

CHAPTER III: THE GREAT MINTON LEAF EPISODE

It was mid afternoon two days later when they reached Wutai. The town had grown considerably since they had last been there. The fall of Shinra and their restrictive trade policies had opened the continent up to free trade practices, and some shrewd bargaining by Godo with their neighboring villages had greatly improved the economy. Looking around the party could see that the town had probably doubled in size.

"This place is almost as crowded as Midgar used to be," Barret commented as they walked through the busy streets.

"But at least there's no sign of slums," Red observed. The others had been quite pleased when he had suggested he go along with them, and of course had agreed immediately. He knew it would take time away from his studies, but it seemed well worth it. The best way to learn of the world was to actually experience it, and he knew that he had learned more than he ever would from any books the last time he had journeyed with his friends.

They threaded their way through the crowd until they saw Godo's house ahead. Even as they approached they saw a diminutive figure rushing out towards them.

"I can't believe you're here!" Yuffie exclaimed as soon as she reached them. "What a stroke of luck. I need your help. My father is very ill, and the only way to save him is up on Da-Chou. C'mon!"

She took a few steps and then turned to look at them as they stood there bewildered. This was hardly the reception they had been expecting.

"What are you waiting for?" she cried. "It's a matter of life and death. Hurry!"

She turned again and ran off down the road. The others had no choice but to follow.

She ran through the town and then out along the path the led up into the foothills of Da-Chou. They finally caught up with her at she was laboring up the steep path.

"Yuffie, hold on," Barret said gruffly, panting slightly. "What the hell is this all about? If this is some kind of trick I swear I...."

"No trick, " she said, looking candidly at him, but not slowing down. "My father is very ill. He will die soon unless something is done. I've been told that he can only be treated with the leaves from a Minton tree, and the only place they grow is up on the mountain top above Da-Chou. We've got to go get him some."

They continued up the path, slowly passing the huge stone faces carved into the native rock so long ago that no record of it's creators was in existence.

"So why didn't you just come up here sooner," Cloud asked. "What do you need us for?"

"The Minton tree grows above the trail on top of the mountain. There is no path up to it. I can't reach it," she answered.

She kept going up, and the others fell silent and followed. No matter how deceitful she had been in the past, she appeared sincere this time.

They reached the top of the path. Here the trail led into a narrow cave, but she stopped before it and looked up.

"There," she said, pointing at the sheer cliff that rose up above them for perhaps twenty feet until it reached the pinnacle of the mountain. They could make out a few twisted branches covered with gold tinted leaves on a small tree at the top. "That's it."

They all looked at the cliff in silence for a moment. Then Barret spoke.

"What do we look like, mountain goats?"

"I don't see any easy way up, " Cloud agreed. "This isn't exactly our line of expertise."

"You've got to help," Yuffie said desperately. "You're my only hope. He'll die if he doesn't get the cure soon."

Tifa looked up at the cliff, then at Cloud.

"We've got to do something," she said.

Cloud shook his head and looked carefully at the cliff face. Finally he nodded.

"It's not completely sheer, " he said. "There are some handholds. I guess it couldn't hurt to try."

His slipped off his sword and laid it on the ground. He ran his hands along the rock, looking up to try and see which way

afforded the most handholds. Then he slowly started to work his way up.

Even though it wasn't that far it was a painstakingly slow process. He had to test every handhold and toehold carefully before he could trust it with his weight. He almost slipped twice, but each time caught himself just in a nick of time. In this way he slowly inched his way within six feet of the top, but then the rock became smooth above him, and try as he might he saw no way to cover the final distance from this position. He tried to move sideways along the rock face to find an alternate route, but he couldn't go very far.

"Damn," he muttered. He certainly didn't want to go back down and start all over now that he was this close, but he could see no way to reach the top.

"What's wrong?" Tifa asked from below.

Suddenly he had an idea.

"There are no more handholds. I can't reach the top, but if someone else could come up here, I think I could boost them to the top," he replied.

Barret and Tifa both looked at Yuffie.

"What?" she said, then took a step back. "Oh no. Sorry, but I can't"

"Even to save your father?" Barret said pointedly.

"No really," she said. "I can't. I'm afraid of heights."

"I'm surprised you admit to being afraid of anything," Barret replied. "C'mon, Yuffie."

She looked up at Cloud, and it seemed she had real fear in her eyes.

"Please don't make me," she said softly.

They looked at her in silence for a moment.

"All right," Tifa said resignedly. "I'll go."

"Tifa!" Barret interjected.

"It's all right," Tifa replied. "She's too scared to go. I don't think it would be right to try to force her. I wouldn't feel very good to see her fall."

"Then I'll go," Barret said.

"Don't be an idiot," she answered. "You're no climber, and it would take all three of us to boost you up there. Besides, I watched how Cloud got up, and it didn't look too difficult."

Barret had no answer to that. He looked at Red.

"I'm afraid she's right," he gave his opinion without being asked. "I'd go myself, of course, but I am afraid that climbing it not one of my better skills."

"All right then," Tifa said, and walked over to the cliff face. She tested some handholds and then started up. She went more swiftly than Cloud, for she really did remember basically what path he had taken. It wasn't long before she was directly below him.

It was a bit difficult to get up next to him, but eventually she succeeded. Holding onto an outcrop of rock that he knew to be secure firmly with one hand, he let her climb up onto his shoulders, supporting her with the other hand. She reached up and pulled herself over the top.

"Good going," Yuffie cried from below. "Now get a branch with a couple of leaves on it."

Tifa stopped for a moment to catch her breath. She looked out at the expanse below and for the first time noticed what a gorgeous view they had. She could see the entire town of Wutai and far into the hills beyond. Then she turned and walked over to the small tree, only a sapling really, and broke off a branch with half a dozen leaves on it.

"Throw it down," Yuffie called. "I'll take it right back to my father. There's no time to lose. Then I'll meet you in my basement. We can talk then."

Tifa dropped the branch and Yuffie caught it as it came down, then she took off like a shot.

"Yuffie, wait for us," Cloud called. "I wanted to see your father."

"No time," she called back. "I've got to get this to him. He's much too sick to see anyone anyway. I'll give him your regards,"

Then she was off down the hill as fast as she could go.

Tifa swung around and slid down to where she hoped Cloud could reach her.

"She took off awfully quickly," he commented from below her.

"Well, she wanted to get the plant back to her father as quickly as possible," Tifa replied. "That's understandable."

She held onto an outcropping of rock and swung her legs lower. Suddenly she felt Cloud's powerful grip.

"No, something isn't right," he said, his suspicions aroused. "It all seems too much of a coincidence with us arriving here just in a nick of time."

He swung her down beside him and held her until she got a grip of her own.

"I'm going after her," he said.

He worked his way down as quickly as possible until he was less than ten feet above the path, then let go and dropped to the ground. In a moment he was after her.

Tifa tried to hurry as well but she found that going down was much more difficult than up had been. It was harder to find toe-holds below her than it had been to find handholds above.

"I'm following Cloud," she heard Barret comment below. "If this was some kind of trick I swear I'll strangle that girl."

Tifa inched her way down a little lower, then glanced down to see Barret swiftly disappearing down the trail. After a moment she saw Red following him.

"Uh, Guys?" she said loudly, but they weren't paying any attention. They had just vanished out of sight when her foot slipped off its narrow toehold. With a cry she slid down the last few feet of cliff face and landed hard on her rear end.

She sat there for a moment until the shock of it had worn off.

"Thanks a lot guys!" she yelled after them, even though she was sure they were too far away to hear. Then she stood up and dusted herself off.

"Hey, wait for me," she called and, limply slightly, trotted off after them.

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Cloud caught sight of Yuffie again just as he reached the village, but the streets were still crowded and he soon lost her. She seemed to be headed straight for her home, however, which would make sense if she was bringing the leaf to Godo. So that was where he headed.

The front doors were wide open when he arrived. He stood there for a moment looking in, but no one was in the room. He heard voices coming from the hallway to the right, and one of them was a deep voice he recognized from his earlier visits. He went over to the hallway and walked down it. The voices were coming from a room off to the right, and they were plainly the voices of Godo and Yuffie.

"I am very proud of you for passing this next phase," he heard Godo say, and then he stepped into the entrance to the room. Yuffie and an extremely healthy looking Godo both stood in front of a window opposite the door. Godo was holding the branch in his hand. They both looked at Cloud.

"Well, thanks a lot, Dad," Yuffie said immediately, strolling over to Cloud. "But I've really got to get going. Cloud and I have some things to discuss that really can't wait." She came up beside him and practically dragged him along as she went by. "We can talk some more later, I'm sure," she continued. "It's just that this is real, real important."

They were out in the hallway now, Yuffie still dragging him along. Suddenly he pulled up short.

"What the hell..." he began.

"Not here," Yuffie said as loudly as she dared. "I'll explain everything outside. I promise."

Cloud looked at her skeptically, but then followed her as she walked back out of the building. As soon as they stepped over the threshold, however, he stopped and looked at her expectantly.

"I don't suppose you would believe me if I said that the Minton leaf worked really fast," she suggested.

"You can do better than that."

"All right," she said with a sigh. "My father's not sick. Part of my ninja training was to climb up on Da-Chou. I was supposed to bring my father the leaf as proof that I had succeeded."

Cloud shook his head. I should have known, he thought, I really should have known.

"So all that about him being on the verge of death was just a ploy to get us to help you cheat on a test?"

"Not cheat," she answered defensively. "He never said I had to get it all by myself."

"If that were true," Cloud countered, "then why didn't you just tell us the truth?"

Yuffie shrugged.

"Because it wouldn't have been as much fun?" she suggested innocently.

It was at this moment that Barret and Red came up beside them.

Cloud turned toward them.

"Yuffie has something to tell you all," he announced.

When Yuffie told them the truth Barret was livid with rage. He lunged at her as if he really were going to carry out his earlier threat to strangle her, but she dodged nimbly out of the way.

"I think you've lost a step or two," she taunted, dancing away from him. "Perhaps it's time you started thinking seriously about retirement."

"Why you little wretch," he growled. "If I catch you I swear I'll make you regret every lie you ever told in your entire life."

"That's a big if," she shot back.

It was at this point that Tifa finally caught up with them.

"Enough!" Cloud commanded. "Now that your little charade is over we have important things to discuss. We came here because we need our materia."

"Charade, what charade?" Tifa asked.

"My materia?" Yuffie questioned.

"Our materia," Barret said firmly. "Remember, we only gave it to you because you needed it more than we did at the time. And you agreed that we could come and get it if we needed it in the future."

"What charade?" Tifa repeated.

"That particular conversation seems to have slipped my mind," Yuffie said innocently.

"Quit playing around..." Barret started, but Cloud held up his hand.

"Perhaps if we go back inside and discuss your recent adventure with your father it will help to refresh your memory," he stated.

"All right, I remember," she gave in. "It's in the basement. C'mon, I'll take you down there, and I promise, no tricks."

"There better not be any," Barret said menacingly, but Yuffie just gave him a smile in return.

"So, why do you need all this materia all of a sudden, anyway," she asked as she led them off. Cloud, Barret and Red followed close behind her, with Tifa in the rear, a puzzled look on her face.

"What charade?" she said again, to no one in particular.

The group rose early the next morning and gathered in front of Yuffie's house about two hours past dawn. Even this early there were still quite a few people in the streets.

"Well, are we all set to go?" Yuffie commented.

"What do you mean, we?" Barret growled, looking at her darkly. No one had made any mention of her joining the party before this. He would have noticed, because he had been listening for just such a suggestion with the express purpose of squashing it immediately.

"Of course I'm going with you," she exclaimed, as if shocked that anyone might have thought otherwise. "I have to keep an eye on my materia. Besides, you guys need me. Let's face it, none of you are getting any younger. If anything, your skills have gone down in the year since our last adventure. But I'm still young, and I'm only getting better. You won't make it halfway through the outskirts of Midgar without me."

"It's our materia, you conceited little thief!" Barret snarled. "And it'll be a cold day in hell before we invite you along after all the trouble you put us through."

Yuffie looked at him with a pained expression.

"C'mon, I was just having a little fun," she said plaintively. "Can't you take a joke?"

"No," he replied forcibly.

"Well, what does everybody else think?" she asked, suddenly appealing to the others, since it was obvious she was getting nowhere with him.

"I don't care what everybody else thinks," Barret said sullenly.

"So who made you the boss?" she said pointedly.

He just growled at that. Then he said, "Well, my vote is no, and I won't change it unless everybody else is against me."

"That's not fair," she said.

"I don't care," he answered angrily. "It was bad enough I had to put up with you for this long."

"Barret, you really need to lighten up a little bit," she commented. Then she turned to the others. "Cloud?"

He didn't answer for a while, but just looked at her intently while she gave him the most innocent look she could muster. In spite of all the trouble she caused, she really was excellent in a fight and had helped them a great deal in their previous adventures. Finally he broke into a grin.

"Yuffie, I have to say that you are the biggest pain in the ass I have ever met. You stepped way over the line yesterday, but I have to admit it was pretty clever. It's all right with me if you come along."

Yuffie gave Barret an 'I told you so' look, but he just shook his head.

"Red?" she said sweetly.

"You have the exuberance and arrogance of youth," he said unhesitatingly. "I can think of no better teachers for you than the people here in front of you. It would be in your own best interests to join us."

Yuffie's eyes turned pleadingly to Tifa, who did not speak for a long time.

Barret suddenly seemed to realize what she was going to say.

"C'mon, Tifa," he blurted out. "Don't let me down now."

"You let me down pretty rudely yesterday," she snapped back. Although she was no longer limping, she still felt a little sore.

"I know I'm going to regret this, but it's all right with me," she said.

"Yes," Yuffie exclaimed gleefully. "I promise I won't let you all down."

"You better not," Barret said sharply. "Come along if you must, but stay out of my way. Now, if we're all done with the negotiating, what say we get this circus on the road?"

He turned and started down the street without waiting for a reply. Cloud looked at the others, shrugged and then

followed. They fell in line behind, Yuffie last, as if to keep as much distance between herself and Barret as possible. Though there were quite a few people in the streets, everyone they noticed seemed concerned with their own business and didn't pay much attention to them. It would have come as quite a surprise to them to know that at least one set of eyes had been watching them carefully since they had stepped out of the house that morning.