

CHAPTER VIII: THE SINS OF THE FATHER

Cloud sat on the steps in front of the villa in Costa Del Sol. A group of kids were playing soccer in the street, dodging around the tourists in their pursuit of the ball. Beyond them there was a low sea wall, and then the golden sand of the beach, covered even more thickly with tourists. Beyond that, the deep blue of the ocean.

He felt better the last couple of days. Not better as in cured, but better as in not being so depressed. The fact that Tifa had seen Zack, that she believed him, had been a tremendous relief. Though he wasn't sure exactly why. If there was a plan involved, if this was something that was caused by what had been done to him, then he felt their chances of finding a cure were greater. It made him feel like he wasn't just cracking up for no reason. Knowing someone else was involved made it somehow better, made him feel like he wasn't alone. But of course he had never been alone. His friends were suffering almost as much as he.

He looked up and saw Tifa walking toward him, a bag in her arms. She had gone out earlier to pick up some supplies for them.

No, he wasn't alone. They had all been supportive of him.

Especially Tifa.

They wouldn't be going through this if only he were stronger, he thought. But he had never been that. He hadn't had the strength of will to finish the SOLDIER program. He had been easily manipulated by Sephiroth. He had not been able to protect Aeris. He had always been weak.

Strange how things had worked out. The reason he had left Nibelheim in the first place, so long ago, was to join SOLDIER and become a warrior like Sephiroth. To show Tifa that he was strong. But now here it was years later and he didn't seem any closer to that goal. Physical strength he had attained, but mental strength still eluded him.

"My, don't we look serious," Tifa said as she came up to him.

He managed a weak smile.

"Just thinking," he replied.

"Something you've been doing entirely too much of lately," she said. "Cloud, it's a beautiful day. You're in the middle of a resort town. People all around us are laughing, playing, and having fun. There's a gorgeous beach not a hundred yards away. Let's go down there. I think it would do us both a lot of good to forget about our troubles for once."

He shook his head slowly. It seemed the harder he tried to be strong the more difficult his life became. Perhaps he was just trying too hard.

"C'mon," Tifa cajoled, misinterpreting his head shake. "Just for a little while? I've bought a new bathing suit."

Cloud smiled and then nodded.

"Sure, why not?" he said. She was right. He couldn't remember the last time they had had any relaxation. It would do them both good.

He stood up and they started back toward the Inn. But then he stopped suddenly and stared out over the ocean to the east.

Tifa turned to look at him.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

He didn't reply for a moment, then turned to her and nodded.

"Yes," he answered. "I just felt...something. I'm not exactly sure how to explain it, but when we leave tomorrow, I know where we have to go."

She waited for him to continue, but he did not, only stood there looking at the ocean. Up to now they had been heading eastward with no particular destination in mind. All Cloud could say was that they needed to go in this direction, but he had mentioned no specific location. She came up beside him and looked out at the watery expanse as well.

"So where are we going?" she asked.

She stood beside him, but he did not turn to look at her.

"Midgar."

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Reeve woke with a start. He didn't know how long he had been sleeping. It had been early evening when he had dozed off, a streak of light still hugging the western horizon, but now it was dark.

He stretched and yawned, his leg aching from being cramped beneath him. He had spent last evening and all of today waiting and watching in his makeshift blind, but he had seen nothing.

He looked around slowly, blinking in the dim light. He could barely make out the lake in the distance, with the shell house as a dark shadow behind it. And beneath that shadow, a small darker one.

He stopped for a moment and stared, holding his breath, not really sure if he were seeing anything at all. But then the shadow moved, and he saw the outline of a feline padding along the lake.

He stood stone still, afraid any movement he made would give him away and send her darting swiftly into the darkness of the forest, where he knew he would lose her instantly.

But she did not detect him. She stood by the lake for some time, right on the shore. He supposed she was drinking her fill, but he could not see her clearly enough to be sure.

He heard a far off buzzing that he immediately recognized as the drone of one of the giant dragonflies. He had heard it off and on the night before as well, but none had come close to him again.

He ignored the sound.

She sat by the edge of the lake for quite some time. Reeve watched her the whole time, afraid to move. After a while his leg began to ache.

Finally she moved away from the lake. She made her way over until she stood by the entrance to the shell house. She remained there for a while without moving, as if deciding on something. Then she suddenly stepped inside and disappeared from view.

Reeve got up slowly, stretching out his legs. He stood there for a moment, not sure of what to do. But then he suddenly started toward the house himself. He didn't know what she would do if confronted by him without Red, but he knew he couldn't pass up this opportunity. There was only one entrance to the house. If he reached it before she came out, she would not be able to run away from him.

The buzzing sound faded away behind him. The night was strangely quiet here. The moon was just a faint sliver on the horizon. All around him was darkness and silence.

He reached the entrance to the house. She was nowhere in sight. It was dark inside, and for a moment he hesitated. He didn't know what was in there. He didn't know how she would react if he cornered her. She was smaller than Red, but she still looked big enough to tear him limb from limb without too much difficulty.

He took a deep breath and then stepped into the building.

He found himself in a wide hallway that circled around the house. He slowly worked his way up the sloping floor, expecting any moment to run across her, but he saw no sign of her. Eventually he reached the crystal stairway that led down into the actual City of the Ancients.

He had come in here a couple of times before with Red, but never at night. He was surprised to see that the stairway was illuminated in a pale glowing light.

He walked slowly down the stairs. He could see the city below him now. The pale light lit it quite clearly, but he could see no source to the glow. Then he realized that the light emanated from the buildings themselves.

He reached the bottom and looked around. Not only the buildings were glowing, but the streets as well. He stepped over to the nearest structure and examined it. It was made of a smooth stone-like material that he had never seen anywhere else. All the buildings seemed to be made of it, and the streets as well. They all glowed with a pale blue light. It was not like sunlight, of any type of electric light he had ever seen. The buildings themselves showed no sign of decay, even though they had not been inhabited for years. It all contributed to the sense of other-worldliness he had felt since the first day

they had arrived here, only more so now.

He looked around. He saw no sign of his quarry, but he knew she had to be down here somewhere. There was just no other way she could have gone.

He glanced back at the steps. They way out was in plain view. She could not get out without him at least seeing her.

He walked slowly down the street. To his right was a railing, beyond which was the shallow artificial lake in the center of the city. He could see the small gazebo-like structure not far ahead of him. The spot where Aeris...

He didn't even want to think about that.

He heard a low growl to his left.

He turned quickly, the hair rising on the back of his neck. She stood in a narrow alley between two buildings, not ten feet away from him. She was crouched down, ready to spring. Her red eyes glaring at him angrily.

She stood there for a moment, unmoving. Then suddenly she sprang forward.

He brought up his hands, covering his head, a cry of terror escaping his lips in spite of his attempt to prevent it. She landed on top of him, her weight driving him back and down. He fell to the ground, with her on top. He made no attempt to fight back, or to defend himself. He knew he was no match for her. He covered his head and gritted his teeth, and waited for her claws to tear into him.

But it didn't happen. For a few seconds he just lay there, then he risked lowering his arms.

She stood over him, her claws extended with one paw resting on his chest. He could see her red eyes staring right at him. But she did not attack.

"Why are you hounding me!" she exclaimed.

For a moment he lay there in shock. Although he knew she was of Red's species and could very well know how to talk, it still surprised him somehow when she actually did.

"I...we, I don't want to. I didn't want to. I mean, I'm not trying to hound you," he stammered. "We just wanted to talk to you. To meet you. Red, I mean Nanaki, he's been looking for one of his own kind for a long time. I'm a friend of his. Didn't you see me with him?"

She growled low in her throat.

"Of course I did," she spat out. "He's come to take me back, just like my father warned me would happen. Well I won't go. I won't go back to Cosmo Canyon to face their justice."

Reeve shook his head vigorously.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "We just wanted to talk to you. Nanaki, has been searching so long for one of his own kind. You're the only one left."

She bent her head lower, looking at him carefully, and for the first time the anger in her eyes seemed to diminish a bit.

"What do you mean, the only one?"

"Nanaki is the only one of your species left at Cosmo Canyon. There are no others. For the longest time, he thought he was the only one. And then he saw you. Can you blame him for doing everything in his power to track you down?"

She stared at him, and now he could see no anger in her eyes at all, just surprise and dismay.

"None, none at all?" she said slowly. "My people are all gone?"

She looked at him again.

He nodded.

"That's why he wanted to meet you," he said. "He's lived almost his whole life alone. Ever since his parents died defending Cosmo Canyon from the Gi. Now he's taken Seto's place as guardian, but..."

He stopped when he suddenly saw her eyes widen in surprise. Then the anger rushed back into them.

She growled again, and bared her teeth, her claws pinching into his flesh.

"I don't believe you!" she shouted. She raised her claw and he shrank back and closed his eyes.

Again the blow did not fall. When he opened his eyes this time she was gone. He looked back and saw her running up the steps until she disappeared at the top.

He lay there for a moment pulling himself back together. Then he slowly stood up.

Well, it hadn't gone as well as he hoped, but at least she hadn't killed him.

~*~

"Any word?" Cid asked.

Barret shook his head.

"Nothing yet. We'll see what the others have to say."

"Damn," Cid muttered.

It had been two days since Zack had taken Shera, and the others had been searching frantically for some sign of him, but they had found nothing. Zack seemed to realize that what he had done would put many people on his trail, and had covered his tracks even more carefully than usual. He seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth.

Cid was on the couch in the living room of his house, a bandage wrapped around him waist. The fact that the others were out searching for Shera, while he had to sit here, was maddening. Still, he knew he had to rest. Even now, two days after the incident, he could barely walk on his own.

The others had all scattered around the area looking for clues as to where Zack had gone. Slowly they returned, but each one had nothing more to report than Barret had.

Vincent was the last to arrive. The sun had just sunk below the horizon when he came in. He had headed east, toward Costa Del Sol, and he had traveled the farthest of them all.

They all looked at him as he walked in, but he said nothing.

"Well," Barret prompted. "Did you find anything?"

"Not exactly," Vincent replied. "I found no sign of Zack. But a couple fitting Cloud and Tifa's description took passage aboard a boat from Costa Del Sol to Junon yesterday."

No one spoke for a moment as they all digested this latest bit of information.

"So you think they're following Zack?" Yuffie asked.

"It would seem the obvious conclusion," Red stated.

"But why would they be going to Junon?" Elena asked.

"We don't know that Junon is their ultimate destination," Red said. "That's where the harbor is. They could be going anywhere from there."

"Still, at least we've got a starting point now," Yuffie said.

"That's not really much of a clue," Reno stated. "It's a big continent. They could get lost just as easily there as they did here. Don't get your hopes up."

Barret had been standing silently as they discussed this, lost in thought. Suddenly he spoke.

"They're going to Midgar," he stated.

"Huh?" Elena said.

"They're going to Midgar," he repeated. "Where else could it be? If Hojo is behind this, if they need anything else that was left behind by him, they would have to be going to Midgar. That's where his lab was, wasn't it? I just can't see any reason for them to go anywhere else."

"We don't know what their reasoning is," Vincent said. "We don't know if they need anything else. Who would have

predicted they needed to go to Cosmo Canyon?"

"But we know what they're after now," Barret replied. "We know what they are trying to do. Can you think of anyplace else they would be going?"

Vincent did not reply.

"I agree with you," Red said. "If Cloud and Tifa arrived in Junon yesterday they could probably reach Midgar tonight, assuming they went straight there. If we take the Slipstream we could be there in half an hour. But if we are wrong we could be wasting time that could better be spent trying to pick up their trail in Junon."

"So what do you think we should do?" Reno asked. "Split up?"

"Does anybody seriously think they could be going anywhere but Midgar?" Barret questioned. "If it's going to go down there, we may need everyone's help. We'll have to fight both Zack and his gang, plus any monsters that might get in our way. You know Midgar is just chock full of them, and if we leave now we'll arrive there at night, when they'll be out in force. Plus we still don't know what Cloud is going to do. We may have to contend with him as well. I think we need everyone to stay together. If we're right, we're going to need all the help we can get."

Red looked at him.

"Barret, you're arguing with impeccable logic. I'm shocked."

"Well, I sure ain't no Einstein, but I can see what's in front of my face," he replied.

"Well, those are the choices then," Red said. "Does anyone think we should check out Junon first?"

He looked around but no one spoke.

"Very well, let's get our gear together and head for Midgar."

Cid pulled himself to his feet.

"I'll go warm up the Slipstream," he said.

"I think it would be better if..." Red started.

"Don't even bother trying," Cid cut him off. "It's my wife they've got, Goddammit. I'll be damned if I'm going to sit around here on my ass while you guys risk your lives to save her. I may not be in such great shape, but I'm still the best damn pilot you guys are gonna find. So just shut up and let's get going."

The others just looked at him for moment, but none of them would dare to challenge his statement after seeing the smoldering fire in his eyes.

"All right then," Barret said. "You heard the man. Let's move out!"

~*~

Reeve didn't know why he returned to the city of the Ancients the following evening. Perhaps he was just drawn by the strangeness of it all, the glowing buildings and streets that seemed untouched by time. There was something eerie about the place but something incredibly peaceful as well. He felt somehow safe here yet he did not understand why. He knew the place offered no special protection. It certainly hadn't for Aeris.

Maybe the one he was after had been drawn by the same thing, and would return. Perhaps that's why he came back. But that seemed like nonsense. After what had happened, he didn't think she'd ever come back here again. She was probably miles away by now.

So it came as quite a surprise when he turned and saw her walking slowly down the street toward him.

He stood there while she approached, not sure what to do. He knew fleeing would be useless, she could easily outpace him. Not that he really had the urge to run anyway. The way she was approaching did not indicate anger, only curiosity.

She stopped a few feet from him and stared at him without speaking.

"I didn't think you'd come back," he said.

She did not reply at first, just continued to look at him. He could not read her expression.

"I'm not sure why I have," she said slowly. There was no anger in her voice.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

She raised an eyebrow.

"That's apparent," she replied. "That may be one of the reasons I returned. You're here alone, unarmed, unless you can call that stick a weapon. You're not much of a threat."

Thanks a lot, he thought. But it was true.

"My name is Reeve."

She hesitated a moment.

"Nipala, daughter of Merko."

She looked at him carefully as she said this, but of course, it meant nothing to him.

"I don't understand," he said. "What were you talking about yesterday, when you said you wouldn't go back to Cosmo Canyon. What happened to you?"

"Nothing happened to me," she replied. For a moment he thought that was all she was going to say. But then she continued.

"It was my father. He was negotiating with a tribe that had moved into the territory north of Cosmo Canyon. The tribe appeared friendly and peaceful, and my father negotiated in good faith. But they betrayed him. They pretended to be friendly to gain trust, then they attacked the Canyon. Fortunately they were not successful. They were beaten off and destroyed. But my father was accused of collaborating with them. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. But before he could kill him he fled with my mother. If he ever went back they would have killed him, as they would do to me if I ever went there."

"You?" Reeve said in surprise. "Why you? You had nothing to do with it, did you?"

"No, I wasn't yet born at the time," she replied. "But the law of the Canyon states that once a death sentence had been ordered, it must be carried out, no matter how long it takes, and it carries over to that persons descendants."

Reeve looked at her for a moment in surprise.

"Now wait a minute. Let me get this straight. You're father is no longer alive, I assume?"

"He died twenty three years ago," she said. "And my mother eleven."

"So he's dead. The sentence has been carried out," Reeve said.

She shook her head.

"Not according to Cosmo Canyon law. He was not executed following Canyon tradition. According to our laws, I would have to pay for his misdeeds. If I went back to Cosmo Canyon now they would execute me."

Reeve shook his head. This whole thing just didn't make any sense. Cosmo Canyon was one of the most liberal and open cities he had ever visited. He couldn't believe they would have a law like that. He was no expert on Cosmo Canyon law, of course, but he had never heard of anything like that. Then he thought of something.

"Exactly how long ago was this?"

She thought for a moment before answering.

"Five hundred and forty three years," she replied.

Reeve almost burst out laughing. He had forgotten how long lived Red's species was.

"Five hundred years," he repeated. "Then you have no idea how things have changed there. Five hundred years ago Cosmo Canyon was fighting for survival against dozens of other tribes. But it's all different now. The wars are long over. The Canyon has been at peace for years. It has become a center of knowledge and learning that is the envy of every other city on the continent. In the world in fact. Your law is archaic. It probably doesn't even exist anymore."

She shrugged.

"I suppose that's possible, but what if it hasn't been changed?"

"Well then I'm sure they would change it. The law is obviously out of touch with the times. Even if it's still on the books, I'm sure Red would make sure it was changed. He's the guardian of Cosmo Canyon now, I'm sure he wouldn't let some archaic law stand in the way of your returning. Especially since you are the only other member of his race that is still alive."

"I'm not so sure he would do that," she said slowly.

"Of course he would," Reeve replied. "I've known Red for a long time now. He's one of the most fair minded people I've ever met. There's no doubt in my mind he can get this all straightened out for you in no time."

"But you don't understand," she replied. "The one who accused my father of collaborating with the enemy in the first place was Seto!"

Reeve eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Red's father? He was the one who accused your father of his crime?"

She nodded.

"They were both well respected in the Canyon. They were both vying to become the next Guardian. Seto had no real proof, only suspicions, but he saw it as a chance to strike a fatal blow to his rival. It was all political."

Reeve did not respond. He found it hard to believe Red's father would do such a thing. But when he thought about it he realized he only believed that because of what he knew about Red. He had never met Seto, who had died long before he was born. He had no idea what he had been like. Of course, it was also quite possible that Nipala's father hadn't quite been accurate with his account of the events either. But what difference did it make now?

"I understand your hesitation, but I don't think Red is going to hold it against you. It all happened a long time ago to people who are now dead. None of it was your or Red's fault."

She did not reply. She had spent all her life running and hiding, not trusting anyone, and for good reason. Her people had marked her for death, both her parents had been killed by human hunters. Her distrust had kept her alive all this time, why should she change that now?

She glanced back the way she had come. She could turn around right now and leave here. Move on like she had so many times in the past. It would be the prudent thing to do, and the man before her certainly could not stop her, or follow her.

But she was tired of running. She was alive, yes, but what kind of life was it? She kept telling herself that she didn't care about Cosmo Canyon, which she had never seen. She kept telling herself that she did not need anyone. But it wasn't true. The simple fact that she had come back here at all proved that.

"I want to believe you..." she started to say, but suddenly she crouched down and turned to look at the stairway leading down into the city.

A man stood there.

Reeve followed her gaze and saw Danneko as well. He held his gun casually in his hands. He hadn't seen them yet.

She turned back toward him, her eyes filled with anger again.

"A trick?" she snarled.

"No," he answered immediately. "No trick. I didn't know he was here. I swear it."

She stood there for a moment, unsure of herself, of him. No human had dealt with her honestly before, she was a fool to have thought it would happen now.

She turned and bolted down the street. In a moment she was gone.

"Nipala," he said softly, knowing she could not hear, but also knowing that it would be her death to shout. Then he ran after her.

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Danneko walked slowly down the steps into the city. He had heard vague rumors about the city of the Ancients, but he had

never seen it before. The rumors did not do it justice.

He reached the bottom of the stairs. He walked over and examined one of the buildings, just as Reeve had done the first time he had come here, the first time he had seen the mysterious glow. But Danneko quickly turned away. He had other things on his mind.

He knew he was finally closing in on his quarry. It had been a difficult chase. His prey had been clever, but not nearly as clever as he. She had to be down here somewhere. He had seen no other way out from up on the stairs.

He walked slowly down the street, stopping every now and then to examine the ground in front of him. But the streets were clean, leaving no mark of anyone's passage. He couldn't understand how the place could be abandoned for years without any accumulation of dirt or dust on the roads.

He shrugged and walked on. He would just have to depend on his eyes and intuition.

He walked along the railing beside the lake for a while, slowly sweeping around in a wide circle. To his right he saw a pathway leading out to a small open building on the lake. To his left was a narrow alley.

He turned and walked a few steps down the alley. And then he saw her, crouching at the far end of it. Her back to a large crystalline wall that blocked her escape. She was trapped.

He walked slowly toward her, bringing his gun up, a smile forming on his lips. After all this time he had her. The hunt had been worth it. She had been a worthy adversary, but now the game was over.

Reeve stood pressed against a doorway near the front of the alley. Under ordinary circumstances Danneko probably would have spotted him immediately, but he was concentrating on his quarry.

Reeve lunged out of his hiding place just as Danneko walked by. He reached out and grabbed hold of Danneko's gun, wrenching at it to try to pull it from the man's grasp, but Danneko recovered quickly. He managed to hold onto the gun, twisting around and pulling it out of Reeve's grasp. Reeve clutched at the man again, grabbing hold of his leg and throwing him off balance. They both fell to the ground.

Danneko swept his arm around and struck Reeve in the cheek with his elbow. Reeve saw stars, but still he held on. Danneko twisted again and hit Reeve with the butt end of his gun. He struck him three or four times, until Reeve finally let go, rolling away and clutching his head.

Danneko stood up and looked around. Nipala was gone.

He looked down at Reeve, rage blazing in his eyes.

"You let her get away," he said accusingly. "You idiot. It took me months to finally get her where I wanted her, and now she's gone again. I don't know if I'll ever get a chance like that again. You stupid son of a bitch!"

He brought his gun up once more, and Reeve was suddenly looking down the barrel of it. He clenched his teeth, though blood dripped from his mouth. He would not beg, not this time.

The air was suddenly rent by a bestial roar. Danneko turned just as Nipala slammed into him. The gun flew from his hands, and he fell to the ground, with her on top of him.

Her claws slashed through the air, and suddenly Danneko screamed.

Reeve stumbled to his feet.

"Nipala, no!" he cried. He staggered over and picked up Danneko's gun. He turned and looked at them. They were both on the ground, Danneko underneath. His shoulder was laid bare from her claws and her fangs were wrapped around his neck, but she had not bit down yet.

"I've got his gun," Reeve exclaimed. "He's no longer a threat."

Reeve opened the gun and the bullets clattered to the ground. Then he took it by the barrel and slammed it against the ground. The stock broke off, and the barrel bent. Then he turned and heaved what remained of it into the nearby lake.

"It's over," he said. "He can't hurt you now. If you kill him, you'll be just like him."

Nipala just looked at him for a long time. Then she slowly released her grip and backed away.

Danneko lay there unmoving, looking at them with shock and fear on his face.

Reeve walked up next to Nipala, grimacing in pain. They both looked down at Danneko. Reeve put a hand on Nipala's shoulder.

"C'mon, let's get out of here," he said.

Reeve looked once more at Danneko, who was slowly getting to his feet.

"Bother us anymore and we'll kill you," he said. Then they turned and walked away.