

CHAPTER IV: THE SEIGE OF COSMO CANYON

Cloud leaned back and rubbed his eyes. He glanced over at Tifa, lying on the bed beside him. Dr. Nathan had performed the infusion last night. It had taken two hours, and the whole time Cloud had sat barely able to breathe, the tension like a vise tightening slowly around his head. He had wanted to be with her, to stand by her side throughout the procedure, but of course that had been impossible. He had been relegated to sitting helplessly in the waiting room, powerless to help her, hoping that she would not forget his words, praying that she would be strong enough.

And she had survived. To say he had felt a rush of relief when Dr. Nathan had told him she was still alive would have been an understatement. He had been absolutely euphoric. Dr. Nathan had tried to calm him down, telling him she was not out of the woods yet. The next twenty four hours would be crucial. Her body needed time to stabilize from the process, they could still lose her.

So he had waited some more. At first he had been excited, but as time went by that had gradually diminished. It had been sixteen hours now, and Tifa still lay there, unresponsive. He thought there was a little more color in her cheeks, and they had removed the breathing tube from her nose, but other than that things didn't seem to have changed.

As time passed Cloud had slowly felt his nervousness returning. The doctors had told him that the infusion was the most dangerous part of the process, that if she survived that she had a good chance of recovering. And she had survived it. But had that sapped the very last of her strength? He knew she was strong, but did she have anything left to fight with? She couldn't die now, not now when they were so close.

He looked back down at the magazine perched on his lap. He started to read a paragraph, one he had already tried to read half a dozen times, but he just couldn't concentrate. He looked up again and shook his head. He just couldn't stand this waiting!

He glanced over at Tifa once more, and then suddenly sprang up, the magazine falling forgotten from his lap.

Tifa was lying in bed looking at the ceiling.

"Tifa!" he exclaimed

She turned toward him, a smile forming on her lips the moment she saw him.

"Cloud," she said softly.

He rushed over to her and grabbed hold of her hand. He looked down at her, the rush of euphoria he had felt when Dr. Nathan had told him she survived the infusion coming back to him, only stronger now. He had to resist the urge to sweep her up into his arms, to hold her as tightly as he could.

"Thank God," he said. "I was so worried."

She looked around, and a puzzled expression formed on her face.

"Where are we?"

"In the hospital," he replied.

She looked down at herself slowly, then turned to look at him once more.

"What happened?"

Cloud hesitated for a moment.

"Do you remember anything?" he asked.

Tifa did not reply. She sat there in thought for a while, then frowned.

"I remember...waving to you," she said finally.

"And that's the last thing you recall?" he asked.

Her frown deepened. Then she nodded slowly and looked at him questioningly.

"There was a bomb," he said gently. "It...it blew up the bar. You were caught in the blast. You nearly died."

Tifa sat for a few moments digesting this information. Then she suddenly turned toward him again, concern on her face.

"Mikko?"

Cloud shook his head slowly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "She and six others were killed."

Tifa lowered her head. Cloud put his arm around her as she started to cry softly. He sat there holding her for a long time.

"It should have been me," she said faintly.

Cloud held her tighter.

"Don't say such things."

"No, it's true," she continued. "It would have been fitting. After what we did in Midgar."

Cloud took hold of her shoulders and turned her toward him, forcing her to look at him.

"Tifa, please stop. When are you going to stop beating yourself up over that? I don't know what I would do if I had lost you."

She looked at him for a moment, then slowly nodded and leaned forward, resting her head against his chest.

"If anything, I should have been there for you," he said. "I couldn't protect you. I'm sorry,"

She shook her head, then wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at him again.

"It's not your fault," she said.

"But I wasn't there," he said. "Maybe I could have done something..."

She shook her head.

"There was nothing you could have done," she said. "And if you had been there maybe you would have..."

She fell silent.

Cloud gently stroked her hair.

"The bar's destroyed, of course," he said.

She shook her head.

"We can build a new one," she replied. Then she turned to look at him.

"Who did this?"

Cloud shook his head.

"We don't know yet," he said grimly. "But we're going to find out."

He told her what had transpired since the bomb had gone off.

"So the others are in Cosmo Canyon?" she said when he had finished.

"Yeah," he replied. "Or that was where they were headed. Who knows what they found out, or where they could be headed now. I have to get in touch with them. I promised Aeris I would let them know of any change in your condition. Everyone was terribly worried."

Tifa smiled and nodded.

Cloud looked at her for a moment, then released her hand and slowly stood up.

"There's something else you should know."

She looked at him curiously.

"You were hurt badly. Very badly. The doctors didn't think you were going to make it. They tried everything they could, but nothing seemed to be helping. They had to resort to..."

He hesitated.

"To what?" she said, and he saw that his hesitation was frightening her.

"To a mako infusion," he said.

Her eyes widened.

"What?"

Cloud walked over to the small dresser by her bed. He picked up a mirror that was on it and brought it over to her without saying a word. She looked at him for a moment, then slowly took the mirror and hesitantly brought it up to her face. She gasped in shock and put her hand over her mouth.

"My eyes..."

Cloud slowly sat down beside her. He had seen the Mako glow from them the moment she had opened her eyes. He took the mirror from her and placed it on the bed. Then he took her hand again and leaned forward, looking into her eyes.

"They're just as beautiful as ever," he said.

Tifa smiled again. She looked at him carefully.

"I guess we match now," she said slowly.

Cloud nodded.

"A small price to pay to have you back," he said. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I won't," she said. "I don't want to leave your side again, ever."

Cloud looked at her for a moment, then smiled mischievously.

"Why, Tifa Lockheart, are you asking me to marry you?"

Tifa blushed and looked away. That was not what she had meant at all!

"Well...I..." she stammered.

Cloud slowly leaned closer to her.

"Because if you are," he continued. "The answer is yes."

Tifa head snapped around, and she looked at him, her eyes widening. For a moment she sat there, groping for words but unable to get any of them out.

"Really?" she finally blurted out.

"Yes, really," Cloud replied. "I had a ring. I was going to give it to you, right before...it happened. I guess I must have lost it. I'm sorry."

She flung her arms around him and pulled him to her, down on top of her on the bed.

"Oh, I don't care about that!" she exclaimed. "When you told me you loved me I thought I couldn't get any happier, but I was wrong. I just can't believe this is happening."

"Easy, easy," Cloud admonished, gasping for breath. "You're going to put yourself back in a coma if you keep this up. You have to rest, so try to relax."

She let go of him and nodded. He stood back up slowly.

"Well, I guess I better go let the others know what's going on."

Tifa nodded. He turned to walk away.

"I love you," she said.

He turned to look back at her and smiled.

"I knew you'd come back to me."

An hour later the room was overflowing with people. Cloud sat on Tifa's bed. Barret stood next to them. On the other side of the bed were Red and Nipala, and Reeve and Yuffie were seated nearby.

Elmyra and Marlene entered the room. Marlene ran up to the bed and Cloud pulled her up to sit beside him. Marlene looked at Tifa

"I'm glad you're feeling better," she said. "I was so scared."

Tifa reached down and patted Marlene's hand. Marlene looked up at her.

"Hey, your eyes look like Uncle Cloud's" she observed.

Tifa nodded.

"Yeah, they had to do that to help me get better," she replied with a smile.

"Are they going to stay that way?" Marlene asked.

"Yes," Tifa replied.

Marlene paused for a moment and looked at Tifa carefully.

"Good, I like them that way," she decided. She turned to Cloud.

"Hey, Uncle Cloud, have you asked her..." her eyes suddenly widened and she covered her mouth with her hand.

"It's okay," Cloud said with a laugh. "I already asked her. You don't have to keep it a secret anymore."

Marlene dropped her hand and smiled. Barret stepped towards Cloud.

"I forgot to tell you," he said. "You dropped this."

He held out a small brown box.

Cloud looked up at him in surprise. Then took the box and opened it up. He smiled again and showed it to Tifa.

"Oh Cloud, it's beautiful!" she exclaimed.

Cloud took the ring out, glinting in the light. He took hold of Tifa's hand and very deliberately slipped it on her finger. He closed his hand over hers, leaned forward, and kissed her.

Tifa smiled and turned away, blushing again.

Cloud looked at Barret.

"Thank you."

Barret just nodded and turned away, embarrassed as well.

Cloud looked at Red.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "But aren't you worried about the Canyon?"

"A little," Red admitted. "But things were calm before we left. I didn't think they would miss us if we were gone for a little while. Besides, I felt bad not coming to see Tifa, after all that had happened to her."

Tifa turned toward him.

"You shouldn't have," she said.

Red just shrugged.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Nipala cut in. "With the use of the helicopter Barret called from Corel, it only took us a half hour to get here. We shouldn't be gone more than two hours. I don't think anything earth-shattering is going to occur in that time."

"I guess being a mayor does have some advantages," Cloud commented.

Barret did not reply.

"So how long do you think it will be before you can get out of here?" Reeve asked.

Tifa shrugged.

"She's still got a long way to go," Cloud replied. "I was talking to the doctors and they said at least a week, maybe two. That traumatic an experience takes a lot out of a person, and they still want to keep an eye on her and make sure everything's all right."

"A week or two," Tifa muttered. "I'll be climbing the walls by then."

"Well, don't rush it," Cloud admonished seriously. "We don't want you to have a relapse."

"Yes sir," she said, looking contrite.

Cloud looked at her suspiciously.

"I don't know whether I can trust you," he said. "Maybe I should take all your clothes so you don't try to sneak out of here. I don't think even you would attempt to escape in that hospital gown."

"Most of my clothes were probably blown up in the bar," she said. "I think I'm going to need a whole new wardrobe."

"Shopping spree!" Yuffie exclaimed. "I'll come with you. That's almost as much fun as finding new materia."

"I think you've still got a few things lying around," Cloud said. He stood up and walked over to the closet beside her bed. He opened it up and looked inside.

"Let's see," he said thoughtfully. "Here's something."

He turned to look at her, that mischievous smile back on his face.

"Orthopedic underwear!" he stated.

"Oh stop!" Tifa said with a laugh.

"Let's see, what else?" Cloud went on, ignoring her. "Aha!"

He turned toward them again.

"Thong underwear!" he proudly proclaimed.

"Cloud!"

"It's true!" he defended himself.

"You are such a liar!"

"Well, we'll just have to get you some then," he conceded.

"How about I get some for you?" she suggested.

"Save yourself the trouble," Yuffie stated. "Just let him wear yours."

"Yeah," Barret agreed, looking at Cloud. "You do seem to have a penchant for wearing women's clothes."

Cloud gave him a nasty look.

"Which reminds me," Tifa said, turning toward Cloud as well. "Just what were you wearing underneath when you disguised yourself as Wisteria?"

Cloud looked at her and grinned.

"Same thing she had on," he replied. "Nothing."

Elmyra clamped her hands over Marlene's ears, then stood up quickly.

"I think we'll go get some ice cream," she said, taking Marlene by the hand.

"But I want to stay!" Marlene protested as Elmyra practically dragged her out of the room.

"And what's thong underwear, anyway?" they heard Marlene say as she disappeared down the hallway outside.

"Oops," Cloud said, looking around innocently.

Barret just shook his head. Not much he could say, considering he was as guilty as any of them.

Just then a nurse came by and poked her head in.

"You really can't have this many people in here," she said, looking at them disapprovingly. "Miss Lockheart needs to get some rest."

Cloud nodded and the nurse disappeared again. He made a sour face.

"We'll all leave, eventually," he said.

Tifa looked at him.

"You better listen to her," she said. "It wouldn't look very good if they threw you all out, now would it? Besides, I do feel kind of tired."

"All right," he relented. They all stood up. Cloud looked at Red once more.

"Still no word from Cid?" he asked.

Red shook his head.

"Zack went to Gongaga with Aeris, Reno and Rude. Maybe they've found out something, but they had not returned when we left, and we could not get through to them on the PHS."

Cloud's brow furrowed.

"I don't like the sound of that," he said slowly.

"Neither do I," Red replied. "A lot of strange things seem to be happening."

Barret looked at Cloud.

"So what are you going to do?"

Cloud turned toward Tifa. She held up her hand.

"Go," she said. "I'll be fine. There's nothing you can do for me here, and I know you'll just drive me crazy if you stay."

He walked over to her, bent down and kissed her on the forehead.

"Thank you, Tifa."

She just shook her head.

They all said their goodbyes and filed out of the room, Cloud last, turning to mouth 'I love you' before he walked out the door. Barret was right in front of him as they walked down the hall. He slowed to let Cloud catch up, then slapped his arm around his shoulder.

"Congratulations," he said. "You pulled her through."

"I didn't do anything," Cloud answered quickly.

"I think you did," Barret replied. "You were there for her. Sometimes that means more than you could ever realize."

Cloud looked at Barret and slowly nodded in agreement. Then he motioned toward the others.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's get back to Cosmo Canyon."

Twenty minutes later, as the helicopter was flying over Corel, the pilot looked back at them.

"I can't seem to contact Cosmo Canyon," he said.

Red's head came up immediately.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't know," the pilot replied. "All I'm getting is static. Either their communications are down, or we're being jammed somehow."

"Can we go any faster?" Red asked.

"I'll see what I can do," the pilot replied.

They fell silent. Red sat staring out the window, straining his eyes to catch a glimpse of the canyon ahead. They were not far away now. Already he could see the red hills beyond the forest in front of them. But it was something else that caught his eye. He stiffened. Nipala caught the movement and looked at him.

"What is it?" she said.

He nodded in the direction of the Canyon. The others looked ahead as best they could. Not all of them could see it at first, but the canyon was rapidly approaching, and soon the dark line of smoke that was billowing up into the sky was obvious to all of them.

"What's going on?" Reeve questioned.

No one responded. Red sat looking out the window, his tail twitching furiously and a frantic look on his face. Cloud had never seen him so upset.

"Hurry," Nipala, who seemed almost as agitated, said to the pilot.

Suddenly a dark shape flew past the window. Cloud got a glimpse of a large birdlike form, then the helicopter shuddered.

"What the hell?" Barret exclaimed.

The pilot seemed to fight with the controls for a moment, then straighten out the helicopter. They could see more of the birds flying toward them.

"We're being attacked," the pilot shouted.

The helicopter shuddered again, and suddenly the air around them seemed to be filled with dozens of black shapes.

"Dammit!" Yuffie exclaimed, reaching into her poach and pulling out a green materia. "I get sick enough when we fly straight. Just leave us alone!"

The materia glowed brightly, and suddenly the birds around them were struck by a burst of lightening. Those closest to the helicopter dropped out of the sky, but more came in to take their place. A lot more.

"Yuffie, start handing out that materia," Cloud shouted. Yuffie reached into her bag and started pulling out the orbs, tossing them quickly to whoever was looking her way. Behind her Barret pulled open a window and started blasting away with his firearm. Seconds later Reeve opened a window on the other side and he too started firing with his shotgun.

The helicopter jerked suddenly to the side, knocking both Reeve and Yuffie off their feet. The sky was swarming with birds now, all around them. Ahead they could see the walls of Cosmo Canyon almost below them.

"Almost there!" the pilot cried.

None of the others were paying much attention at this point. They were all more concerned with casting their spells while not falling out of their seats. In quick succession the creatures surrounding the helicopter were struck with fire, ice, and lightening, as well as blasts from both Barret and Reeve's weapons. Though dozens fell from the sky, many more quickly came in to replace them. The helicopter shuddered violently again and plunged downward sickeningly until the pilot once more regained control. Barret, who was firing toward the rear of the helicopter, saw thick black smoke billowing from the engine.

There was a bright flash of green light, and the birds around them were tossed back by a blast of power from the Ultima materia Cloud held in his hand. And suddenly they were in the clear. The birds no longer pursued them, but they were still dropping rapidly, and the walls of the Canyon were all around them. Cloud looked down to see people scrambling out of the way.

"Hang on!" the pilot exclaimed.

"Oh shit!" Yuffie yelled.

They were all thrown forward as the helicopter hit the ground heavily. The craft shuddered once more, and then was still.

Cloud looked around and saw the others slowly picking themselves up.

"Anyone hurt?" he called.

He paused for a moment, but no one responded. The door was flung open and Red lept outside, followed immediately by Nipala. Cloud scrambled out as fast as he could. He could see the two red beasts disappearing down the stairway. He ran after them, aware that some of the others were following as well.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and looked around. It took him a moment to spot Red and Nipala, for they were high up on the cliff face. For a moment he was at a loss as to how they had gotten up there, but then he spotted a steep trail that wound it's way up the canyon wall. He sprinted over to it and started up.

He took him a few minutes to reach the top. The trail was extremely steep, and he was panting from the effort by time he came out on a narrow ledge running along the top of the canyon wall. Red and Nipala stood nearby, along with Illyanova and some other citizens of Cosmo Canyon that he did not recognize. They were all staring off to the south.

Cloud came up beside them. They stood at the top of the canyon, a vertical wall in front of them that plunged down for hundreds of feet. The rocky terrain continued another hundred feet beyond that, not nearly as steeply, then flattened out into the rolling hills that covered the plains to the south. From this vantage point they could see the homesteads and farms that dotted the landscape south of the canyon. They could also see the billowing smoke that rose from many of them.

"They came out of the forests about an hour ago," Illyanova was saying. "We don't know how many, but more than we had ever seen in the past. Maybe hundreds of them. Not just one kind, but all manner of beast. I've never seen such creatures working together like this before. We sent out the guards and have been evacuating everyone back to the canyon, but I don't know how longer they can hold out. We haven't had an attack like this in hundreds of years, we are no longer prepared."

Red nodded.

"I should never have left," he said.

"Don't blame yourself, Nanaki," Illyanova replied. "It was a surprise to all of us. Your presence here would have made no difference."

"Still, I am the protector," he answered. "Are they burning the farms out there?"

"Yes," Illyanova replied. "They're destroying everything in front of them."

"How much longer before the evacuation is complete?" Red asked.

"It's almost done now," Illyanova replied. "The guards are heading back as we speak. We got the word out as quickly as we could, but there were some who we just could not get to in time."

Red shook his head.

"I've wasted enough time," he said. "I must go help them."

The others had caught up to them and were standing next to Cloud.

"We're coming with you," Cloud said.

Red nodded and they quickly made their way back down the steep path. When they reached the bottom Red and Nipala raced toward the entrance to the canyon, quickly leaving Cloud and his friends far behind. Cloud called for them to slow down, but they paid no heed. Cloud ran after them as best he could, wishing they had some kind of vehicle. He knew he could never keep up with the red beasts without help.

Still, there was nothing else they could do at the moment. But then, just when he thought Red and Nipala would disappear from sight, he suddenly saw them stop. Cloud redoubled his speed, hoping to catch them before they decided to take off once again, but they did not move as he ran up beside them.

They stood at the very entrance to the canyon now. In front of them the land sloped down and grass covered over the red rock of the canyon. Cloud looked up and saw the Cosmo Canyon guards running toward them as fast as they could. But it was what was behind them that made them all stop and stare. The ground sloped down gently behind the guards, and then rose up into a line of low hills just at the edge of vision. Charging up the slope, and covering it like a swarm of ants, were all manner of creature. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of them. All hot on the tail of the guards and the last few stragglers from the farms below. Never before had any of them seen anything like it.

The guards came up to them, and then swept past, some of them turning once in a while to fire a shot wildly behind them. Red stood there for a moment more, just looking at the horde that was approaching them in shock, then he turned and looked at the others.

"Back to the canyon," he shouted. "There are too many of them!"

Red and Nipala raced back the way they had come, once again leaving Cloud and the others in the dust. As Red neared the canyon walls he stopped again and looked up to see sentries high up on the ridge-tops.

"Close the gates!" he yelled up to them. "Close the canyon gates!"

The men looked at him for a moment in surprise, then scrambled over to huge wheels on either side of the walls and started twisting them frantically.

As Cloud caught up to Red once more he heard a deep rumbling sound. He looked up and was startled to see the walls of the canyon moving. But then he realized it was not the canyon wall he was seeing, but two huge cleverly concealed stone doors that were built right into the canyon wall. The last of the guards ran through, along with Cloud and his friends. One of the last men through was an older man with graying hair and deep green eyes.

Red was the last of all to step through the doors before they slammed shut. The great gates of Cosmo Canyon had been closed, for the first time in over one hundred and fifty years.

Red looked up. He could see the birds that had attacked the helicopter circling above. He wondered why they weren't attacking now. He had a feeling they were waiting for something.

Illyanova strode over to him. Red looked at her.

"Communications?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"They're being blocked. We never got a message out."

"What about the helicopter?"

"It was badly damaged in the landing. It will take a while to repair it, if it can be repaired at all."

Red nodded slowly. They were cut off.

"What about the Gi cave?" he asked. "Is it still clear?"

Illyanova nodded.

"There was no enemy activity outside the cave," she replied.

Well, that was better than nothing. At least they could get a message out that way if they needed to.

"Nanaki!"

Red looked up at the call from one of the sentries above the gate. The man pointed to the south.

"Something's happening out there."

Red nodded and ran up the steep path until he stood beside the sentry at the top of the canyon wall once again. He looked out and saw the plain south of the canyon crawling with monsters. But at one point to the southwest, not far from the dark trees of the forest, he could see some kind of activity. The creatures there were running rapidly, seeming to be converging on one spot. Red strained his eyes, staring off into the distance. For a moment he stood there motionless, watching small figures moving rapidly across the plain. There were four of them, moving swiftly toward the canyon. Four chocobos, and as they came closer Red recognized the riders perched on them.

He turned and ran rapidly back down to the others.

"It's Zack," he called. "He's coming back."

He looked at Illyanova again.

"How many chocobos do we have in the stables?"

"Ten," she replied. "Though one is injured and cannot be ridden."

"It'll have to do," he said. "They'll never make it back on their own. We must help them."

He turned to the others.

"Hurry!"

The creatures outside the gates were wandering around at random, seemingly confused by the sudden appearance of the huge stone walls in front of them. Though there were many of them, they did not seem to have any type of order. No one seemed to be in command, and none of them were posted as sentries.

So it was that they were taken complete by surprise when Red and Nipala, followed by nine chocobos ridden by Cloud and his friends, as well as the best of the canyon guards, burst forth from a narrow ravine near the gates and fell upon them. The creatures rapidly fell back and scattered. But Red did not press the attack. He knew their enemies numbers were too great to stand against. Speed was of the essence. They had to get through to Zack before the enemy could become organized and overwhelm them with their superior numbers.

They broke through the creatures that had gathered near the gate, and raced across the plain. Red could see Zack's group clearly now, not too far away. The enemy was swarming around them. Even as he looked, one of the chocobos went down.

Red put on a burst of speed. Cloud spurred his chocobo onward to keep up, but even so barely managed to. He had his sword out, and slashed visciouly at any monster foolish enough to come within reach. Already half a dozen had fallen in front of him.

Ahead of him Red reached the creatures that were gathered around their fiends. With a fearsome howl he launched himself into their midst, falling upon them from behind. Moments later Cloud and the others had joined him.

Cloud saw a flash of light as lightening from Yuffie's materia blasted some of the creatures to his left. His sword flashed out, and two others fell in front of him. He could see Reno and Elena standing back to back beside their fallen chocobo, blasting away with their guns. Beside them Rude, still mounted but with his ammo spent, stood kicking at any monster that happened within reach. He looked around and spotted Aeris defending herself with her rod, Vincent mounted behind her, just as Reeve came to her assistance with his shotgun.

Cloud spurred his mount and cut his way through to Reno and Elena. He slashed at a wolf like creature that was snapping at Elena. The creature howled and fell to the ground.

Two other creatures on the other side of them were lashing out at Reno when Zack rode up and cut one down with a flick of his sword, while the other one fell to Cid's spear.

Cloud reached down and pulled Elena up behind him. He saw Reno remount behind Rude. He glanced up and saw more creatures rushing toward them from all directions. He felt something hit his back and was almost knocked from his chocobo. He looked up to see some of the birds diving down towards them.

"Let's get out of here!" he yelled.

They turned and spurred their chocobos forward, racing back toward the canyon. Red and Nipala took the lead once again, with Zack and Cloud on either side of them. They could see a knot of monsters gathering at the gates to the canyon in front of them.

Barret and Yuffie came up beside Cloud, all three of them lifting up their materia. Green light flashed and elemental magic crashed down upon the beasts in front of them, killing most of them outright. The ones that were left offered only token resistance as the riders slashed through them. In moments they had slipped through the line of monsters and disappeared once more into the ravine from whence they had emerged, the concealed door slamming shut behind them. They had made it safely back behind the walls of Cosmo Canyon.

Cloud dismounted and the chocobo's were quickly led away. Barret stood nearby, blood dripping from a wound on his left leg. Yuffie quickly cast cure on him.

Zack strode up to Cloud.

"You came out just in time," he said. "I thought sure we were making our last stand."

Cloud nodded, still breathing heavily from the exertion.

"It was the least we could do."

He turned to look at Cid.

"Where's the Slipstream?"

"Long story," Cid replied. "I'll fill you in when we get a chance." He grinned. "I never thought I'd be so happy to see your spiky little head."

"It's good to see you again too," Cloud said.

Aeris stepped up to him.

"It is good to see you," she said. "But what are you doing here? How's Tifa?"

"She's improved," he replied with a smile. He looked around. He saw Red climbing up toward the gate once more.

"We can discuss it later," he continued, starting after Red. "Right now we've still got work to do. We're safe for now, but who knows how long that is going to last? The canyon is still in danger. It looks like we might have quite a fight in front of us."