

CHAPTER III: CONSPIRACY THEORY

Red led his companions slowly eastward along a dry river bed. They had traveled clear under the mountain the other night and come out on the southern side. The mountain range now blocked the arctic wind that blew in from the north. There was no snow here and the weather was much milder.

Even out in the open, however, Red was still able to follow the scent. It had led them in a generally eastern direction all morning. They had stopped twice to take a break so far, and each time Red had paced impatiently as the others rested. It took almost all his strength of will to not race down the trail as fast as his legs could carry him. The scent was strong. He knew she could not be far ahead.

He looked back at his companions. They were making the best speed they could with only two legs to carry them. They had both been unusually silent all morning.

Aeris walked along beside Reeve. The riverbed ran through a forest of tall pine trees, and they could not see very far in any direction. Still she knew that somewhere to the south of them lay Bone Village.

She looked ahead. She could see a line of hills through the trees in front of them, blurred to a uniform blue grey in the distance. If they kept on as they had already this morning, they would probably reach them by early evening.

And the next day what lay beyond.

Aeris shivered as if struck by a sudden chill, but the air was warm around them, and there was no sign of any breeze. All morning she had hoped that the trail would turn away to the north or south, but it had kept in a straight line, almost due east, directly at the line of hills ahead of them. And then just over them....

The City of the Ancients.

The place where she...

She found herself shying away from the thought, trying to get herself to believe it had never happened at all. But she knew that was not true.

The place where she died.

Would the memories be more vivid there, she wondered. Would her emotions be stronger?

Would the blade feel sharper?

Her hand rose unbidden to her chest, but the flesh there was smooth and unmarred. She had seen Tifa's scar, the mark Sephiroth had left on her for life. But her own skin was untouched. The journey through the lifestream had removed all outward signs of injury.

Her scars were inside.

She had felt the sword in her back. Like someone had shoved her forward. A sharp pain, but not exceptionally severe. Then looking down, more in disbelief than fear, to see the blade protruding from her chest. Realizing, as the world slowly went gray around her, that this was a wound that she could not possibly survive. Knowing that all her plans, her dreams, her life, were over.

The last thing she recalled was the look of horror on Cloud's face.

They came over a small rise and the ground dipped sharply in front of them. Ahead Aeris could see that the trees fell away to reveal scattered grassland covering the bottom of a wide valley.

They walked down lower into the valley and out of the forest. The hills in the distance disappeared below the trees on the far side of the valley, and with them went her unease. She had to head back to Rocket Town to be at Shera's baby shower tomorrow. Even if the path led to the City of the Ancients, she would not be following it.

She looked at Reeve. He plodded along silently beside her. He had not spoken a word the entire morning. Actually, none of them had said much all day. She had been caught up in her own melancholy, and she knew Red only had one thought on his mind. Now that she thought about it, Reeve had not said much at all since the incident the night before in the cave.

"How you doing?" she asked.

Reeve shrugged.

"Fine," he replied.

It was pretty obvious that something was bothering him.

"Something on your mind?" she tried again.

He looked at her for a moment and shook his head slightly.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes. She was about to try yet again when he spoke.

"When I was controlling Cait, this all just seemed like a game to me. We had adventures, we fought, but none of it was real. There was no pain involved, and if worst came to worst, and Cait was destroyed, well, I could always have another one built and continue on as if nothing had happened. But it's not like that now."

He shook his head slowly.

"I guess I just thought I could continue the same way I had used Cait. I thought I would fight bravely beside you. After all, you are all real, and you did it."

He looked at her carefully, but she said nothing.

"But it didn't work out that way at all, did it? When that wolf came at me, I was so frightened I couldn't even speak to warn you. I would have given anything to get away from it. If I had been holding you in my arms I would have thrown you in front of it to save myself. I felt relieved when it went after you."

Aeris looked at him sympathetically. If she hadn't been all wrapped up in her own thoughts she would have realized.

"It's perfectly natural to want to preserve your own life," she said. "You have no weapon, and your fists certainly wouldn't have been of any use against the wolf's teeth. Considering the circumstances, I would say you did the wisest thing."

He looked at her in a way that made it clear that her answer was unsatisfactory.

"Let me ask you this," he replied. "If you had no weapon, and the wolf had attacked me, would that have stopped you from coming to my aid?"

He went on without waiting for her to answer.

"Did Red pause for a moment when the wolf was at your throat? Of course he didn't. He came to your aid immediately, without even thinking about the consequences, or the danger he was putting himself in. But I just sat there on the floor."

He looked down and shook his head slowly.

"I should never have come."

"It's foolish to judge yourself on one incident," Aeris told him. "I think you're being too hard on yourself. We all get scared. You can learn to function that way, but it takes time. Give yourself a chance."

Reeve sighed.

"I'd like to believe that, but I'm not so sure. When I worked for Shinra, I knew what they were doing was wrong. But did I try to do something about it? No. While you guys were out risking your lives trying to stop them I was being the good soldier doing what I was told. Even when I protested, if I thought I was going too far, I backed off, because I was afraid."

"But you did fight against them," she reminded him. "Sure, you did it through Cait, but that doesn't change the fact that you were risking your own life if Shinra had found out."

Reeve shrugged. He understood what Aeris was trying to say, and had to admit she might even be right. But that didn't make him feel any better about his actions back in the cave.

"Thanks for trying to cheer me up," he said. "But I'm afraid there really isn't anything you can say. I can only hope that we stay out of trouble the rest of the trip. I'm afraid I will not be of much use if anything else happens."

"Give yourself a little time," she responded. "You just might surprise yourself."

Red was ahead of them, as usual, but not too far. As he scanned the valley around them he spotted something near the treeline on the hillside ahead of them.

"There!" he said.

Aeris and Reeve looked up, surprised by this sudden exclamation. They saw the red beast on the hill ahead almost

immediately. Aeris let out a small gasp of excitement. After all this time chasing the creature, she felt a thrill to finally get to see her.

She was moving slowly up the slope towards the trees that stood just above her. She was moving slowly, seemingly in no hurry, apparently unaware of her pursuers. She was too far away to see any details, but she seemed to be an exact duplicate of Red.

Red paused for a moment, and Aeris thought he was about to let out a howl, when suddenly the unmistakable retort of a gun echoed through the valley.

The red beast in front of them suddenly bolted into the trees and was immediately lost from view.

Aeris looked across the valley floor. She hadn't noticed him come out of the woods, but now they all saw a man standing just below the trees on the northern slope of the hill, about thirty yards away from them. He held a rifle in his hands.

"What do you think you're doing?" Aeris yelled angrily.

The man turned to look at them. As soon as he saw Red he raised his gun again and pointed it at him.

"Watch out lady!" he yelled.

Aeris leaped in front of Red.

"Put that gun down, you idiot!" she shouted.

The man did not move for a long time, but then slowly lowered his gun and started walking over to them.

"Lady," he said, as he approached. "Do you know that there is a wild beast standing behind you?"

"I may be a little frisky at times," Red observed, "but I would hardly call myself wild."

The man stopped and his mouth dropped open.

"It talks?"

"Of course he talks," Aeris said. "This is Nanaki, the guardian of Cosmo Canyon. He's as intelligent as any human, more than most in fact," she finished, looking at him pointedly.

He looked at Red and rubbed his chin.

"Cosmo Canyon, huh," he said slowly. "Now that you mention it I do remember hearing something about that. What are you doing here, you're a long way from Cosmo Canyon. My name's Dannako"

"Well Mr. Dannako," she replied. "We're trying to find the person you just took a shot at."

"Person?" he replied. "I wouldn't go that far. Now matter how smart it may be, that creature is still a beast, one I've never seen the like of before. I can get a pretty penny for that pelt. And it's just Dannako."

Red growled low in his throat.

Dannako readied his gun.

Aeris raised her rod.

"Don't you dare touch him," she said evenly.

The man looked at her. He was well over six feet tall, with a loaded rifle in his hands, and here this...this girl, barely reaching up to his shoulder, seemed ready to go toe to toe with him. He smiled in spite of himself.

"Aren't you the feisty one," he commented. "Okay, I promise to leave your pet alone, but the other one is fair game."

This did not satisfy Aeris at all.

"You don't seem to understand," she said. "These are not beasts, they are thinking, intelligent beings who have every right to live as much as you do. Besides, these two may be the last of their species. If you kill one they will become extinct."

"Oh great," he replied. "You must be one of those 'save the whales' people. If they go extinct it will be because it was meant to be, not because of me. It's survival of the fittest, right? If they're not fit to survive, is that my fault? All I know is I have to hunt to put food on my own table, and that skin will put a lot of food on it."

"Killing either one of them would be murder," Reeve stated.

"Oh please," he retorted, looking at Reeve disdainfully. "So call security. No matter how clever they may be they are still animals. I don't care if they're smart or not. Like I told you before, all I'm interested in is the gil."

Aeris looked at him in disgust.

"You make me sick," she stated.

He shrugged.

"I feel real bad about that," he replied. "Well, I guess I'd better be on my way. I don't want to fall too far behind. I don't suppose you'd be interested in selling me the one you've got."

Aeris couldn't believe he had the gall to ask such a question.

He saw the look on her face.

"Didn't think so," he said with a smile.

He turned and walked swiftly away, headed in the direction they had seen the other red beast disappear.

Aeris turned to look at the others, still fuming. Red looked at her grimly.

"If he harms her I will not rest until he has paid."

Aeris nodded.

"I understand your feelings," she replied. "But I'd rather not have it come to that. We'll just have to make sure we find her first."

"How are we going to do that?" Reeve questioned. "He's already got a head start."

Aeris looked at Dannako once more. He was walking up the slope just short of the trees.

"I don't know how good a tracker he is," she said, "but we've still got something he doesn't. Red's nose. He can't go very fast while he's following her trail. We can circle around and pick up her scent ahead of him."

Reeve nodded.

"Let's get going then," Red said and headed for the trees immediately.

Aeris and Reeve followed. They both realized that this might be the only chance for Red to ever find another of his kind. With that in mind their own problems had suddenly faded to unimportance. Somehow, they had to reach her first.

~*~

"We must head west."

Altim looked up to see Bennis and the Swordsman standing in front of Bennis' tent. They seemed to be having some kind of argument.

"So you've said," Bennis replied, shaking his head. "But you haven't given me a single good reason why."

"I told you, I don't know why. I just know we have to head west, I need to go that way."

Bennis laughed humorlessly.

"So you're saying it's just a feeling? The only person who's feelings I trust is me. And I say we stay right here. The traffic between Corel and Costa del Sol is good, and the protection is minimal. I think this is the perfect spot from which to run our operations for quite a while."

The Swordsman was obviously not pleased with this response.

"There's plenty of traffic to the west as well," he replied. "And nobody has protection anymore. We have to go to Nibelheim."

"Nibelheim?" Bennis said in surprise. "What the hell would you want to go there for? There's nothing of significance there except for a team of scientists studying the notes from that Jenova project thing of Shinra's. There's nothing of value there at all."

"I have to go there," the Swordsman said sharply, and for the first time his voice held a hint of menace.

Bennis looked at him darkly.

"I'm in command here," he said immediately. "We go where I say we go. Don't forget that if it wasn't for me, your bones would be bleaching on the hills outside of Midgar. I say we stay right here!"

The Swordsman looked at him for a long time without speaking.

"I guess I'll just have to go myself then," he said finally.

"Oh no you don't," Bennis replied angrily. "When you sign up with me you sign up for life. I won't have anybody walking away. I know how to deal with traitors!"

"I'm not a traitor," the Swordsman protested. "I just want..."

Bennis held up his hand.

"The matter is not open to discussion," he said with finality. Then he turned and stalked into his tent.

The Swordsman stood unmoving for a long time, and though he looked dispassionate Altim could tell from the cold look in his eye that he was angry, angrier than Altim had ever seen him. He hadn't know the Swordsman for long, but he had known him long enough to know that he was the one person in camp that Altim would not want to get angry.

The Swordsman suddenly turned and stepped into Bennis' tent. Altim could hear Bennis say something, but he could not tell what. The heavy material of the tent dulled the sound, but it sounded like an exclamation of surprise. Then there were more words exchanged, and though he could not hear them clearly he could tell that Bennis was angry now as well.

Suddenly he heard a shout from Bennis and the clash of steel. He looked up in surprise. He took a step toward the tent but then stopped. There were half a dozen other men nearby, and they must have heard it too, but not one of them even lifted their heads to glance at the tent.

He heard someone cry out in pain, and then there was silence.

He stood there for a moment. None of the other men seemed to be paying any attention. He started toward the tent once more, slowly. When he was a few paces away the tent flap opened and the Swordsman stepped out, his sword in his hand. The bottom of it was covered with blood.

The Swordsman looked around the camp, his eyes falling last on Altim, who was closest to him.

"Get your gear together," he said loudly. "We're breaking camp and heading west."

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"Well, that takes care of half our problem," Elena commented.

They stood in the remains of Bennis' camp, looking down at the remains of Bennis.

"Umm," Reno stated absently. Someone had apparently done them a favor, and he was pretty sure who. They had seen the Swordsman many times while observing the camp. Looks like he had staged a little coup.

Actually, Reno really wasn't all that pleased with this turn of events. They still had to recover the stolen items, and Reno didn't think this would make things any easier. They had been studying the patterns of the camp, learning their opponents habits, but now everything would almost certainly change. Everything they had learned so far could now be tossed out the window. With a new leader came new habits, they would have to start again from scratch.

Besides, Reno had a feeling this Swordsman would be a much more dangerous opponent than Bennis had been. Yuffie had told him what she had seen, the glow in his eyes. Reno knew as well as anyone that someone who had been in SOLDIER would be a formidable enemy. And that odd sword he carried, Reno didn't like that at all. He thought it a strange coincidence that it seemed identical to the one carried by Cloud Strife. He felt it was a bad omen.

Still, that wasn't about to stop him. They were Turks, they had dealt with difficult opponents before.

He turned to look at Yuffie.

"Looks like we don't need you anymore," he stated.

Yuffie looked at him angrily.

"Fine," she retorted. "You're just wasting my time anyway. All we've done since I've joined you is sit around and watch the camp. If I was by myself I would have the materia and be back in Wutai celebrating by now."

"If you were by yourself you'd probably have already joined our friend Bennis here in the great beyond," he replied. "You tried walking blindly into their camp once already and it nearly got you killed. You have to observe your enemy and come up with a plan."

"And what's your plan?" she asked. "To sit here and wait until they all die of old age?"

"Now listen you little..." he started, but then Elena came up and tugged him on the shoulder.

"What?" he said sharply, turning toward her.

"Maybe it would be better if we kept her with us," Elena said softly. "If we let her go off on her own, she's just going to get herself in trouble, and probably alert them that they are being tracked. If we keep her with us we can at least keep an eye on her."

Reno thought it over for a minute, then nodded.

"I suppose," he replied. "Though I don't think even having her stay with us will keep her out of trouble."

He turned back toward Yuffie.

"All right, I guess you can stay with us."

Yuffie just looked at him.

"Maybe I don't want to now," she said petulantly.

Reno threw his arms in the air.

"Do whatever the hell you want!" he said angrily. "We're leaving. You can follow us or fall down a hole and die. I really don't care either way!"

He turned and stalked off towards the woods. Elena and Rude followed. Elena smiled in spite of herself. It was good to see someone get under Reno's skin for a change.

She looked back to see that Yuffie was following them. As she turned forward once more she thought she caught a glimpse of movement in the forest off to her left. She looked that way again, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. She was almost sure she had seen something move, something large enough to be a human.

She continued to stare for a minute or two, but nothing moved there now. If there had been anything there at all, it was probably nothing more than some wild animal. She shrugged and hurried to catch up with Reno.

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"You go home, Mikko, I'll finish up here," Tifa said, clearing the glasses from one of the tables.

Mikko looked up from the table she was clearing herself.

"Okay, Miss. Lockhart. Thank you."

Tifa smiled. Mikko was a good kid and a hard worker, but she did seem to have an obsession with formality. She must have told her a million times already that it was just Tifa.

She couldn't help but think how much better Mrs. Strife would have sounded.

She shook her head and smiled faintly. She was letting her imagination run away with itself.

She glanced over to where Cloud was sitting, and her smile disappeared. He was in the corner of the room, by the window, but he was not looking out it. He was just sitting there staring at nothing in particular, had been for almost an hour.

Mikko went over to the closet and got her pocketbook and jacket. She walked over to the door and turned towards them.

"Good night, Miss. Lockhart, Mr. Strife."

"Good night, Mikko," Tifa replied.

Cloud said nothing.

Mikko stepped out the door and it closed behind her.

Tifa finished picking up the glasses and brought them into the kitchen. When she returned to the room Cloud had not moved.

"Cloud, are you all right?" she asked gently.

He did not respond.

"Cloud?"

He turned to look at her.

"I'm fine," he said emotionlessly.

She looked at him, hoping he would say more, but he did not. He had not had anymore bad dreams, but she could tell by the way he held his head on occasion that the headaches were bothering him still, and seemed to be getting worse. He hadn't said more than two words all day long.

"I'll make you some tea," she said, starting to walk back into the kitchen.

"I'm not interested," he replied. He suddenly stood up and walked across the room and up the stairs.

She sighed, feeling suddenly helpless. It was obvious there was something wrong with him, but she had no idea what it was, or what she could do about it.

Cloud came back down the stairs a few moments later, his sword strapped to his back. He walked past her without a word and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Out," he replied.

"Out where?"

He didn't answer. As he reached the door she ran up beside him.

"I'm coming with you," she said.

He looked at her, a look of surprise on his face that quickly turned to anger.

"I don't need any company," he responded.

"I don't care," she said firmly. "I'm coming anyway."

His eyes blazed with a sudden cold light.

"I don't want you to come with me," he said harshly.

"Cloud, please," she said. "Something is wrong. I'm worried about you."

"Worried about me?" he said. "Or spying on me?"

"What are you talking about?" she said. He didn't seem to be making any sense.

"You heard me," he said grimly. "All this time you've feigned concern for me, it was really just an excuse to keep an eye on me, wasn't it? You don't really care about me at all, you're just using me."

Tifa involuntarily took a step back. She had never seen Cloud look at her like this. His eyes glowed with a cold anger that she had never seen before. Then she realized that was not true, she had seen that look before, but it had been in the green glowing eyes of Sephiroth.

"Cloud, what are you taking about?" she said, and suddenly, in spite of the fact that she knew it was not really him talking, she felt tears stinging her eyes.

"This has all been a trick," he continued, stepping toward her slowly. "A trick by you and Avalanche to keep me here. To keep me from doing what I have to do. But you won't stop me. I see through your little charade."

"Cloud, please," she said.

He suddenly reached back and pulled out his sword. He held it between them, poised inches from her chest.

"I won't let you stop me," he muttered.

He raised the sword about his head.

"Cloud, stop," she said desperately. "You're being controlled somehow. It's happening again. I don't know why or how, but you have to fight it. Cloud, please!"

The cold look in his eyes did not change, but the sword hesitated in the air for a moment. He stood there for an instant, poised above her. Then she saw sudden resolve in his eyes.

The sword slashed down. And embedded itself in the banister beside her. She turned and bolted up the stairs.

She ran straight to her room, the tears flowing uncontrollably now. She went into the room and slammed the door behind her. She opened her dresser and pulled out clothes, throwing them unconcerned onto the floor, until she found what she sought. She pulled out the PHS.

She waited for a moment, then heard Barret's gruff voice at the other end.

"Yeah?"

"Barret," she said hurriedly, not even attempting to hide the desperation in her voice. "It's Cloud, he's...there's something wrong with him. I think it's starting all over again. He went crazy. It's like he's not himself anymore. He had that look in his eye, and Oh God, I don't know what to do anymore. I don't think I can take this."

"Calm down," Barret said, his voice filled with concern. He had never before heard her sound so hysterical. "What exactly has he done?"

Tifa stopped for a minute and took a deep breath. Then she related to Barret what had just happened.

When she was almost finished the door suddenly opened. Barret heard her sharp intake of breath.

"Tifa, are you all right?" he said immediately.

She didn't answer. Cloud stood in the doorway, unarmed. He looked at her and she could see his eyes now held tears of their own, with no hint of madness.

"Tifa, I'm sorry," he said, obviously struggling to speak.

"Do you want me to come over there?" she heard Barret ask.

She said nothing, just stood there looking at Cloud for a long time. He made no move to come closer to her.

"No," she said finally. "I think it's all over now. Besides, from Corel it would take you hours to get here, and it's late at night. We'll see you tomorrow at the baby shower."

Barret did not really seem happy about her response.

"You sure?"

She looked at Cloud again.

"Yes, I think so. I...I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay then," Barret said reluctantly. "But if anything else happens, you call me immediately, understand."

"Yes, I do. Thank you. Bye."

She put down the PHS. Cloud slowly entered the room.

"Tifa, I don't know what happened to me," he said slowly, the anguish plain in his eyes. "Somethings wrong. It's all coming back to haunt me, and I don't know why. I don't know what to do about it, and I don't know if I can control it."

She said nothing.

"I'm sorry for what I said. It wasn't me talking, you know that."

She looked at him for a moment more, then nodded and walked over to him. She reached out and put her hand on his

shoulder, but then he suddenly grabbed hold of her and squeezed her so tightly that for a moment she thought she was being hugged by Barret.

"I would rather die myself than see you hurt."

For a long time she said nothing, not even breathing for fear that it would spoil the moment. Wishing that she could stretch out time and make this moment somehow last forever.

But of course she couldn't.

He slowly let her go, then reached up and wiped away her tears.

"So what are we going to do?" she finally said.

"I'm not sure," he replied. "I guess we should go to Cosmo Canyon. I know Red isn't there, but they still have the most scholars and knowledge of anyone around. They may be able to tell us something."

Tifa nodded. It was as good an idea as any she could think of. One thing she knew, anything was better than doing nothing.

"What about the baby shower?" she asked.

"Well, Rocket Town is kind of along the way. I guess it won't hurt to stop there first. You've already missed out on enough because of me."

She smiled. "I just want you to get better," she said.

"I know," he replied. "I know I'm not the only one affected by this. The truth is it hurts me more to see what this is doing to you than to myself. I just hope we can find some answers."

Tifa nodded. She hoped so too.

He stepped back.

"Okay, it's settled. We better get some rest then. It's already pretty late, and we'll need to get an early start."

She nodded. He walked slowly toward the door, glancing back as he reached it. She sat down on the bed and looked at him.

"Cloud?"

"Yeah?"

She started to speak but then changed her mind. She looked down at the ground.

"I...I'd rather not be alone tonight," she said softly.

He looked at her for a long time without saying anything. She looked up at him again, but his face was expressionless.

"I'm afraid...", he started, and this time it was his turn to have difficulty speaking. "I'm afraid of what I might do."

She bowed her head again and nodded. He slowly turned and walked out of the room, closing the door softly. She sat there for a long time without moving, then slowly lay down, curling up into a ball and staring at the far wall. It took her a long time to finally drop off to sleep.