

CHAPTER X: THE RIDERS RETURN

"We'd like to see the mayor."

The woman looked at them curiously. Cloud noticed it was not the same secretary they had seen the last time they had been in the office of the mayor of Junon, but he recognized her nonetheless. It was in fact the women they had caught on the mayor's lap.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked. If she recognized him, she gave no outward sign.

"No," Cloud replied.

The woman's look instantly became more distant.

"But it's very important," Cloud continued. "Tell him we're from Avalanche."

The woman did not react to the name. She stood up.

"I'll go see if he's available," she stated frostily.

She walked through a large door behind her. Cloud looked around. Except for them, the office was empty. He got a sudden feeling of déjà vu.

"Might as well sit down," he said to the others. "This could take a while."

Aeris looked at him curiously, but took his advice and sat down. Reeve eased himself into a chair nearby as well, giving Cloud a knowing look. He hadn't forgotten the last time they had been here either.

"You might as well relax," Cloud said, looking at Aeris. "We've done this before. The last time we were here we had to barge into the office to get Mayor Hart's attention."

Reeve looked at him thoughtfully.

"Maybe we should do that now," he suggested.

"We may," Cloud replied. "But let's give him a chance, at least. Maybe he'll be quicker this time."

The tone of his voice made it clear he wasn't too hopeful that would be true.

"I'll be right back," Cloud said. "I'm going to get a drink of water."

No one responded.

He walked back out into the hall. There was a water fountain at the end of the corridor. He had noticed it when they had come in. He turned it on and drank his fill. When he finished he started back toward the office, but looked back behind him when he heard a door open. He saw the mayor step out into the hall and look around quickly. A look of surprise crossed his face when he saw Cloud standing there.

"Mayor Hart," Cloud said, striding over immediately. "Just the person I wanted to see."

Cloud caught a glimpse of the secretary through the door, and for a moment he thought the mayor was going to bolt back through it, but then it closed quickly in front of him. He stood there for a moment groping for words.

"I'm sorry young man," he said eventually. "But I'm late for a very important appointment. I don't have time to talk now."

And with that he started walking swiftly down the hall.

Cloud was right on his heels.

"This won't take long," he said. "Cosmo Canyon has been attacked and overrun by monsters from Gongaga. They need your help to retake the canyon and destroy the monsters."

"I'm aware of the situation," the mayor replied, not looking at Cloud, and walking even faster. "I'm afraid there's nothing I can do."

Cloud frowned, though not really surprised. Somehow he had expected that.

"But don't you see that these monsters pose a danger not just to Cosmo Canyon, but to all of us. They've never organized like this before. If they all band together they will be a formidable fighting force, one that no single city could beat. They could sweep across the entire continent. Who knows, maybe Junon will be next."

The mayor stopped and looked at him skeptically.

"I think you're exaggerating the situation," he said. "They are no threat to Junon. They're not even on this continent. Cosmo Canyon does not even have an army, it would be easy for a few monsters to band together to wreak havoc there, but Junon is a large city, with its own army. Even if they could get here, those monsters are no threat to us."

"But Cosmo Canyon needs your help," Cloud tried.

The mayor shook his head and started walking again.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I feel bad for them, but it's their own fault. They should have been more vigilant. I have enough of my own concerns to take care of right here in Junon. I don't have the resources to spare. Money is tight. Do you know how much it would cost to send an army to Cosmo Canyon?"

"What difference does it make?" Cloud protested. "They need your help. If it was Junon that had been overrun, don't you think they would send help?"

"As I already pointed out, Cosmo Canyon does not have an army. If the situation were reversed they couldn't help us even if they wanted to."

"So you're just going to do nothing," Cloud said, anger creeping into his voice. He hadn't even worded it as a question.

They reached the entrance to the building, and the mayor stopped once again right in front of the door.

"Look young man, I'd like nothing more than to help the people of Cosmo Canyon. But it's not as simple as that. It's easy for you and Avalanche. You have no responsibilities. You go where you wish, do what you want, help wherever and whenever you see fit. You run all over the place stirring up things and tell everyone you're doing it all for the good of the planet. And that's fine. You have done some good in the past, but that doesn't give you the right to lecture me. It's easy for you, you don't have to answer to anyone, but my responsibility is to the people of Junon. Sure the people of Junon care about Cosmo Canyon, but not enough to see their sons marching off to war and dying for it. We've got our own problems here, and that's what I'm concerned about. Now I really must be going."

The mayor walked out the door. Cloud stood in the doorway looking at him, anger etched on his features. He had known all along they were probably wasting their time, but he still couldn't help but feel frustrated that the mayor could be so shortsighted.

"This isn't a problem that is going to go away on its own," Cloud called after him. "You're not talking about a random group of monsters gathering together. This is a coordinated attack by Jenova."

The mayor waved his hand dismissively without looking back. A car pulled up to the curb in front of him and he opened the door to step in.

"Just to let you know, you're not gonna get my vote in the next election," Cloud shouted, ignoring the fact that, since he was not a citizen of Junon, he would not get to vote in that election. The mayor disappeared into the car. A moment later it pulled away from the curb and merged into the traffic in the street. Cloud stood there for a moment and watched it until it disappeared around the corner.

"Moron," he muttered.

He went inside and walked back to the office. The others were standing in the hallway outside the door. Reeve came over to him when they saw him approaching.

"Where'd you go?" he asked. "There's a water fountain right there."

Cloud recounted his run in with the mayor. Reeve snorted when he was done.

"Figures," he said disgustedly. "The man has no spine at all. When the secretary told us he was gone, we suspected it was something like this."

Aeris came up beside him.

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

"Continue on to Fort Condor just like we had planned," Cloud replied. "It isn't like this came as any big shock. I didn't think we'd get much help here."

He led them back outside once more. They had come into Junon earlier in the day by ship. Now they started walking down the road.

"Let's find out if Zack has gotten us some decent transportation," Cloud said.

The ship that had brought them over had not had accommodations for their chocobos, so they had been forced to sell them before they left. They had sent Zack off to find them whatever he could to get them on their way. Cloud had no desire to continue on foot, he knew they wouldn't stand a chance that way against mounted foes.

They took the elevator down to the lower level of Junon. They had told Zack they would meet him near the beach. They reached the stairway leading down to the sea, but there was no sign of him. Aeris sat down on the steps, hugging her knees and looking out at the ocean. Reeve sat down nearby, while Cloud stood there, his arms folded across his chest.

There were quite a few people on the beach. Cloud surveyed them casually. None of them caught his eye until he spotted one young girl near the base of the steps, looking up at him. They recognized one another almost simultaneously.

"Priscilla," Cloud exclaimed, breaking into a grin.

"Cloud!" she said, hurrying up the steps and stopping right in front of him, a broad smile on her face. "You've come back to Junon. It's about time. I've been waiting for you. Have you come back to marry me?"

Aeris turned and looked at Cloud, a bemused smile on her face, while he stammered for an answer.

"Uhh, I...um...don't you think you're still a little young yet?" he finally managed to say.

"I'm nearly fifteen," she responded. "I have a cousin out in the country who got married at sixteen, and I act much more mature than she does."

Cloud seemed to think this over for a while, trying to buy some time.

"Still," he said, "there's no rush is there? I don't know whether I'm ready for that kind of commitment just yet."

She thought about that for a moment.

"Well, all right," she said finally. "But you better make up your mind soon. A lot of the other boys have said they like me, but I told them I was waiting for you."

She turned and looked at Aeris suddenly.

"And don't you try to steal him from me," she exclaimed.

Aeris eyebrows went up. She kept a straight face with some difficulty. Finally she managed an innocent look.

"I wouldn't dream of it," she replied.

Priscilla turned back toward Cloud, somewhat mollified. But then she looked up as Zack suddenly appeared and walked up to them.

"There you are," Cloud said. "We were starting to think you had gotten lost."

Zack started to reply but was cut off by Priscilla.

"Who are you?" she said.

He looked at her curiously.

"My name is Zack," he replied.

She looked back and forth between him and Cloud for a few moments.

"Hey, you're cute too. Are you two brothers?"

"No," Cloud answered. He glanced over at Aeris for a moment. "But you're not the first person to notice the resemblance."

Cloud explained to Zack how they had met Priscilla.

"So if you didn't come to see me, what are you doing here?" Priscilla asked when he was done. "Are you going to be in town long?"

"Actually we're just passing through," Cloud replied. "We had to talk to the mayor, and now we're headed for Fort Condor."

"You're going to leave already?" she said in surprise. "You can stay for a little while, can't you? At least come over to my house for a bit. I bet my Dad would be glad to see you."

"Well, we don't want to impose," Cloud began.

"Oh, don't be silly," she replied, getting excited about the idea. "He won't mind. C'mon."

She started off. Cloud looked at the others, but no one said anything. Finally he shrugged and followed after her. Her home was right across the street, just up a long wooden stairway. She ushered them in quickly and called out to her parents. Her father came in and recognized Cloud immediately. His look of surprise was replaced by a wide grin. He came over and shook all their hands and invited them to sit down and relax. Her mother came in and asked them if they wanted to stay for dinner. Cloud could see a stew simmering on the stove and the smell of baking bread wafted through the air, reminding him that he hadn't had a good home cooked meal since he had left Kalm. He looked at the others again, and they all seemed to have the same idea. Soon they were all sitting at the table eating the stew and freshly baked bread and reminiscing about the first adventure together.

After the meal was completed Priscilla's Mom cleared off the table while Cloud told her husband what had been happening lately.

He told him about their latest adventures, and the start of it all with the attacks and the bombing of the bar in Kalm. He continued the story and when he got to the part about the attack on Cosmo Canyon the man nodded thoughtfully.

"I've been hearing rumors about that for a few days now," he said. "Just when we all thought things were starting to get better. It's a bad omen."

"We came here to try to get Mayor Hart to send some help, but he wouldn't listen."

"He's just a good for nothing butt kisser, if you'll excuse the expression," the man replied, glancing at Priscilla. "Doesn't surprise me one bit that he won't help. So what are you going to do now?"

"Head on to Fort Condor," Cloud replied. "They've got an army there too, and they might be more willing to listen to reason. Especially after we helped them in the battle against Shinra."

"I see," Priscilla's father responded thoughtfully. "Unfortunately, I know there's no way to talk any sense into our wonderful mayor. You've been on the road a couple of days now. You're welcome to stay the night and get a decent rest if you wish."

"That's very kind of you, but we really need to get going. I'd like to get to Fort Condor as soon as possible," Cloud replied.

"Can't you stay a little longer?" Priscilla exclaimed, looking disappointed.

Her father gave her a look and she shut her mouth.

"Of course," he said, "but at least stay to have some dessert. If my nose hasn't failed me that is a peach pie I smell in the oven. You wouldn't want to miss out on that, they're the best in the city."

"Why Conrad," they heard floating in from the kitchen. "I hadn't thought you'd noticed."

"Why do you think I married you?" he replied.

He glanced back at Cloud, who nodded. Priscilla looked terribly pleased.

Cloud stood up and walked over to the window, looking out. The sun was dropping toward the horizon, long shadows growing from the houses along the street. He felt the urge to move on. He didn't really know why, but he felt uneasy. It seemed to him it wasn't a good idea to stay in any one place for too long.

He pulled out the PHS and dialed a number. He stood there for a minute with the instrument to his ear, then put it away and looked at the others.

"I still can't get through to Kalm," he said.

"The phones have been down since yesterday," Conrad filled him in. "Another wonderful job by our mayor, I suppose."

"Maybe," Cloud said dubiously. He hadn't thought that the jamming would reach this far. It made him even more uneasy.

Priscilla's Mom came in and set the pie down on the table. Like everything else she had made, it smelled wonderful. Cloud sat down again as she passed out slices. He accepted his and took a bite. It was delicious. Tifa would be jealous.

He finished off the piece quickly, all the while not being able to shake off the uneasy feeling. If anything, it increased. He looked around nervously and noticed that Zack had not eaten at all, but was just sitting in his chair, a far away look on his face.

Aeris seemed to notice as well.

"You really should try the pie, Zack," she suggested. "It's delicious."

Zack sat there as if he hadn't heard. The others were all looking at him now.

"Zack?" Aeris said slowly.

He suddenly stood up, his face pale.

"We have to go," he stated.

Everyone except Cloud looked at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"What are you talking about?" Aeris asked, a look of concern on her face.

"They're here," he said. "We have to go."

"Who's here?" Reeve asked.

"The riders," Cloud stated with sudden certainty. "Jenova's disciples."

Zack looked at him and nodded his head.

They all got up and there was a flurry of motion as they gathered their belongings together. Conrad stood up as well.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he questioned.

"You've done more than enough," Cloud replied. "We must leave. We're endangering all of you."

"How the hell did they find us?" Reeve muttered.

"I don't know," Cloud replied thoughtfully. It seemed more than a coincidence that the riders would find them so quickly. Either they were followed or someone had betrayed their location.

"You think Hart sold us out?" Zack questioned, putting into words what they were all thinking.

"I don't know," Cloud repeated. "But it wouldn't surprise me. Looks like the whole idea of coming here was just one big mistake."

The others looked at him. They were ready to go.

"Zack, did you find us some transportation?" he asked. With all that had happened with meeting Priscilla and her family again, he had forgotten to ask.

"Yeah," Zack replied. "It's parked down the block."

"Let's go then." Cloud turned to Conrad. "Thank you for everything."

"I just wish I could do more," the man replied.

Cloud nodded but said nothing more, instead hurrying out the door, the others right behind. They reached the bottom of the stairs and headed off in the direction Zack indicated. None of them noticed Priscilla slip out of the house and cautiously follow them down the street.

They walked quickly down the street, all of them looking around warily. Zack had sensed the disciples, and Cloud had felt...something. He had felt Jenova as far away as Gongaga when he had been in Cosmo Canyon. The disciples had obviously been injected with cells from this new Jenova. They could undoubtedly detect his and Zack's presence, just as he could feel theirs, at least as well, perhaps better. They had to know they were close.

They were half way down the block when he saw a dark figure back behind them, past Priscilla's house, near the elevator to the upper levels. Cloud knew, he knew right away.

"Run," he exclaimed.

They all took off down the street as fast as they could run. Cloud looked back and saw the figure fast approaching. He could make it out clearly now. It was one of the men all right, still mounted on one of those peculiar black chocobos. He was gaining rapidly.

"How much further?" Cloud said sharply, looking at Zack.

"Around the corner," he replied, pointing ahead.

Cloud looked behind them again. The rider was in full gallop, approaching rapidly. Suddenly he saw another appear coming up the stairs from the beach. Cloud glance over at Aeris, who was having trouble keeping up with them. It was obvious they would be caught before they reached the corner.

Cloud suddenly slowed down.

"We can't outrun them," he said. "Zack, go ahead and get the vehicle. We'll try to hold them off."

The others slowed down with him. Zack had started to slow down as well, but then nodded and raced off. Cloud stopped and pulled out his sword. He stepped forward until he was between the riders and Aeris. He saw Reeve come up beside him, shotgun ready.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he muttered.

Cloud did not reply. The first rider was almost upon them now. He held a long sword in his hand. Almost as long as Cloud's but not nearly as wide.

With a yell Cloud leaped forward, swinging his own sword in a murderous arc. The rider twisted out of the way, in the process nearly falling from the saddle. Apparently he had not expected Cloud to be so dextrous with the huge blade. But the rider recovered quickly. He came at Cloud again, his sword flashing like lightening, and Cloud quickly found himself on the defensive, slowly being forced back. The man was good, better than anyone he had faced in a long time.

The second rider was almost upon them now. He raised his sword and aimed a blow at Cloud as well, but suddenly reeled back, stunned by the blast from Reeve's shotgun. He too recovered quickly, and came on again, seeming no worse for the wear.

Reeve fired again, hitting his mark and sending the rider spinning backwards one more time. Immediately Reeve dropped his weapon and pulled out a materia orb. A moment later fire shot up around both the riders.

The first rider continued to slowly force Cloud backwards, but Cloud was now starting to go into a fighting frenzy, letting his instincts take over. He redoubled his efforts, and almost matched the rider strike for strike, until he was no longer retreating. But neither one seemed to be able to get in a killing blow.

The other rider changed tactics suddenly and rode straight at Aeris. Reeve concentrated on that one, blasting it again and again with the fire materia, but it didn't seem to be having much effect, and he didn't want to waste time picking out another one.

The second riders sword swung, only to clang loudly against the Princess Guard. Aeris stumbled, the blow blocked but the strength of it nearly knocking her off her feet.

Cloud saw that Aeris was in trouble, but there was nothing he could do. He was fully occupied fighting the rider in front of him.

He happened to glance down the road and saw yet another rider approaching them.

"Shit," he muttered.

Aeris blocked three more blows, each one seeming to strike with greater force than the last. The final one knocked her off her feet. The rider swung again, and she managed to dodge out of the way, partially blocking it with her rod once again.

Reeve cast fire one more time, but by now he realized it wasn't going to do the trick. Aeris appeared to be in desperate trouble. With sudden resolve he ran forward and slammed into the hindquarters of the rider's chocobo.

The chocobo stumbled and the rider had to fight to hold it up for a moment, allowing Aeris to scramble out of the way. The rider turned and swung his sword at Reeve, who dodged but still felt white hot pain shoot through his arm. He fell to the ground.

The rider ignored him, turning to Aeris again.

Aeris heard the roar of an engine. She turned to see a Humvee racing down the street towards them. The rider in front of her paused and looked at it for a second. It screeched to a halt nearby. Aeris could see Zack at the wheel. Suddenly green light flared in his hands.

The two riders were thrown back as the blast from Ultima struck them

"Hurry up!" Zack shouted.

Aeris ran to the vehicle and jumped in beside Zack. Cloud reached down and grabbed hold of Reeve, practically dragging him to the vehicle and tossing him roughly in the back before leaping in himself. Even as he did so he glanced back to see that yet a forth rider had appeared.

"We're in," he shouted.

Instantly the Humvee swung around and raced off down the road. The riders gave chase, and at first gained rapidly on them, until one was just a single chocobo length behind, but then the hum vee started to pull ahead. Slowly at first, but then picking up speed. A moment later Cloud saw the riders stop, all four of them together, watching the hum vee race away.

"We did it!" Cloud exclaimed.

Reeve sat up beside him, looking back, ignoring the pain in his shoulder. He could hardly believe they had gotten away. But then he noticed a dark shadow forming above the riders heads. It swirled about them, finally coalescing to form an inky black hole above them.

"They're using that summon thing," he shouted. He looked up into the front. "Go, go go!"

Zack had slowed down at Cloud's exclamation, but now he floored it. The hum vee leaped ahead once more, racing up a low hill toward the outskirts of town.

Reeve looked back again. The figures were small now, but the blackness above them had grown large. Once more he felt the despair they had all felt when they had looked into that light less hole back at Cosmo Canyon. He turned away and gritted his teeth, praying that the hum vee would go faster.

They reached the crest of the hill and plunged down beyond it just as, in a flash of blackness, the world exploded behind them.

For a moment the whole car shook, and Reeve thought for sure that Zack would lose control and they would go flying off the road into a deep gully that ran beside it. But he managed to retain control. For a moment longer the roar of the blast echoed in their ears, then it faded away. When Reeve looked back the road behind them was empty, the riders could no longer be seen.

He turned and looked at Cloud.

"Damn that was close."

Cloud nodded but said nothing. Reeve shifted his weight and groaned suddenly as pain shot through his shoulder.

"Better have Aeris take a look at that," Cloud stated. He sat back and stared into the darkness behind them, unhappy with himself. They had gotten away, but it had been too close for comfort. It had been a stupid mistake to go to Junon, to talk to the mayor. He had almost gotten them all killed. If they expected to survive, he couldn't make any more stupid mistakes.

Rios sat on his chocobo in the middle of the street, surrounded by the other disciples. He remained there unmoving for a long time, and none of the others dared disturb him. They had come so close, and had let the crystal materia slip through their fingers. The Healer would not be happy to hear this. He would not be happy at all.

"Should we follow?" Fielder eventually asked.

Rios shook his head slowly. There was no way they were going to catch that vehicle on chocobos, no matter how fast theirs were. They had been lucky enough to get the tip that they were here. They might never get that type of chance again.

"No," he replied slowly, controlling the anger that was trying to well up inside him. "We would never catch them."

"So what do we do?" Garn questioned.

Rios did not reply, just bowed his head, deep in thought. Perhaps they were going about this the wrong way. Their quarry could go anywhere from here, leading them all over the planet. They could chase them forever and not catch up. But maybe there was another way. Maybe there was a way to bring their quarry to them.

"Our spies have reported that Avalanche has scattered far and wide," he said thoughtfully. "But there is one member who has not moved since this all began. Perhaps if we captured that one, we could convince our prey to come to us."

He lifted his head and looked at the others, suddenly pleased with his plan.

"No, we're not going to follow them. We're going to go in another direction entirely. From here we head north, to Kalm."

With that he spurred his chocobo forward, and they all galloped away down the road. A moment after they had disappeared a small figure came out from behind a large barrel that stood in front of one of the buildings not far from where the riders had been. Priscilla looked around for a moment, to be sure that the riders were really gone, then she ran down the road as fast as she could, back toward her home.

She wasn't sure what was going on, but it was obvious Cloud and his friends were in trouble. From what Cloud had told her father and what she had overheard, the riders were after that other girl. What was her name... Tifa. That was it. Cloud had said she had been hurt, and was at the hospital, probably helpless, and Cloud didn't know what the riders intended. She had to warn him somehow.

She ran up the stairs in front of her house and burst in the door. Her father was sitting in his favorite chair, beside the fireplace which now was burning brightly. It had started to get chilly at night, and he had been lighting it the last few days.

He looked up at her sharply.

"What's your rush?" he asked.

She hesitated for just a moment.

"I need to use our chocobo," she said.

His eyes widened in surprise.

"Whatever for?"

"I need to go to Fort Condor," she replied. "I need to warn Cloud."

"You'll do no such thing," he replied. "You're only fourteen. I'm not going to let you ride all the way to Fort Condor by yourself, with darkness about to fall. It's out of the question."

"But I need to help Cloud," she protested.

"He can take care of himself," Conrad replied. "He's proven that already. I know you're worried about him, but I'm sure he'll be fine."

"But..." she began, but he held up his hand.

"No buts, young lady. No daughter of mine is going to go running around in the wild at night. I think you might be taking this crush a little too seriously."

"It has nothing to do with that..." she began, but then shut her mouth. It was obvious her father was not going to listen. She stood there for a moment in silence, then turned and stomped off to her room.

She flung herself down on her bed and lay there, her head propped up on her hands. It was obvious her father was not going to listen to reason, but it was also obvious that she couldn't just ignore what she had heard. She had to do something, no matter what the consequences.

It didn't take her long to make up her mind. She rarely disobeyed her father, but in this case it seemed she had no choice. She sat there for a few minutes longer, her mind made up but still hesitant. Then with sudden resolve she pulled herself up. She walked over to the window and opened it slowly, so no one would hear. She slipped out onto the roof, then rapidly made her way over to a tree that grew by the side of the house. She had exited this way before a few times, only when it was really important, of course. She figured this qualified. She scampered down the tree and made her way to the small stable that stood behind the house. Ten minutes later, as light started to fade from the sky around her, a chocobo trotted

out of the stable with her mounted on it. She glanced one last time at her house. She could see the fire flickering in the window above her.

"I'm really going to get it this time," she muttered.

She turned and spurred the chocobo forward, and in a few minutes the houses of Junon were fading away behind her.