

CHAPTER X: THE CHOICE

Cid brought the Slipstream down in the same field he had picked Red up the previous time he had come here. Red got out as soon as the plane came to a stop, Cid following behind more slowly.

Red hurried down the trail toward the City of the Ancients.

"Hey, wait up," Cid called. He had aggregated his injury in the battle last night, but even if he had been healthy he would not have been able to keep up with the pace Red was setting.

Red stopped and waited for him to catch up.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I'm worried about Reeve. I'm afraid I was a bit selfish in letting him stay. I should have insisted he come back with us."

Cid shrugged.

"Hey, it was his own choice," he responded. "If he's gotten himself into any kind of trouble, I'm sure we'll be able to straighten it out. I just hope he hasn't gone and gotten himself lost."

They continued down the trail, more slowly this time, with Red resisting the urge to speed down the path as fast as his legs would carry him. If something had happened to Reeve, he would be responsible.

They reached the lake, and both of them stopped and stared in surprise at what they saw there.

Reeve lay on the ground beside the lake, his head resting comfortably on Nipala, who was stretched out, basking in the warm morning sun. Suddenly her head came up and she looked at them. Reeve noticed the motion and turned toward them as well. They both got up and strolled over.

Cid and Red just stood there.

Reeve stopped when he reached them and looked at Red.

"Nanaki," he said. "I'd like you to meet Nipala."

Cid came up next to him.

"Nice goin' Reeve," he whispered.

Red nodded a greeting.

"I've been searching for you for quite some time," he said.

"I know," she said hesitantly. Slowly she told him what she had said to Reeve earlier.

Red stood there thoughtfully for a moment after she had finished.

"I know my father was an ambitious man. For the longest time I thought him a coward. No matter what may have happened, no matter who may have been at fault, if anyone, I think it would be best to lay it to rest now. Certainly neither you or I bear any responsibility. As for the law, well, if I recall correctly, that particular law was stricken from the books over a hundred years ago."

"I knew it!" Reeve exclaimed. "See, you're free to go to Cosmo Canyon."

"Indeed you are," Red agreed. "Would you like to go see it?"

Nipala smiled.

"I can think of nothing I would like better."

~*~

Shu sat down beneath a tree and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Man, I'm tired. My backpack feels like it weighs a ton."

Altin sat down beside him. They had been walking all morning, and now stood in the foothills of the mountains south of

Midgar.

Shu looked at him.

"Well, we've had quite a little adventure, haven't we? I bet you never expected anything like that when you left Junon to join me. What a disaster."

Altim stared off into the distance and shrugged.

"Oh, I don't know about that."

Shu looked at him.

"I would hardly call you going ga-ga over some girl you'll never see again adequate compensation for all we went through. And it's certainly not going to pay our way once we get back to Junon," he remarked.

Altim continued to stare off into the distance, and for a moment Shu thought he was ignoring him. But then Altim turned toward him.

"I might see her again some day," he said slowly. "But that wasn't what I was referring to. I believe we came out of this better than you think. Remember those materia orbs Bennis took from that convoy?"

Shu looked at him sharply for a moment, then his eyes widened.

"You lifted them?" he said.

Altim nodded.

"You've got them here, in your backpack?" Shu questioned.

"Not exactly," Altim replied, looking at him. "They're in yours."

Shu's mouth dropped open. He slipped off his backpack and spilled out the contents. A dozen materia orbs rolled into the grass in front of him.

"Well I'll be a..."

He didn't finish the sentence. He looked at Altim again. Then he reached over and slapped him on the back.

"Son of a bitch," he said. "We'll make a thief out of you yet!"

~*~

Later that day Cloud and the others gathered together at Tifa's bar for an impromptu celebration. Cloud sat at a table watching the others for a while, not really saying much. The constant buzz in his head was gone, and his thoughts were clear, more so than he could ever remember. He was completely cured, yet he was not content.

He looked around slowly. He saw Vincent and Elena in a dark corner of the room, talking quietly together. Red and Nipala lay side by side by the fire, watching the others with amusement. Cid sat at a nearby table, with Shera on his lap, a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, right in the middle of telling a dirty joke. Some role model he was going to be.

But Cloud sat alone.

No, his mind was not clouded now, and he had been thinking a lot about what had happened to him, and to all the others. He had been thinking hard about his own life.

All his life he thought he had been sure of what he wanted. He wanted to be strong, he wanted to be admired. He wanted to be a hero.

And who could say he hadn't achieved that? He and the others had fought Shinra and Sephiroth and won. They had literally saved the world, but he had never been satisfied. To him there had always been another battle to fight, another challenge to face. No matter what he achieved, it had never been enough. He had always been driven, and that drive had consumed his life.

But for some reason he no longer felt that way. Perhaps it was because he finally felt free of Shinra's shadow. Perhaps it was because he had had the strength of will to fight off Hojo's influence. Perhaps he was just maturing, although he

thought that unlikely. Nevertheless, he no longer felt an overwhelming urge to excel.

For the first time that he could remember, he wanted something else out of life.

He wanted to share it with someone else.

It was time to make a decision.

He got up slowly and walked upstairs. The sounds of the others slowly faded away below him. He walked down the hall toward Tifa's room.

As he approached the door opened and someone stepped out. She stopped when she saw him, her eyes glinting in the light.

"How's Zack?" he asked.

"Resting comfortably," she replied. "He still has a headache, but I'm sure he'll be fine."

"He still doesn't remember anything?"

She shook her head.

"From before he was shot? No, and I don't know whether he ever will. He remembers what happened afterward, though, all too well."

Cloud nodded.

"We all know it wasn't his fault."

"He knows that too, but I'm afraid it doesn't make him feel any better."

She looked at him.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," he said. "I guess it just didn't affect me as much. Maybe because I was a failed experiment."

"Or maybe it was because you have more strength of will than you give yourself credit for," she said.

He looked at her and then looked down at the ground.

"Maybe," he replied.

He looked up at her again.

"Aeris..."

She returned his gaze. Her soft green eyes looking at him expectantly, innocently.

"I need to talk to you about something important. I couldn't tell Tifa. I don't think she would understand. But I think you will."

She did not reply, but continued to look at him expectantly.

"I hope you will."

He turned away from her. He knew this was going to be hard, but he hadn't realized how hard.

Aeris came up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Cloud, it's all right," she said.

He turned to look at her and she gave him a reassuring smile. But that did not make him feel any better.

"Aeris..."

He turned away again and did not speak for a long time.

"Aeris...I..." He stopped and took a deep breath. He had to just come right out and say it.

"I love you Aeris..." he said softly.

She stared at him, and she felt her heart suddenly beat faster in her chest. But he did not look at her, and she realized with

sudden certainty that that was not the end of the sentence.

"...but I love her too," he finished.

He turned to look at her once more.

"I couldn't bear to hurt either one of you."

She looked at him carefully. Then she reached out and took him by the hand.

"You won't hurt me," she said slowly. "I love you too, Cloud. I...I love you enough..."

She paused for just a moment.

"...to let you go," she finished.

She looked up into his eyes, but he turned away.

"It's okay Cloud," she said. If she had any doubts, they were gone now. "You've got to follow your own heart. You've got to do what makes you happy. I understand."

He slowly turned back toward her. His other hand came up and he grasped her hand in both of his.

"Thank you, Aeris."

She smiled.

"You don't have to thank me," she replied. "Now go on. Get out of here. Go to her. You've waited long enough."

He let go of her hand. She looked at him one more time, and saw a faint smile on his face. Was it possible for someone to smile and look sad at the same time?

He leaned forward and kissed her. Their lips touched, for just a moment. Then he turned away and hurried down the steps.

"That was very noble of you."

She turned to see Zack standing in the doorway, half outlined in the light from the window.

"Perhaps," she said slowly. "I know he loves her. I think I've known it from the very beginning."

"Still, he needed you to tell him you understood," Zack said thoughtfully. "I wonder what would have happened if you hadn't."

Aeris shrugged.

"I have to admit that not too long ago I might not have. But things have changed. I now think my destiny lies elsewhere," she said, looking at him carefully.

Zack returned her gaze, but he did not speak.

"Besides," Aeris continued. "She loves him much more than I ever did. Her love burns so brightly it almost blinds me sometimes."

Aeris had never loved like that. She wondered if she ever could.

"I couldn't keep them apart," she continued. "When I was resurrected, Tifa was willing to give up her life for me. I know she was doing it for Cloud, but that doesn't diminish the fact. How could I keep her from what she cherishes most in the world?"

Zack reached out and put his hand on her shoulder.

"I don't remember anything else from before I was shot," he said slowly. "But I remember you. Now I know why."

She reached up and took his hand.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do," she said. "But I have something I have to do first. I realize now that I've been running from some things as well. It's time to put the past to rest and get on with my life anew."

She looked him in the eye and slowly disengaged.

"I'll be back soon."

Then she turned and walked slowly down the hall.

~*~

Tifa pulled off her apron and sat down at a small table in the kitchen. She had been running around serving drinks and preparing food for her friends since the party began. But now she was tired. If they wanted anything else, Mikko could get it for them, or they could get it themselves.

For the first time in a long time, she felt she could relax.

And yet...

They had won again. They had beaten Hojo. Even though he had reached from beyond the grave. But the Jemova cells Hojo had implanted in Cloud still remained. They could never get rid of them. Did that mean they could never be safe from Shinra? Yes, they had won this time, but was this really the last time? Who knew what other plots Hojo had hatched while he had been alive, who knew what other traps he had set? Would they ever really be free of him? Could they ever really be sure?

Tifa shook her head slowly.

Probably not. But whatever happened, whether Cloud was finally free or would have to struggle against this for the rest of his life, she knew she would be there for him. Always.

She hadn't forgotten what she had told herself at the baby shower, before things had gone so terribly wrong.

She would tell him.

She slowly stood up. She looked at the doorway leading into the main room of the bar. There was no sense in putting it off any longer.

But she did not move.

Why is this so hard? she thought angrily. Shera had been right. She had faced down Shinra and Sephiroth. She had thrown herself into dozens of battles without a second thought. Why was it so difficult to say three simple words?

Was it fear of rejection?

What else could it be? She couldn't stand the thought that he was in love with Aeris, but it was a real possibility. She didn't know what she would do if that were true. But as long as she didn't ask, as long as she didn't know for sure, then she still had hope. She still something to cling to.

But what good was false hope?

Wouldn't it be better if she found out once and for all? She couldn't live her whole life like this. She had to know, one way or the other.

She gritted her teeth and started forward, even though that simple act seemed like the hardest thing she had ever had to do.

~*~

Cloud reached the bottom of the stairway and looked around. He could not see Tifa, but Yuffie sat at a table right next to him.

"Have you seen Tifa?" he asked. "I have to tell her something. Something important."

Yuffie turned to look at him.

"I think she's in the kitchen," she replied.

She watched him idly as he walked away. As Cloud was passing the entrance to the bar someone approached him.

"Are you Cloud Strife?"

A young man who he had never seen before stood looking at him questioningly.

Cloud nodded.

"I have a message for you," the boy said. He handed Cloud a piece of paper, then turned and walked away. Cloud opened the letter and started to read. Slowly his face became very pale. He looked up, but the messenger was gone. He stood there for a long time, unmoving. He glanced around one more time. Then he turned and strode deliberately out of the bar.

~*~

Barret sat at the bar not far from Reno and Rude, but not too close either. The party had been boisterous at first, but now that everyone had drunk their fill things were starting to quiet down. He looked over his shoulder and saw Tifa approaching.

"Barret," she said. "Have you seen Cloud?"

"Not in a while," he replied. "Why?"

"I've looked all over and I can't find him anywhere," she said with a hint of concern in her voice.

Barret stood up.

"He must be around somewhere," he said reassuringly. "Have you asked the others?"

"Not everyone."

He looked around.

"Well, let's see if any of them have seen him. Hey!" he yelled. The others looked at him. All except Reno, who by this time was too drunk to care. "Has anybody seen Cloud lately?"

No one spoke until Yuffie piped in.

"I saw him a little while ago. Some kid handed him something. I think it was a message. Then he took off out the door."

"A message?" Tifa questioned.

"I guess," Yuffie replied. "That's what it looked like, anyway. They were standing right by the entrance."

Tifa frowned. For some reason she felt suddenly uneasy. She slowly walked over to the entrance, looking around. A crumpled piece of paper lay by the door.

She picked it up and unfolded it. As she read she slowly turned white as a ghost.

Barret came over and took the paper from her. He looked at it and read aloud.

Cloud,

I know this is kind of sudden, but I assure you it is of the utmost urgency. I would not have gotten in touch with you if it were otherwise. Meet me at pier number three at the dockyards in Junon at ten thirty tonight. Do not be late. There is more at stake here than you could possibly imagine.

Signed,

Morgan Strife

Barret looked up with a frown.

"Morgan Strife?" he said. "Who the hell is Morgan Strife?"

He looked at Tifa, who was staring at the ground, shaking her head slowly.

"His father," she whispered.

~*~

Aeris emerged from beneath the trees and stopped. The sun was low on the horizon, the western sky streaked with purple. Ahead of her she could see the dark outline of the shell house, and beneath it the calm water of the lake.

She stood there for a long time in silence, then slowly approached the lake. She did not remember, but Cloud had told her what they had done. Had told her where they had laid her to rest.

The water was calm and crystal clear. She felt a strange reluctance to approach. What had happened to her body then? What would she see if she stared deep into the water?

She realized how ridiculous that was, but she couldn't help the way she felt.

Still, she had come here to let go of the past. She had to look.

She walked slowly forward until she stood at the very edge of the lake. Then she gazed down into it.

She did see herself there.

She bent down and touched the water, sending ripples through her reflection. Two small fish dashed away at the disturbance, but beneath them there was only smooth sand.

She turned and looked at the shell house. All this time what had happened here had kept her from returning. All this time what Sephiroth had done had stopped her. Stopped her from coming back to the City of the Ancients. The city of her people.

But that was over now. Sephiroth was dead. He had no hold over her anymore. It was time to let go of the past. It was time to return to the city of her heritage.

Without hesitation she walked toward the shell house that was the entrance to the city. To her city.

It was time for her to return to her real home.

~*~

Lightening flashed across the night sky, and a torrent of rain poured down upon the dark streets of Junon. All along the streets shopkeepers and citizens alike scurried inside and closed their doors to the billowing rain, until the flash of lightening in the sky revealed only empty streets.

Or perhaps not quite empty. For suddenly there was a clattering on the cobblestones. Those who had not closed their shutters saw dark figures rush by. When the lightening flashed again, it revealed four figures riding hard on Chocobos through the city streets.

Straight for the docks they raced, heedless of the rain pouring down around them. When they reached the gates they dismounted, and the few dockworkers unlucky enough to have pulled the shift for this evening saw four people swathed in dark cloaks dash by, running as fast as they could toward pier three.

Barret raced forward, but even so Tifa outdistanced him. The downpour left a sheen of water on the ground even where it had not formed into open puddles. Barret had to catch himself from falling half a dozen times. He looked back and saw that Vincent and Elena were having as much trouble as he. But Tifa ran on unheeding, not seeming to notice the rain, or the bright bursts of lightening or tremendous claps of thunder. She ran on as if possessed.

She rushed out onto the pier, looking ahead, straining her eyes to see if any ship lay there. But there was none. She looked out farther on the pier, but the far end was obscured in the rain and darkness for a moment.

She ran out farther still, and the end came into view. But even as it did she saw something else. The dark bulk of a ship slowly moving away.

"Cloud," she cried.

It was a submarine. She could see it clearly now. A single white light shone from it's stern. It was moving away from the pier. Even now it might be too far...

"Cloud," she shouted again. "Cloud, wait for me!"

Suddenly her foot slipped on a wet plank. She fell down jarringly and skidded to a halt just short of the edge of the pier.

She looked up and saw the submarine fading away into the darkness.

"Cloud," she said, her voice choked with anguish. She had followed him for so long. They had been through so much. And now, after she thought it was all over...

He couldn't leave her now.

They were supposed to be together forever.

"Please, Cloud," she said softly. "Please don't go where I can't follow."

She lifted herself to her knees, staring out into the darkness where the ship had vanished. Her clothes were drenched, the rain still pouring down around her, mixing with the tears that ran down her face.

Barret ran up beside her. He looked out into the darkness, then stooped down beside Tifa and put his arm around her.

"Don't worry Tifa," he said. "We'll find him. No matter where they take him or how far we have to travel, we'll find him."

THE END

~*~

AUTHORS NOTE: What? That's it? That's the end? What are you, CRAZY??? There, now you don't have to Email me. Okay, that's the end of Hojo's Legacy, but that doesn't mean it's the end of the series. I told you before I couldn't make it too easy.

A couple of odd things about this one. No offensive use of materia. Barely any magic at all really, except for Aeris. Now that I look back on it, there really isn't all that much fighting either. I guess that's what happens when your major antagonists are an old friend and a computer program.

I decided to add a lot more about Reeve. I think he's a much more interesting character than Cait. It's likely you'll be seeing more of him and less of Cait in the future.

It is just me, or do a lot of people seem to be pairing up? What can I say, I guess I'm just a romantic kinda guy.

I'm sorry. I just had to choose Tifa. She is my favorite character, after all. I hope I didn't alienate all you Aeris fans out there. I do like her a lot too, and I don't think she's going to come out of this too badly.

As usual, feel free to Email me with any comments at FCVERDE@ix.netcom.com.

That's all til next time.