

Chapter Forty: Battle

Cloud normally didn't say good morning to the world by making a mad dash for the toilet bowl, but when he woke up with sunlight trying to burn a hole in his eyes, he rolled onto his side to escape the scalding rays and promptly felt the contents of his stomach jump into the back of his throat. He still didn't know how he managed to avoid stepping on the sprawled bodies of his friends and fellow party-goers as he ran for the bathroom to puke his guts out.

Served him right, he supposed, as he stumbled out of the bathroom. What a cruel world it was when a savior of the Planet was punished just for having fun with his friends. He remembered drinking a truly heinous number of Blood Rains with Reno at the bar, Cid and the others arriving to join in, but everything after that was just a blurry haze of faces and jokes about liver damage and flatulence. The only other things that stuck in his mind were kangaroos, a telephone pole, and an angry Tifa.

Though he prayed the angry Tifa was only part of a liquor-y dream he'd had, he knew from the annoyance simmering in her eyes when he tottered into the kitchen that she very clearly disapproved of his irresponsible actions last night. He had half a mind to blame it on Reno, but since his partner-in-crime was seated miserably at the kitchen table, trying to choke down a measly piece of toast while flinching at every noise, Cloud just ducked his head shamefully, scratching at his tousled blond hair.

"Hey, Cloud, you best not have missed the toilet when you barfed your brains out just now," Cid said, looking annoyingly pain-free as he dug into a plate full of eggs and bacon.

"I didn't miss," Cloud muttered, looking warily at Tifa as she walked up to him, a tall glass with a familiar concoction in it. Cloud's stomach rolled with a mixture of dread and relief as he recognized her patented hangover remedy.

"I made it extra potent, just for you," she said dryly, shoving the glass into his bare hand.

"Thank you, Tifa," he said glumly. For a moment, he just stood there, holding the glass, but she waited in front of him, hands on her hips as she stared at him expectantly. Grimacing, he complied with the silent order and tilted the remedy into his mouth, nearly gagging on the pungent taste--too many Potions and other nameless herbs mixed into a sludgy paste that should never have come into existence.

He lowered the glass, still cringing, but Tifa's wearily affectionate smile made him feel way better than the hangover remedy. He gave her a weak smile in return and handed her the empty glass, the pounding in his skull already beginning to ebb.

"Hey, Tifa, how about giving me one of those?" Reno complained.

Tifa glanced at Cid. "Should I give him one now?"

"Nah, make him wait longer," Cid said good-naturedly, biting into a piece of greasy sausage. Beside him, Reno watched and started to turn a sickly shade of green.

"Why is Reno being punished?" Cloud asked Tifa quietly.

"Because," Red XIII said as he padded into the kitchen, "he also had a close encounter with the toilet this morning, but unlike you, he missed and made a mess."

"But I cleaned it," Reno insisted, looking away from Cid and his happy munching.

"Didn't do much for the smell," Red said sourly. "But I did not come in here to talk about vomiting. Cloud, Vincent and Yuffie are gone."

Cloud frowned. "Gone as in, 'went to the store' gone, or gone as in 'kidnapped' gone?"

Red scratched idly at one of his ears, and Cloud took the casual gesture as a sign that Red wasn't particularly worried. "I'm not sure. Two of the gold chocobos are missing, and I can only assume that they ventured off somewhere beyond the limits of Rocket Town. I went looking around the town, but I didn't find Vincent and Yuffie at the diner, the weapons shop, or any of the other stores."

Though obviously in the grips of a terrible hangover, Reno still had the strength to grin lecherously. "Did you check the hotel? Maybe they went off to a love nest together."

Cid tapped Reno on the shoulder. "C'mere, let me tell you somethin'."

"Wha--?" was all Reno managed to get out before Cid leaned over and burped loudly in his ear.

"Shit, that's f---ing gross!" Reno exclaimed, clutching his nose as he bowed over the table.

"Cid!" Tifa chastised.

"The stench..." Red gasped as he quickly trotted out of the room. Cloud took it as a blessing that he was on the other side of the room and didn't have a particularly acute sense of smell.

"That's for barfing all over the bathroom floor," Cid said smugly, smirking as he rose from the table and made his way over to the sink, depositing his dirty plate among the heaps of dishes already piled there. For a moment, he scratched his short blond hair, as if contemplating washing them before shrugging and leaving them as they were.

"Where is everyone else?" Cloud asked, glancing at the window, which was dotted only lightly with drizzle. Outside, the morning sky above Rocket Town looked gray and gloomy, but he could still see figures in rain slickers and jackets moving stubbornly about the town.

"Sleeping, showering, running errands," Tifa replied, bustling around the counter with deft hands, mixing together the ingredients for another of her remedies, presumably for Reno, who was still breathing very deeply into his hands.

"What's our battle plan?" Cid suddenly asked, a newly-lit cigarette already between his lips. "I'm gettin' antsy, sitting around and doing nothin' all day."

Tifa laughed. "Cid, it's only nine in the morning."

"Yeah, but that's already too long," Cid grumbled.

"Strife," Titus suddenly called from behind him.

Frowning, Cloud glanced over his shoulder at the man handcuffed to the radiator, hunkered to one side of it like a dark shadow. From this angle, only his legs were visible, and Cloud briefly wondered if he had imagined the summons, but judging from Cid's dark scowl and Tifa's worried brow, that wasn't the case. Wordlessly, he made his way into the living room, eyes idly scanning around for Fa-Li and finding the woman curled next to the fireplace, her left hand bound to the small, ornamental metal bar Cid had built into the wall to hold the poker in place. She had exchanged her leather bodysuit for pale blue sweatpants and matching hooded jacket, the garments obviously loaned to her by a very generous Shera. The pastel color made the woman's exotically beautiful features look surprisingly soft, but it didn't dim the wariness in her eyes as she watched Cloud approach.

Titus hadn't bothered with a new set of clothes. His black pants and jacket were just as dark as ever, his green eyes just as brilliant as they stared up at Cloud from beneath pale, level brows.

"What do you want?" Cloud demanded, fighting very hard not to avert his gaze.

"I just wanted to tell you that the President of Neo-Shinra is a good man, but it seems that despite all efforts to let him go peacefully, mercy was determined not to grant him reprieve."

Cloud felt his eyebrows draw together in a tense scowl. "Look, Titus, stop the cryptic stuff. If you have something to tell me, just do it."

Titus just stared at him as the phone trilled loudly in the kitchen. His green eyes flicked apathetically in that direction, and Cloud felt the first ripples of unease begin to tighten his shoulders. His eyes remained on Titus, but all his attention was on the one-sided conversation Cid was having with the person on the other end of the phone.

"Yeah... Speak up, man, I can't hear ya with all the static... Yeah... No, this is Cid Highwind... The hell ya need to talk to Cloud for?"

Cloud turned away from Titus and stalked into the kitchen, coming up behind Cid. The man turned and lifted an eyebrow, offering him the receiver. "Some guy asking for ya. Sounds familiar, but there's a shitload of static."

Heart thudding in his chest, Cloud put the receiver to his ear, hearing nothing but a low hum of static on the other side. "This is Cloud Strife."

The static intensified, but through the hair-raising crackling, he heard the words, "...Strife... Campbell in Mideel... hear me?"

"Doctor Campbell?" he repeated. "I can barely hear you."

"...is here... has... poisoning."

Cloud clamped his hand over his opposite ear, turning his back on the worried faces of Tifa and the others. "Can you please repeat that?"

"Reeve... Mako..."

Though the connection was still horribly static-filled, even Cloud's sleep-and-alcohol-muddled brain could piece together what the doctor was trying to tell him: Reeve is here. He has Mako poisoning.

Cloud's skin was cold, but the blood ran hot in his ears, filling his body with a warm surge of growing fury. "I understand, doctor. We'll be heading down to Mideel as soon as possible."

"Hurry," the doctor's voice came in a crackling rush. "...seeing you."

Interpreting that as a goodbye, Cloud set the receiver back on the ringer a bit too heavily. Without turning around to face the others, he said, "Ready the Highwind and gather everyone. We're going to Mideel."

"Strife," Reno said sharply, and Cloud didn't have to ask what the Turk was demanding.

"Reeve is in Mideel," Cloud said shortly.

"Reeve?" Reno echoed incredulously. "What the hell?"

"I'll tell you when we're on the move. Now let's just hurry and get ready."

No one moved.

"Now," he snapped, still hunched over the phone cradle, not wanting to show his angry face in front of the others. If Cid and Reno saw, they would grow angry as well, and their rage would spread to the others until it ripped through their whole wartorn band like a wildfire blazing out of control. Besides, he didn't want them to know about what Titus had told him. If the Turks thought that the Running Man was responsible for hurting their President... Cloud was in no mood to try and keep them from shedding blood unnecessarily.

Fortunately, Tifa, Cid, and Reno all scattered at Cloud's curt, clipped order. He felt their eyes on him as they left the kitchen, but he didn't meet their gazes. He knew he owed them a full explanation, but he couldn't do it with the blood boiling in his veins like this. Mako poisoning. Of all things, why that? And how?

Of course, Cloud knew the how. As soon as Reno and Cid were out of earshot, he stalked over to Titus and stood over him, letting his shadow loom over his seated figure and wishing the darkness would suffocate the life out of him. Titus only looked at him, jewel-like eyes indifferent.

"You put him in the Lifestream, didn't you?" Cloud hissed.

Silence.

"Why?" Cloud demanded, fighting not to let his voice rise. "Why do that? Why didn't you just kill him? He has... he has..."

"Mako poisoning," Titus finished in a low, emotionless voice. "So I heard. That is unfortunate."

Cloud's fingers itched to grab hold of Titus' collar and shake a reaction out of him. Anything would do, any shred of emotion, a hint of regret or remorse for what he'd done to a man who had helped save and rebuild the Planet. He clenched his fists instead, aware of Red watching him from the hallway.

Gritting his teeth, Cloud forced himself to turn his back on Titus and walk away. Tifa came out of the hallway just as he stepped from the living room.

"What are we going to do about Yuffie and Vincent?" she asked quietly, noting the fury in Cloud's blue eyes.

"I hate to say it, but tough luck," Cloud said flatly. "We need to get over to Mideel."

"We can't just leave them behind," Tifa protested.

"Shera knows where we're going. She'll tell them when they get back, and they'll just have to find their own way to Mideel."

Yuffie made a gagging noise into Zoe's wet feathers, fighting down the vomit that kept trying to rise into her throat as the waves did their nauseating little dance underneath the chocobo's clawed feet.

"I'm sick and miserable," she complained, almost inhaling a feather as she spoke.

"I know," Vincent said, not sounding sympathetic at all. Of course, if she'd had to steer Vincent's seasick ass across the churning sea while trying to maintain control of her own chocobo, she wouldn't be oozing sympathy either.

"I don't know why I'm getting sick now," she continued, figuring that as long as she was talking, it would distract her from the sensation of her stomach's contents rolling like a pig in the mud. "I was fine on the way to Wutai. Don't know why I feel like... puking... now. Urgh!"

Zoe warked in dismay as Yuffie leaned to the side, holding onto the edge of the saddle for balance as she dry-heaved, coughing up nothing but still feeling like shit after she was done. She'd emptied most of her dinner a few miles off the Wutainese shore when a giant wave had roared up in front of her and Vincent. Instead of bracing for impact like a normal chocobo, Zoe's higher breeding had somehow told her that it would be a good idea to run through the goddamn wave. As soon as she could draw a full breath of air, Yuffie had thrown up. In front of Vincent, too. Fortunately, he hadn't gone "ew!" or made any snide remarks. That was the good thing about Vincent: you could do some embarrassing things in front of him, and he rarely ever commented on it. All he did was gently take the reins out of her grip and bring his chocobo alongside hers to guide her through the rainy night on the ocean.

Dawn had broken an hour ago, but thanks to the crappy weather and high waves, they were forced to move at a snail's pace. Yuffie was sure someone had noticed that she and Vincent were missing by now. Hell, she'd be insulted if they hadn't! Reno was probably making lewd jokes about them running off to engage in naughty activities. Not that Yuffie would ever engage in such debauchery. Of course not. No way.

She groaned as Vincent urged the chocobos into a fast trot to scale a wave before it could rise any higher. Yuffie felt like someone had stuffed her into a dryer and put it on the fastest setting. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut and waited for level ground to return. She'd be happy if she never saw the damn ocean again.

"Vincent," she moaned.

"Yes?"

"How far away are we?"

"It won't be long, Yuffie."

She sighed. "Distract me, Vincent."

"Just concentrate on the rain hitting your clothes," he suggested dryly. "I'm afraid I'm all out of distractions at the moment. Unless you want to drown when a wave hits us."

"Don't be melodramatic," she scolded. "The waves aren't as bad right now, and my need to puke hasn't been consistent. Just talk to me, or something. Tell me a story, one that your mama used to tell you."

"My mother was not one for stories."

"Just talk, Vincent," she said, trying not to sound desperate as her stomach heaved again. "Hey, weren't you going to tell me about the Brother of Battle?"

"You remembered that?" Vincent asked, sounding mildly surprised.

"Yeah, yeah," she said hurriedly, grasping her opening. "Tell me, tell me. I wait with bated breath." And vomit in the back of my throat.

After a moment, Vincent said somewhat reluctantly, "Very well. I'm afraid it's not a very long tale. I don't quite remember all the details, either. It's really just a piece of our local folklore. When I was a child, I lived in a village high in the mountains. The soil there was very dark, but there was one large area of land deep in the forests that had red soil. Whenever it would rain, the mud there would stain any passing travelers' feet the deep red-brown of dried blood. My sisters told me that there was once a pair of great warriors amongst our people, back during the time of the Ancients. A brother and a sister renowned for their great skill in protecting the village from evil. The sister was named Battle, and it's said that she died on that patch of naked land in the woods where the soil is red and the trees never grow. She had told her brother that wherever she fell when she died--that was where she wished to remain, rather than become just one

corpse amongst many in the village's traditional burial ground. So, there she fell, and there she remained. Her blood seeped into the earth, turning it deep red.

"But Battle's brother still lived on after her death. Not wanting to be separated from the sister he had loved so dearly, he lived on the land where Battle had fallen. There are a few disturbing versions of the story that say he literally lived off the earth that Battle's blood had soaked into, growing food in soil soaked with his sister's blood. Then, he just disappeared. No one knows if he died, or if he somehow passed into a different plain of existence. But his spirit stayed at his sister's side. Wherever there is bloodshed between fighters, Battle's warrior spirit is there, and so is her brother. They are never apart, and every cut and bruise that mars the skin of a female warrior is a kiss from the Brother of Battle."

"Just the women?" Yuffie asked, her nausea briefly lulled by Vincent's voice.

"So the tale goes," he replied. "For all I know, it's just a myth."

"Myth or not, the Brother of Battle is into the tough love. Someone should let him know that sometimes he's a bit overzealous with his affection."

"Perhaps he is just hungry for the presence of a woman."

Although Vincent said the comment in his usual impassive tone, Yuffie still lifted her face from Zoe's feathers and glanced at him with mild curiosity, wondering if he was attempting to make a joke or just thinking out loud. His face was almost lost beneath the hood of his rain slicker, his white skin standing in stark contrast to the black material, wayward strands of dark hair clinging to the dampness on his face.

"Well, I can get that, I guess. He has to get his kicks somehow," she said with a sigh, thinking of the huge shiner she'd had on her cheek when the Faceless Man had slammed his rifle into her face back in the deep sea complex. Stupid faceless freak.

"So," she said as casually as possible, "you lived up in the mountains when you were little?"

"Yes," he said, and she could feel him starting to withdraw, obviously trying to discourage further questions. Fortunately, Yuffie was known to fart in the face of discouragement. Besides, Vincent hadn't shut down completely like he had during the previous times she'd tried to cajole bits of his past out of him. That had to be something, right?

"How long ago did you live up there?" she insisted.

"Before your father was born," he replied, crimson eyes turning in her direction, watching intently for something--some hint of revulsion, maybe, or shock, that he was older than her father.

Well, Yuffie was going to disappoint him. She'd always suspected that Vincent was an old fart despite his young appearance, and she grinned even as raindrops rolled down her face. "I guess that explains why you act and sound like an old fuddy duddy sometimes."

Vincent frowned. "I'm realistic. I never considered myself particularly... fuddy duddy-ish."

The words sounded so ridiculous when Vincent said them in his deep, daunting, "woe to me" voice that Yuffie had to laugh. "Ah, Vinnie, you're such a trip! Your sisters must have loved you a lot."

Vincent turned away again, facing forward. "They did. And before you ask, I don't want to talk about them."

"I didn't ask," she grumped.

"But you were going to," he said, and she couldn't argue. But she was really, really damn curious about his past, especially since she knew her old tooter of a father had to have told Vincent some embarrassing stories from her childhood when they'd had their little impromptu tea party. It was only fair that Yuffie got to know some things about Vincent! She wondered what it had been like to have siblings. Yuffie always thought of her friends as an extended family, but she had spent a lonely portion of her childhood wondering what her life would have been like if she'd had brothers and sisters related to her by blood. But then she imagined some little bratty brother stealing all of her treasures, or some older, elegant sister chiding Yuffie for her tomboyish nature, and she was grateful that she was an only child.

But, glancing at Vincent, she couldn't help but wonder what his sisters had looked like. Had they been as beautiful as Vincent was handsome, with the same dark hair and long limbs? Had they--

"You're staring at me and asking yourself questions, aren't you?" he suddenly asked, pinning her with an intent look that made her feel like he could stare right into her head.

"No!" she exclaimed hotly. Vincent nodded and looked away, but she saw amusement on his face, silently accusing her of being full of crap. She had the childish urge to stick her tongue out at his profile, but she wisely stifled the impulse.

"Land," Vincent said suddenly, sitting up a little straighter in the saddle. Zoe felt the tug on her reins and drew herself up, feathers shifting out of Yuffie's death grip. Yuffie glanced in the direction of Vincent's gaze and saw that he was right. The vision of the shores of Rocket Town was the damn loveliest thing she'd seen in her life, almost as gorgeous as a whole bagful of materia. Almost.

"Wow, Vinnie, you should tell me stories more often," she joked, catching Zoe's reins as Vincent tossed them back to her. "I completely forgot to charm you by puking into the ocean again."

"Glad I could service you," he said. "Now, let's get going."

"Service me"? Yuffie's mind echoed. What the hell am I, a buggy?

Vincent flicked Quinn's reins before Yuffie to could reply, and she had no choice but to urge Zoe into a run. Nausea reared in her stomach, but she fought it down, speeding towards the shore. They didn't bother to decrease their speed as the talons of the chocobos touched the soggy sand of the shore, spurred by a strange urgency they felt in their very bones. Rocket Town felt oddly empty as they approached the city limits, and Yuffie had the nagging notion that something was wrong. She could only assume Vincent shared her instincts, because when she glanced at him with a worried and uncertain expression, he looked back at her with his mouth in a grim line. Anyone else might have thought that was how he normally looked, but she knew better.

Yuffie leaned forward in the saddle, the last lingering traces of nausea gone as Zoe's speed increased, Quinn fighting to keep up with her taxing pace. They didn't even bother to head to the chocobo barn to deposit the weary birds amongst their brethren. They rode right up to the front steps of Cid's house and hopped off the saddles almost before the chocobos had drawn to a complete halt. Zoe warked in dismay as the sudden shift in Yuffie's weight made her veer slightly to the side, but the gold quickly corrected her balance. Yuffie raced up the steps with Vincent at her heels, grimly noting the absence of Red XIII on his usual perch on the porch.

She wasn't surprised when she barged through the front door to find the house empty except for Shera's lonely figure washing dishes in the kitchen sink, her glasses perched on her nose and her hair in a no-nonsense ponytail. She whirled, a preoccupied expression off her face when she saw Vincent and Yuffie in the doorway.

"They took off to Mideel," she said quickly, just as Yuffie opened her mouth to demand where the others were. "The doctor down there said that he found Reeve."

"All the way in Mideel?" Yuffie demanded incredulously, deep worry blooming where relief should have taken root. "The last time someone popped up in Mideel..." Cloud washed up there with Mako poisoning.

Her voice trailed off, drowned in her growing horror, but Vincent finished her sentence in a flat tone, "The Lifestream. I suspect Titus' involvement in this."

Yuffie almost whirled to snap at him for jumping to conclusions, but she bit her tongue when she realized that he was probably right. Titus' former favorite hangout was deep in the earth, very likely close to the Lifestream, and Yuffie wouldn't put it past him to have dumped Reeve in there just to be an ass. Part of her wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but a larger part of her wanted to find Titus and kick his ass all the way to the Chocobo Ranch and back. Just in case.

"They took your things with them," Shera said. "I know they didn't want to leave you behind, but..."

"But they did, those jerks!" Yuffie exclaimed, needing an outlet for her anger. She whirled and stalked out the door. "I'm going after them!"

"Thank you, Shera," she heard Vincent say, his polite but strained voice making Yuffie freeze in mid-stomp. Chiding herself for forgetting her manners, she turned again and barged back through the doorway, almost knocking Vincent over. She bowed to Shera and said, "Thanks for everything."

Shera blinked in surprise before nodding. "Please call and let me know how Reeve is."

"We will! I'm sure he's fine!" Yuffie said with conviction she didn't really feel. The gravity of the situation was starting to dawn on her, and she was desperately fighting back images of Reeve in the grips of the same Mako poisoning that had managed to dull even the light in Cloud's bright blue eyes, stealing his sanity, stealing him.

She couldn't help herself from thinking darkly, Reeve's body is weaker than Cloud's, and after being kidnapped and tortured, he'd be weak in the mind as well...

With one last nod to Shera, she turned and ran back out onto the porch, hopping into Zoe's saddle in such a hurry that the gold chocobo turned her head to see what had her rider so agitated. Vincent had already taken off when Shera rushed out onto the porch, her hands still wet with dishwater.

"Ride fast," she pleaded.

"Don't worry," Yuffie said, trying to force a smile that probably came out looking more like a grimace.

It didn't take her and Zoe long to catch up to Vincent, and before she knew it, they were tearing through the outskirts of Rocket Town, the chocobos' talons sinking into the soft earth. Yuffie stared at the place the Highwind had hovered, her heart twisting painfully in her chest when she saw the empty sky. She was annoyed at being left behind, but she understood Cloud's decision. But still...

"Cloud's an ass for leaving us behind," she snarled.

"If I were him, I would have made the same decision," Vincent said curtly. "We ran off without telling anyone, and a leader should not let the whims of two subordinates affect the rest of the team."

Yuffie gritted her teeth, not knowing if it was honesty or simple politeness that made Vincent use "we." She had been the one who'd run off without letting anyone know, and he'd only followed to make sure she didn't get kidnapped. She wanted to be insulted that he didn't trust her to take care of herself, but then again, she didn't have a great track record of avoiding kidnappers. In the end, she kept a lid on her anger, knowing that she was only pissed off at the nagging thought that it was her fault they got left behind. Which was stupid, but...

"I shouldn't have run off by myself," she said sullenly, wishing there was a way to kick herself hard in the ass.

"No, you shouldn't have," Vincent replied. "But at least we got left behind together, rather than just you being left behind alone."

Yuffie glared at him out of the corner of her eye, holding tight to Zoe's reins as the chocobo continued to race along. "Are you just being nice?"

Vincent gave her a droll look. "No, merely being an old fuddy duddy."

Yuffie almost laughed at that, but she didn't have any laughter in her at the moment. "I can take care of myself, you know."

"Yes, you've told me that before."

"Then why don't you listen?"

"Because I choose not to," he said simply.

"That answer sucks, Vinnie," she grumbled.

"Only because you can't argue with it."

She couldn't, although she wanted to continue arguing just for the sake of distracting herself. She had to admit that running through the rain with Vincent was better than running by herself. At least she had someone to grumble at, even if Vincent had become annoyingly adept at returning her banter.

A low rumbling suddenly shook the earth beneath them, too quiet and constant to be thunder. Zoe warked with concern but knew better than to slow her pace, and Yuffie quickly began scanning the area, reaching down to her belt to touch the comforting metal of the Oritsuru and wishing she'd brought her Conformer to Wutai. "What the hell is that?"

Vincent didn't reply, but she saw he had the Death Penalty held at the ready, the hood of the rain slicker pushed back so he wasn't robbed of his peripheral vision. Yuffie started to do the same, but the rumbling suddenly intensified, and she heard the distinct noise of air screaming in protest as something large raced through it. She looked up and had to blink twice before she could believe what she was seeing. For a moment, she thought she had water droplets in her eyes. That would explain the shimmering wave of disturbance blazing through the air far above her, but it was too contained, moving with too much purpose to be a fleck of water marring her vision.

"Is that...?"

"It's hovercraft of some sort," Vincent replied. "It has a cloaking device on it."

Yuffie squinted, and she could see that the cloaking device just applied to the ship, not the people on board. As it shot through the air above them at breakneck speed, she was grateful for the shadow cast by the mountain they were running along, hiding them from view. Especially once she recognized the craft's passengers.

"Oh shit!" she exclaimed, not bothering to lower her voice. The passengers were too high up and too far ahead to hear her now. God damn it! They were going to get to Mideel way ahead of her and Vincent!

"Jezebel and Montana," Vincent said grimly, lowering himself until he was practically lying on Quinn's neck, making himself as small as possible to decrease wind resistance. "I didn't want to run the chocobos this hard, but..."

"They're tough. They can take it," Yuffie said tersely, fighting against rising panic. "How the hell did Jezebel and Montana know to go to Mideel?"

"We aren't sure they're heading there."

"Yes, we are! They're after Titus! Where else would they be going?" she snapped, and she could tell from the look in Vincent's eyes that he agreed with her. She wished he didn't. Tifa wasn't anywhere near healed yet, and Yuffie knew she wouldn't hesitate to get in Montana's way again. Yuffie felt her chest tighten at the thought of not being there to help her friend. Deep down, she knew that she and Vincent wouldn't make much difference in a battle against Jezebel and Montana, but in her mind, being there with AVALANCHE was a huge deal. But, she wasn't there with them because they'd flown off to Mideel because someone had done something nasty to Reeve...

If Titus has something to do with this, she thought to herself, forget kicking his ass all the way to the Chocobo Ranch. I'll strangle him to death with my bare hands.

"What I want to know is what f---ing motherf---er decided to build this godforsaken village way the f--- out here in the middle of the goddamn jungle! Can't get where we want to go because we can't land in the trees! Goddamn piece of--"

Like everyone else in the Highwind, Tifa dutifully ignored Cid's angry ranting about the location of Mideel. He'd been cursing under his breath ever since they'd left Rocket Town, and Tifa couldn't say she blamed him. The news that Reeve had turned up in Mideel had everyone wound in knots, but it was evident from the dark anger on Cloud's face that something was terribly wrong. Even though he'd said he'd tell them more once they were on their way, he had done completely the opposite, clamming up and just insisting on getting their as soon as possible whenever someone badgered him to explain further. Reno had eventually thrown up his arms in disgust and stormed out to the deck of the airship to be closer to the ladder when they reached their destination. Cid and Barret obviously wanted to ask more questions, but Cloud's expression forbade anyone to get near him, which only pissed off Cid. Hence, the constant swearing.

Tifa glanced over at the front of the Highwind where Cloud stood with his arms folded over his chest, glaring out of the cockpit's windows with such vehemence that it was amazing he hadn't burned a hole in the glass. She could tell Cloud was trying very hard to keep a lid on his anger, and although she wanted to go over there and talk to him, touch him--anything to bring him back to them--she stayed where she was, gazing out over the ocean and ignoring the worry eating at her.

"Shu'up!" Barret finally exploded at Cid. "Quit your goddamn bitchin'! Ever think it might be the fault of this ghetto-ass airship that we can't land in the trees?"

"Go to hell!" Cid snarled back. "Ain't nothing wrong with my ship! They should just build a landing strip in the--"

Tifa didn't hear Titus come up behind her, and she didn't know if it was because of Cid and Barret's raised voices, or simply because Titus was unnaturally quiet even when wearing heavy combat boots. She jumped a little when she suddenly found him standing beside her at the railing, the cold gray light of the morning making his skin and hair paler than usual. His eyes stood out in stark contrast, green irises alight with the distant reflection of the Lifestream that had ruined Mideel, which could be seen even from the air. Beyond his regal profile, Tifa could see Cloud staring at Titus, his blue eyes warm with rage. Tifa frowned, realizing that whatever had Cloud so angry had something to do with the man beside her...

Titus suddenly turned to look at her, eyes catching hers, and everything seemed to fall quiet. The sound of Barret and Cid's escalating argument was muted, distant as a dream, and Tifa forgot all about the meaningful anger in Cloud's eyes. The air felt soft and thick, surrounding her like the smell of her mother's soap lingering in the moist air of the bathroom after she showered. Tifa remembered standing in those wreaths of warm fragrance, watching as her mother dried her damp hair. The memory soothed her, but she knew it was so very wrong to feel placated at a time like this.

She opened her mouth to demand that Titus stop whatever spell he was weaving, but a hand seemed to close around her throat, stopping her voice from leaving her lips.

"No time for words," Titus said, his voice only meant for the two of them. She felt it all along her body, in her head. He was everywhere. "If you are to be my defender, I can't very well leave you damaged."

He raised one of his hands, and Tifa saw with a sort of distant shock that his handcuffs dangled from one wrist only. All this time, he'd been able to free himself, and they'd been none the wiser. The orb embedded into the back of his hand flashed with a light of its own, a blue-violet storm building in its depths, swirling like captive smoke beneath the glassy surface. He

turned it towards her, and her eyes followed it helplessly, hypnotized by the cloud-like wisps dancing inside of it. Suddenly, she had the impression that there were actual dancers in there, temptresses shrouded in robes that hid their faces as their limbs moved through the air. They danced in a lake of deep purple flames, and Tifa could feel the heat of their fiery stage on her stomach, itching and burning. She wanted to raise her hands to scratch the area, but her limbs were too heavy, too sluggish. Her mind started to slip towards the orb, and she let it. Down she fell, plummeting towards the wreaths of dark fire to join the smoke-dancers...

The Highwind suddenly landed artlessly on the shores of Mideel, and Tifa blinked rapidly, a little disoriented as she automatically gripped the railing. Beside her, Titus did the same, the chain link of his handcuffs clinking against the metal bar. She looked at him warily, for some reason convinced that he had just done something strange, that he had been standing next to her for a reason. If only she could remember...

"Let's go," Cloud said tersely, his voice carrying even in the large room. "Cid, Barrett, keep Titus close to you. Make sure he doesn't get away."

"Some of us should remain with the Highwind," Red said reluctantly, deferring to his tactical prudence but obviously not wanting to be the one to stay behind.

Cloud nodded stiffly. "Yeah, someone should, but I'm not going to ask anyone to. We've all been searching for Reeve for so long, and I know..." His voice trailed off, and Tifa saw his jaw bulge as he grit his teeth, closing his eyes as if he didn't want them to see the frustration and anger that was obviously plaguing him.

Finally, he said in a tight voice, "Whoever wants to stay, feel free to."

Red and Cait Sith were the only ones who volunteered, more out of a sense of, "Well, if someone has to do it, I suppose we will," than any real desire to remain behind. Tifa didn't blame them. Everyone wanted to see Reeve. Cait looked forlorn as he watched them clamber down the rope ladder, but Tifa trusted both him and Red to protect the ship. Tifa spared an idle thought about what Fa-Li intended to do: remain on the ship and away from Reno, or head into the fray at Titus' side. She got her answer when she saw the woman descending the rope ladder with amazing agility for someone who couldn't move her hands. To her surprise, Cloud didn't protest the woman's presence, just signaled for Barrett and Cid to watch her as well.

Fortunately, Fa-Li appeared to be very low on Reno's list of worries at the moment. The redhead had taken off towards the edge of the jungle as soon as his feet hit the sand, and Elena and Rude followed closely behind him, obviously anxious to get to their president as soon as possible. Cloud didn't bother to rein them in, just rushed across the beach to join them, allowing the Turks to blaze a trail through the damp jungle as they struck out for Mideel.

Under different circumstances, Tifa would have admired the way the lush greenery shimmered with standing raindrops, or stopped to examine the huge pink and yellow flowers that remained open in spite of the recent torrential downpours and depressing lack of sunlight. But now the scenery was just a blur of bright colors all around her, perfumed with the thick aroma of wet, rich soil, which clung to her boots as she fought to keep up with the group's taxing pace. She kept hoping that Vincent and Yuffie would come bounding out of the jungle on their gold chocobos--Vincent stony-faced and Yuffie snarling at them for leaving them behind--but their surroundings remained woefully silent except for the rustling of enemies in the bushes, apparently too wet and miserable to attack the humans passing like a wildfire through the jungle.

Or maybe something else is wrong? Tifa wondered, glancing at the gleaming eyes of a Spiral glaring out at her from the shadow of a tall tree; the creature was obviously hungry but unwilling to move, for some reason.

No more than a minute later, Tifa learned the reason for the creature's fear. The earth began to rumble beneath them, forcing everyone to come to a halt. Tifa started to glance at the earth beneath her boots, wondering if the Planet was angry at something, but then the trees above her were whipped into a violent frenzy by something hovering above them. Leaves, already burdened by water, rained heavily down on them.

"What the hell!" Reno exclaimed, sounding more annoyed than frightened, his nightstick already out. His crimson ponytail lashed the air behind him like a twisting viper, and Tifa felt her hair doing the same, her bangs blown back from her forehead as she turned her gaze skyward.

"What's up there?" Cloud demanded, gripping the hilt of the Ultima Weapon.

"Some old friends," Titus' voice drifted from behind them.

Tifa and Cloud both whirled to look at him, standing calmly between the battle-ready Barret and the nervous Fa-Li. His eyes met Tifa's, and she suddenly knew what he was talking about. "You don't mean...?"

"You know who's up there," he said ominously.

The sound of leaves crackling drew her attention back to the treetops, and everyone watched as a peculiar rectangle of wavering air descended into the jungle, vaporizing everything in its downward path. Leaves and wood alike dissolved into nothing but dust, scattering into the wind and stinging Tifa's eyes as she fought to make sense of what she was seeing. At first she thought she was looking at some sort of airship with an invisibility cloak, but as it drew closer, she saw it was more the size of a hovercraft, a vessel just big enough to seat two people. From her vantage point, she could see no obvious steering mechanism, but she wasn't surprised that one wasn't required, especially given the two passengers on board.

Unconsciously, Tifa lifted her hand and pressed it against the bandages covering her stomach, expecting to feel a burst of pain from the burn on her skin, a little reminder of just who she was dealing with. But to her surprise, she felt nothing. Shock broke through her growing haze of fear, and she scratched at the bandages with a gloved hand, waiting for agony to blind her as her fingers chafed the skin underneath. Nothing. Her first thought was that the adrenaline in her veins had somehow made her numb to pain, but something told her that wasn't true. With sudden vehemence, she ripped away the bandages, and as the cloth got caught in the lashing wind and floated away from her body in streams, she stared with wide eyes down at her smooth, completely healed stomach.

She whipped around, her eyes seeking out the one person who had had any sort of idea on how to heal the burn. Titus met her gaze levelly, something like a smile playing on his lips, so faint that Tifa could convince herself it wasn't even there.

"What did you do?" she demanded, the wind ripping away her voice, but she knew he could hear her.

Titus definitely smiled, the expression oddly bitter. Tifa stared at him, remembering his words: i "Cetra curative magic would be the only outside force that could heal this burn in such a short period of time..."

Her jaw threatened to drop as she stared into his too-familiar green eyes, but a tremor ran through the ground, and she forced herself to turn forward again, dreading what she'd find. She was right to fear. Jezebel and Montana stood on the floor of their hovercraft, their hair and clothes annoyingly undisturbed by the whirlwind of fury their landing had created. Jezebel's face was fully healed and once again cruelly beautiful, brown eyes staring out at them with intense battle-hunger. Montana was as imposing as ever, tall and wreathed in white garments, his dark green eyes filled with fire and focused right on Tifa.

He didn't need to say anything. His eyes said it all: I'm going to kill you.

Tifa swallowed hard and raised her fists.