and almost innocent looking.

She didn't want him to die. She would do anything to prevent it. She knew he was the one who was most responsible for bringing her back. He was the only one who had never given up hope. She could never repay him for that. She couldn't just sit here and do nothing. If there was any way to contact the outside world, she would do it in an instant, but of course there wasn't. There were no doctors here, unless they were with the Cetra. If she gave up, if she told them she would cooperate with them, would they save him?

She didn't know for sure. She didn't know what they really wanted. They didn't want her dead, she was sure of that, but that didn't mean they needed her cooperation for whatever they had in mind either, and she was almost certain they didn't need Cloud. If she revealed herself to them, would they care about Cloud? Would they just let him die, or perhaps kill him themselves?

She knew Cloud would be dead set against it. All of her friends probably would. She had gone on her instincts one other time and it had gotten her killed.

But what other choice did she have?

The only other choice was to just wait it out, hoping that Cloud would somehow recover.

She didn't think she could stand that, just sitting here waiting to see if he would live or die. She couldn't just stay here and do nothing. If she didn't try to help him and he died, she would never forgive herself. Tifa would never forgive her. She'd never be able to look her friend in the eye again.

She didn't want to leave Cloud. Even for a minute, but, comforting as it might be to stay here and hold him, she wasn't doing him any good this way. She didn't want to reveal herself, she knew the others would probably just think she was being foolish and not thinking again, she knew she might just be making more trouble for both of them, but she didn't know what else to do.

It was all her fault he was here. He had jumped on the chocobo to try to protect her, and look where it had gotten him. Again, again that promise had come back to haunt her, to haunt them both. How she wished she had never gotten him to make it!

It was too late. She couldn't take it back, or make it undone, any more than she could cure him. They were in the situation they were in and no amount of regret would change that. She had to make up her mind.

She looked down at him one more time, her hand coming up to caress his cheek. He moaned softly, but there was no pain in it.

She placed him back gently on the sand once more and stood up.

"I'm sorry Cloud, I have to leave you right now," she said. "I'll be back soon, and I'll bring help."

He didn't reply.

She looked down at him for a moment longer, then turned, her mind made up, and walked resolutely toward the entrance once more.