

## CHAPTER II: WE HAVE A PLAN

It was night. Cloud stood on a treeless hill in the dark. Rain pelted down around him, he could feel it but not see it. He could see nothing but darkness all around him. He looked up, but there was no sign of any stars or moonlight.

He turned in a slow circle, but saw no hint of where he was, or how he had gotten here, or anything at all except the darkness. But then a light slowly grew ahead of him. Faint at first, but then growing until he could see a small figure.

The light continued to brighten. He could see Aeris clearly now, for the light seemed to emanate from her. He took a step toward her but then stopped. In the growing light he saw that he stood on the edge of a chasm. The ground dropped off in front of him as if it had been cut by a knife, and he could see nothing below but inky blackness. Aeris stood on the other side, close, but unreachable. She seemed to be beckoning to him.

He looked around, but the chasm seemed to stretch in both directions for as far as he could see. He could not reach her.

He looked at her again, and it was then he saw the dark shadow growing behind her.

He shouted a warning, but though she didn't appear that far away, she did not seem to hear. The shadow grew deeper and larger behind her while she continued to beckon to him, unaware of the danger. Burning green eyes appeared in the blackness behind her and a long sword materialized out of the darkness and hovered above her head.

"Look out," he yelled as loud as he could. "Look out, behind you!"

She didn't hear. The sword swung up slowly and he knew in an instant it would descend.

With a cry of rage he flung himself into the chasm. He felt himself falling, and suddenly he could hear her voice calling his name, echoing in the darkness as he plummeted downward.

"Cloud!:"

He awoke with a start to see Tifa looking at him, concern on her face.

"You've had another dream," she said softly. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said quickly. "I'm fine."

He stood up and looked around. They had camped beneath a small stand of elm trees at the foot of a hill. The sun, low in the east, cast long early morning shadows around them.

Tifa waited, hoping maybe Cloud would say more, but not really expecting it.

He didn't.

"You better pack up your gear," she said finally, "We need to get an early start if you want to be there by noon."

He nodded and started to get his gear together.

"So you're finally up!" Barret came striding over and gave him a slap on the back that nearly sent him sprawling. "Thought you were going to sleep away the whole morning. And a fine morning it is, I might add."

Tifa was glad that Barret had insisted on coming along with them, although she had been kind of surprised that he could leave his office on such short notice. But when she had broached the subject to him he had just snorted dismissively and told her he had only taken the job in order to get Corel back on its feet, and it was doing well now. He hadn't taken a vacation since he had become Mayor, and if they didn't like it they could just fire him and find someone else to take the job, though personally he doubted they would be able to find someone foolish enough.

He took a deep breath and filled his lungs with the cool morning air.

"Ahh," he said pleasantly, "It's good to be on the road again."

Cloud smiled in spite of himself at his old friends enthusiasm. It was good to see Barret again. He had been surprised when Tifa had brought Barret back to the Inn, even more surprised when they told him their plan. He had tried to hide the visions he was getting from Tifa, but obviously he hadn't done a very good job. He had been half afraid if he told her she would have dismissed it as nonsense, or perhaps even thought he was losing his mind, as he had to admit he sometimes thought himself. He should have known better. He was grateful she understood and was trying to help him, though he hadn't told her so.

"We better get going," was all he said.

They finished packing their gear and were soon on the road again. Though Shinra Corp had been sucking the planet dry and no one in the party was sorry to see it go, having had more than a little hand in bringing about its destruction, there were some disadvantages. The roads were in poor repair and vehicles were scarce. Not that any of them minded very much. They had done quite a bit of their earlier traveling on foot, and were well accustomed to the road.

Soon the flat plains around them began to rise up and the vegetation become scarce. The road wound up slowly into the hills and passed into a steep sided canyon. They came around a bend and saw a town carved into the hillside ahead, covering the entire side of the mountain. Perched at the very top they could just make out the dark silhouette of an observatory.

"Its good to be back," Barret remarked and led them up a rough cut stairway into Cosmo Canyon.

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"Welcome, friends"

"Red, it's so good to see you," Tifa exclaimed, walking up beside him and rubbing the fur under his neck. He lifted his head for her to get better access. Cloud couldn't help but smile at the sight of this huge fire red beast, with rapier sharp claws that could tear a man apart in an instant, being petted like a house cat. Even though he knew the look was deceiving and Red was just about the calmest and most peaceful person (or creature, but he really couldn't think of Red as anything other than a person) he had ever met.

"Indeed it has been a while," Red replied. "Too long, in fact. My studies have kept me busy, but that has not stopped me from thinking about you all often. You are all well, I hope?"

He looked quickly at each of them in turn. Barret responded in the affirmative. Tifa just looked at Cloud, who said nothing.

"Ah yes," Red said quickly. "I have been looking into your theory. If you wish we can go up to my chambers and discuss my findings, or perhaps you are too weary from the road and need to rest first?"

"No," Cloud said quickly before the others could speak. "We're not tired at all. Let's go."

Red slowly led them through the town and up to the observatory. Tifa and Cloud had readily agreed with Barret when he had suggested that they contact Red, and they had sent word ahead to let Red know they were coming and the nature of their quest. Cosmo Canyon held a huge storehouse of knowledge about the planet and all who had lived on it, including the Ancients. If there was anyplace in the world where they could find out what they were looking for, this would be it.

The observatory hadn't changed at all since they had last seen it. Red had kept it just the way it was in honor of Bugenhagen. He walked into the laboratory and sat down on the floor, the others gathering around him.

"I have been searching through the records since you first contacted me," Red stated getting right down to it. "I am afraid that what I have found is not promising. There is no way she could have survived Sephiroth's attack. However," he said quickly as Cloud started to speak, "there is some evidence that in certain circumstances an Ancient can be brought back from the dead. Although there is precious little information about death and/or resurrection of an Ancient. I have come across a few items that hinted at it. There is one thing I could find that seemed to hold some promise. There were two references to a special type of materia, a Crystal Materia, that apparently could revive the spirit of an Ancient. Both references were from some of the oldest books here in the Canyon, both written in ancient languages that were difficult to translate, but the fact that it was mentioned on two separate occasions, in two separate books, leads me to believe that it could exist, though whether it actually can bring Aeris back is unknown."

"But you think it might be possible," Cloud asked.

"Maybe," Red replied. "There is so much about the Ancients that is lost forever. I can't say for sure what is possible when it comes to them."

"So how do we find this Crystal Materia?" Barret asked.

"The books did not say," Red answered.

"You mean you have no idea where to find it?" Tifa asked.

"Correct," Red said.

"So we're basically right back where we started from," Cloud said gruffly.

"Maybe not," Red replied. "There was a reference in one of the books to another tome. I have looked through our archives and it is not in them. But a long time ago, when Cosmo Canyon was threatened with invasion, some of the books from our libraries were stored away in a secret chamber. Even after the danger had passed not all of them were returned to the library. I'm not sure what books they were but I know they were some of the oldest in the Canyon. It is quite possible that the book we are looking for is among them. But it is not a safe place, and I wanted to be sure of your determination to follow this quest before I suggested it. It is not in a place where I would go on a whim."

He sat up and looked at each of them carefully.

"So where is it?" Barret blurted out.

"In a chamber below the cave of the Gi."

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Tifa felt a touch of fear rise unbidden within her as the door to the Gi cave slowly opened. She remembered full well how close they had come to death the first time they had crossed this threshold. She glanced quickly at the others, but they were all looking at the door as well. It was all right to feel some fear, she thought, as long as she didn't show it.

"Do you really think anything is left in there?" Barret questioned. "I thought we cleaned the place out the last time we were here."

"The dead abide here," Red replied solemnly. "There may be fewer than last time we entered, but you can never remove them permanently. Shall we go?"

Red slowly padded into the cave, and the others followed. Cloud first, then Tifa, with Barret acting as rear guard. Tifa looked around quickly as they entered but saw nothing out of the ordinary in the dim light. The only thing she noticed was the musty smell and the abundance of cobwebs. Apparently the dead, just like some living she could think of, were not fond of dusting.

They proceeded down into the lower chambers without incident. Well, not entirely without incident. It was true that nothing disturbed the party as it moved through the darkness, but Tifa could not shake the feeling, that grew stronger as they slipped deeper into the caverns, that something was nearby. She felt... she could only describe it as some kind of presence, and the feeling soon became overpowering. She kept glancing sharply around, for she kept thinking that she could see something just out of the corner of her eye, but when she looked that way there was nothing there. And there were sounds too. Furtive movements in the darkness around them. Or so it seemed. Yet even when she concentrated solely on listening, she could not really be sure what she was hearing was real.

They reached the bottom cavern and followed Red into the maze of tunnels.

The others said nothing, and for a while she thought that she was the only one who felt it. But gradually she noticed the others looking this way and that, and stopping for a moment to stare off into the darkness. The feeling of a presence was so overpowering now that she almost wanted to scream.

The others must have felt exactly the same, for Barret suddenly called out from behind her; "Quit yer sneaking around and show yourself. Then we can get this over with and all go home!"

The others stopped and tensed, looking around in all directions as Barret's words echoed through the caverns. The words died away into silence, but still no one moved. Finally Red turned to Barret.

"That was unwise," he said casually.

They continued on their way. Red turned suddenly to the left and slipped through a narrow opening that they had not seen on their first visit. He had been leading them at a cautious pace up to this point, but now he sped up, as a man tends to do when his goal is in sight.

"We're almost there," he commented.

At first Tifa was glad for Barret's outburst, for it had broken the tension, and the presence seemed to have disappeared. She began to think that it had all been in her mind, and that she had been getting nervous over nothing. But now the

feeling suddenly came back with a vengeance. She stumbled for a moment, almost overwhelmed by it. Furtive sounds and shadows surrounded her, whirled around her in every direction, everywhere!

Get a hold of yourself, she thought angrily. She took a deep breath and forced herself to look only at Cloud's back. Then she marched deliberately after him, resolutely ignoring the dark movements in the shadows around her.

The party came to a sudden halt, and Tifa almost stumbled into Cloud. She had been concentrating so much on his back that she hadn't seen they had come to the end of the corridor and now stood in front of a rough cut stone door.

Without hesitation Red pushed the door, which opened smoothly and without a sound. When they entered the room beyond Tifa saw that it was circular and lined with dusty books.

"Here we are," Red said with satisfaction.

The feeling of the presence had not diminished, but now it seemed to be coming only from behind them, through the door and the corridor beyond.

"Please close the door," she heard herself say.

But even before the sentence was finished Barret had done just that. There was a heavy wooden beam beside the door and Barret used that to bar it as well. For some reason Tifa felt tremendously relieved.

Red was already carefully looking over the books. Tifa glanced at the books for a few moments, thinking maybe they could help Red look, but she saw that they were all in some strange language she did not understand. Barret walked around idly poking in corners and knocking softly on bookcases, apparently looking for some secret compartments, or walls. Cloud just stood near the center of the room and stared at nothing in particular.

It seemed like a long time, but it was only a few minutes before Red broke the silence.

"I found it," he said. "Now we have to..."

He was interrupted as the room shook. They all jumped, startled by the booming sound that reverberated around them. Something had pounded on the door!

It took only a moment for Cloud to compose himself.

"Something wants in," he remarked.

Barret stood back, looking at the door.

"Something big," he commented.

They all looked at Red.

"Apparently there is something still down here after all," he said thoughtfully.

"Is there any other way out of here?" Barret asked.

Red shook his head.

"Figures," Barret replied.

The room shook again, and the door shuddered.

Cloud took a step toward the door.

"Who's there?"

He jumped back as the blow came again. This time they heard the splintering of wood from the beam holding the door closed.

Cloud looked at Red again.

"Don't suppose there's much chance it'll just go away," he asked.

"Not likely," Red replied.

"Kind of figured that. All right folks, get ready."

Cloud slid his sword silently from its sheath. Barret moved to stand in front of the bookcases directly opposite the door. Red moved to the left of Cloud and Tifa to the right. She felt her nervousness rising again. It had been a while since any of

them had done this, and she wasn't really sure how much their skills had deteriorated. She had spent plenty of time practicing, but that was always different from the real thing. She tried to clear her mind of doubts and focus only on her opponent as she had been taught.

Cloud edged up closer to the door, then used his sword to slip the beam off. For a moment nothing happened. Then the door opened.

It did not burst open, as they had all expected. It opened slowly, almost casually, and for a moment they could see nothing beyond it. Dark shadows seemed to swirl in the air out there, then, like dark tendrils, they drifted into the room. Once in the room they thickened, until slowly they took on solid form, and Tifa could see half a dozen skeletal faces staring at them.

"Time to rock and roll," she heard Barret shout. Then there was a blast of gunfire as he opened up.

Tifa leaped and kicked the nearest skeleton warrior in the face. For a moment she thought her foot would just pass through it, but then felt a very satisfying thump and the warrior back. For a short while there was no time to think as she let her instincts, which apparently weren't as rusty as she thought, take over. They all fell back into the battle pattern that had been so familiar to them. Cloud in the center of things, swinging his sword like a madman. No one, or thing for that matter, could stand in front of him. Red and Tifa on either side of him, protecting his flanks. Barret in the back, picking off any enemy when the opportunity presented itself, or lending his firepower to any of the others if they seemed to get in trouble. The battle was over quickly, but even after the last warrior fell, Tifa could still feel the presence.

Barret apparently didn't share her feeling this time.

"Looks like we kicked butt," he said, grinning.

Then a figure appeared in the doorway. But it was not a skeleton warrior. It was the last person anyone of them would have expected to see, even though she had been so much in their thoughts lately. Tifa cleared her mind and thought of Zangan's training, all the while concentrating on her fist.

They all knew it couldn't really be Aeris, but the vision was so startlingly real that the others just stared for a moment. But that was enough. In an instant Aeris' vision vanished, to be replaced by a huge clawed skeleton that rushed directly at Cloud, who was closest to the door.

Cloud tried to bring up his sword, knowing it would be too late, but just as the creature was upon him Tifa sprang in from the side and drove her fist with all her power straight into the creature's breastbone. With a horrible screech the creature rose up in anguish, and then suddenly collapsed with a clatter into a pile of bones on the floor.

For a moment they all stood there in silence.

Finally Barret spoke.

"Nice form. Now, I think it's time we got our asses out of here."

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Cloud, Tifa and Barret sat around the eternal fire of Cosmo Canyon later that night. Red was up in the observatory poring over the book. He had told them he would let them know when he found anything, but who knew how long that would take. Of the three of them Barret seemed enormously pleased with himself.

"Man, we were slicing and dicing just like old times," he said. "Cloud, you haven't lost a step with that sword. I knew you were good, but I'd forgotten how good."

"Thanks," Cloud replied. "You're still pretty handy with that gun as well."

The truth of the matter was that Cloud felt better than he had in a long time. Although, as noted earlier, he was more than happy to see Shinra Co. destroyed, the fact of the matter was that peace was not the best of times for a trained mercenary. With Sephiroth and Shinra out of the picture, there was not much work available for him. Even the monsters that had terrorized the land had mostly disappeared now that Shinra's Mako Reactors were no longer creating them. He had spent most of the last year helping Tifa with the bar, and it had been more satisfying than he realized to finally get to use his real skills again. He had a feeling that Barret felt much the same.

"And Tifa," Barret continued. "That was awesome. I hope I never get you mad enough to use that on me."

Tifa just smiled. Cloud had not thanked her for what she had done. Not because he was ungrateful but because he knew there was no need. He would thank her by saving her neck in the next battle. It had happened often enough in the past.

"Look, here comes Red," Barret said suddenly.

They turned to see Red padding down the stairway and coming over to them. He sat down between Cloud and Tifa.

"Well, I have some information," he said. "the Crystal Materia was originally in the Temple of the Ancients."

"Which we destroyed to get the black materia," Cloud reminded him.

"As I am well aware," Red replied. "There was nothing more about it's location in that book. But with that clue I started looking in some more recent books on the Temple. I found out that the Crystal Materia was removed by Ifalna."

"Aeris mother," Tifa said.

"Indeed," Red said. "Apparently sometime after Shinra killed Professor Gast she escaped from them. She made her way to the Temple and took the Crystal Materia. Why she wanted it I cannot say, but she was recaptured soon after by the Turks."

"So Shinra got the Crystal Materia?" Cloud exclaimed.

"Yes," Red replied, "but they didn't know what it was. It does not look like ordinary materia. They didn't know it was materia. They didn't know what it was at all. They just knew it was some kind of Ancient artifact, so they stored it with all their other Ancient artifacts."

"And just exactly where was that?" Cloud asked, sure he wasn't going to like the answer.

"In a vault below Shinra Headquarters in Midgar," Red responded.

"Oh brother," Barret exclaimed.

"It figures," Cloud said, shaking his head. Midgar had nearly been destroyed by Meteor, and now it was completely abandoned. Abandoned by people, at least. It was probably the only city left on the planet, however, that was still crawling with monsters.

"So we have to go to Midgar," Tifa said.

"I'm afraid so," Red replied.

"And you know what that means," Cloud said.

"We're going to need our Materia," Barret responded.

"And you know what that means," Tifa added.

"We're going to have to pay a visit to Wutai," Cloud finished.