

CHAPTER XIII: A LONG TIME COMING

"Well, that was an interesting little vacation," Cid commented.

He stood on the deck of the New Age along with Barret, Vincent and Elena. Around them crewmen were scurrying to release the lines as the ship prepared to depart, the first ship from Mysteele to openly sail to the other continents.

"Yeah, it was interesting all right," Barret mused

He turned to look at the crowd gathered to see the ship off. Dr. Lee stood right in front, with Lenore and Mosato nearby. Mosato was smiling and waving vigorously. Barret waved back.

"Do you think he'll be all right?"

Cid looked down and saw Mosato too.

"I think so," he said. "Lenore seems like a fine woman. I think she'll take good care of him."

Barret shook his head.

"I can't believe Yuffie gave him one of her materia."

Cid took a long drag from his cigarette.

"Neither can I," he said. "Looks like the little brat might finally be growing up."

"Yuffie!"

They all turned as Yuffie dashed by, followed closely by Reno.

"Did you steal the stun materia?" he yelled. "That's mine! I found it in the alley."

Yuffie turned back to look at him.

"Finder's keepers," he yelled back. "What can you expect if you just leave it lying around?"

"Lying around?" Reno cried out. "Locked inside my cabin is NOT lying around. Now you give that back!"

"Try and get it!" she yelled back as she dashed off.

Cid leaned back against the railing and watched as Reno chased after her.

"Then again," he said thoughtfully, "Maybe not."

Yuffie ran down the deck and passed Aeris and Reeve without a glance, Reno not far behind her.

"I can't believe you're alive," Aeris said.

Reeve smiled and shrugged.

"What's that, the third time you've said that now?"

"I know," she said, smiling in return. He couldn't describe how beautiful it made her look, or how happy it made him to see it.

"But I just can't help myself," she finished.

Reeve did not reply, just looked at her. He didn't think he would ever understand what had happened in that alley. Miracle or otherwise, he was alive. Some things in life there was just no explanation for.

"I don't know how I can ever repay you," Aeris said slowly.

Reeve looked embarrassed.

"You don't have to repay me," he replied. "I didn't do it because I was expecting anything in return." He paused for a moment, realizing that didn't make any sense. Of course he wasn't expecting anything in return, he should have been dead.

"I...I'm just glad to see you safe, that's all," he ended lamely.

Aeris did not reply, just stood there looking at him for a long time, until he became even more embarrassed. He could feel the heat in his cheeks. She stepped closer to him, then reached up and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you, Reeve," she said.

He turned away, even more embarrassed, if that were possible, but feeling a rush of euphoria too. He took a deep breath and turned back to look at her.

He hesitated for a moment, as if unsure of himself.

"Aeris, I..."

"Am I interrupting anything?"

They turned to see Cloud walking over to them. Reeve turned away quickly.

"No, not at all," he said. "I've got some things to do anyway..."

His voice trailed off and he walked away quickly.

Cloud stood beside Aeris and watched him go. Then he turned toward her.

"I think he likes you," he commented.

Aeris looked at him.

"I'm surprised you even noticed," she replied.

He grinned.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I guess I can be a little dense at times."

Reno reappeared walking slowly back toward them, Yuffie obviously having given him the slip. He looked over at them.

"Haven't seen her," Aeris said.

Reno nodded and turned around. He walked back the way he had come and then ducked through a hatch. He walked slowly down the hallway, not very hopeful he would find her. But it didn't matter, he was bound to run into her again sooner or later. She couldn't hide forever.

He turned down another hallway and saw Tifa walking toward him.

"Have you seen Yuffie?" he asked.

Tifa shook her head.

"No," she replied. "Why? She been causing trouble again?"

"When is she not causing trouble?" Reno replied.

Tifa smiled ruefully. She stood there looking at him for a moment, then nodded and walked past him. His gaze followed her.

"Hey," he called out.

She turned around and looked at him.

"I'm glad you're all right," he said.

Tifa didn't reply, not sure what to say. Not sure what she was feeling. Half of her wanted to wring his scrawny little neck, but she had a feeling it wouldn't do a bit of good. She had threatened him before, all to no avail apparently.

Or maybe not. At least this time she thought he had actually meant to do some good. He had tried to protect her, in his own manner, even though she hadn't wanted or needed it.

"What am I going to do with you?" she said slowly, shaking her head.

Reno shrugged. She stood there waiting for some kind of flippant response, but he just looked at her for a long time.

"Tifa," he said slowly. "I want to tell you something, but you have to promise that you won't repeat it to anyone."

She looked at him in surprise. She expected to see a smile on his face, but he looked perfectly serious.

"What is it?" she said slowly, not sure she wanted to hear this.

"Promise?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Yes what?" he said, looking at her slyly.

She gave him a look.

"Yes, I promise not to tell anyone," she recited.

His smile faded, replaced once again by a serious look. He didn't say anything for some time, just stood there, and she could tell he was struggling to get it out.

"I..."

He shut his mouth, then opened it again. "I'm sor..."

He stopped, looked at her, and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry for what happened to your friends in sector seven."

She stood there staring at him, at a loss for words. This was certainly something she would never have expected from him. Then she turned away, thinking of her friends again. Jessie, Biggs, Wedge. The good times they had had together, before it had all gone to hell. All gone, all because of Reno. She could never forget that. She wanted to hate him for it.

But she couldn't.

It hadn't been Reno, it had been Shinra. They had all done horrible things during that time, things that they regretted. Many people died when Avalanche had blown up the mako reactors, and she was responsible. Was she really any different from him? She couldn't hate him without hating herself.

She looked down at the ground.

"Jessie, Biggs, Wedge," she whispered. "Forgive me."

She turned back toward Reno.

"It was a long time ago," she said slowly. "It's over now."

He looked at her as if he were expecting her to say more, but she remained silent. Finally he nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Remember, not a word to anyone."

"I won't forget," she replied. "And you don't forget your promise either."

"I won't," he said with a grin. He looked her up and down.

"But it will be hard."

She smiled and shook her head. Then he turned and walked down the hallway. She stood there for a minute looking after him. Then she too turned away. She walked down the corridor and into an observation lounge. She spotted Rude sitting by the window. She walked over to him and he turned toward her.

She looked at him for a moment without speaking. He just sat there, returning her gaze, his face expressionless.

"I'm sorry," she said.

His expression did not change.

"For what?"

"For what I said to you on the submarine," she answered. If she could forgive Reno she could surely forgive Rude. "It was wrong. I know what happened in sector seven wasn't your fault. I don't blame you."

He looked at her for a moment longer, then nodded slowly.

She extended her hand.

"Friends?"

He continued to look at her, and then he smiled. He reached out and grasped her hand.

"Friends," he agreed.

She let go, gave him a quick smile and walked out of the observation lounge, onto the main deck. She looked around. Things had been hectic since they had all been reunited. She hadn't had a chance to talk to Cloud.

She walked slowly along the deck, and then she spotted Cloud ahead, standing by the railing talking with Aeris.

She stood there for a moment looking at them. She had had her courage all worked up back at the bar, that night he had left, that night which seemed so long ago now. She had been determined to tell him, to finally say what was in her heart, but now she looked at him, standing beside Aeris, and doubt assailed her.

He had done so much for Aeris. When they had all thought her dead, only he had not given up hope. It was Cloud who had been determined to find her again, to bring her back. Could there be any doubt that he loved her?

Tifa turned away. It was foolish to think otherwise. It was foolish to think there could be any other outcome. It would be foolish to tell him that she loved him when she knew she didn't have a chance.

Aeris glanced over Cloud's shoulder and motioned for him to look. Cloud turned and saw Tifa standing not far away, looking in the other direction.

Aeris stepped closer to him.

"Speaking of being dense," she said softly. "Don't you think you've waited long enough?"

He looked back at Aeris, smiled and nodded in agreement. Then he walked quickly away.

"Tifa."

Tifa looked around, startled, then turned quickly away. She took a moment to compose herself, then turned back to Cloud once more.

"Cloud," she said. "You startled me."

"I didn't mean to," he replied.

They stood there in silence for a moment.

"I can't believe you all followed me," he said slowly.

She smiled.

"Well, what did you expect us to do?" she replied. "Running off like that without a word."

"I didn't want to put any of you in danger," he replied. "I'm sorry. I should have known you'd come after me."

"You should have," she answered. "I told you once that I wouldn't leave you. That I'd follow you to the ends of the earth, and beyond..."

Cloud nodded slowly.

"I know," he replied. "I should have told you. I made a mistake, and it got you all in worse trouble than if I had told you. I put you in danger."

"It's not the first time," she replied. "But I accept it willingly. You don't have to protect me."

"I know," he said, staring at her, "But I can't help it. I don't know what I would have done if you had been hurt."

Tifa looked at him and smiled, touched by his sincerity. He really did care for her.

"Well, everything turned out for the best in the end, now didn't it," she replied. "Magnus..."

She stopped, as if suddenly remembering something. She reached down and pulled out the necklace Magnus had given her. She extended her hand.

"He wanted you to have this."

Cloud slowly took it from her, he looked at it for a moment, then opened it. Tifa could see it held a picture of a young woman. She immediately recognized it as Cloud's mother.

Cloud closed his hand around it and bowed his head.

"I was hoping he hadn't forgotten her," he said softly.

She looked at him for a moment.

"You knew?" she asked.

He looked up at her again, his face pale.

"I suspected," he replied. "But I wasn't sure until now. I don't know whether I can find it in my heart to forgive him. But at least I did get to see him again, before the end."

They feel silent again. He was still looking at her, as if he wanted to say more. And so did she.

"Cloud..."

Aeris had stood watching the two for a little while, then she turned to walk away, just as Barret came up, looking around.

"Have you seen Cloud?" he asked. "I need to..."

Suddenly he spotted Cloud and Tifa.

"Oh there he is," he said. He started to walk toward them but Aeris ran over and grabbed him by the arm.

"Not now," she said.

He looked at her.

"But it'll just take a second," he said.

She grabbed hold of his other arm and forced him to look at her.

"Not...now," she said firmly.

Barret looked at her with a puzzled expression, then he looked up at Cloud and Tifa. Suddenly realization dawned on his face.

"Oh, I get it," he said, smiling suddenly. He nodded and slowly walked away, but didn't get far before he stopped, turned, and looked back at Cloud and Tifa. Aeris walked over to him and took him by the arm once again.

"C'mon," she said. "Let's go take a walk."

"Yeah?" Cloud asked.

Tifa paused and looked at him again. She knew he cared for her, but there was a big difference between that and loving someone. At least, the way she wanted him to love her.

She turned away from him, staring out across the harbor. She had stood by him all this time, waited for him all these years. In a perfect world that would mean something. But love didn't work like that. It was just something that happened on its own. It didn't matter how long you'd known someone or how much you had shared. You couldn't make someone love you if they didn't. If they loved someone else.

But he was still her friend. She knew that. She knew he would understand, even if he didn't feel the same way.

"I have something to tell you," she said, not turning around.

"I have something to tell you too," he replied softly.

She went on as if she hadn't heard him.

"It's about how I feel," she said. "About you and I. I don't know quite how to say it. I've kept it in for a long time. I don't know why. I'm just scared I guess. I don't know how you will feel about it."

She stopped for a moment. Cloud made no sound behind her.

"You probably don't even want to hear it," she continued. "I'm probably just being foolish. But I can't help it. I can't help how I feel inside."

She rested her hands on the rail, and she could see that they were trembling. "Cloud...I..."

She felt him come up behind her. And for a moment she thought she could not continue. But she had to say it, she had to say it or she would burst.

"I don't know whether it means anything to you...but...I love you."

She felt tears suddenly welling in her eyes.

"I know you probably just think I'm being foolish. I know you're probably in love with Aeris, and if you are, I'll understand."

But she wouldn't. She couldn't.

"I know I probably don't..."

She felt his hand on her shoulder. Slowly he turned her round until she was facing him.

"Tifa," he said slowly.

He looked at her, and she could see his eyes were moist as well.

"Tifa, my loyal companion..."

He brought his hand up and brushed away her tears.

"My dearest friend..."

He brought his hand around behind her head and caressed her hair.

"I don't know what I would have done without you," he said, continuing to stare directly into her eyes. "I can't imagine living my life without you by my side."

He slid his other hand behind her back and pulled her to him. He looked down into her deep brown eyes.

"I love you, Tifa. I love you."

He pressed his lips against hers, and for a moment she thought her heart would stop beating in her chest. She wrapped her arms around him, as he pulled her even tighter to him. Tears ran down her face, but now they were tears of joy. If this were a dream, she never wanted to wake up. But it wasn't a dream, it was better than that. It was a dream come true.

Eventually their lips parted, but he continued to hold her, looking down at her and smiling. She lowered her head and rested it against his chest.

"Oh, Cloud," she said. "I never thought this day would come. I'm so happy."

"So am I, Tifa," he replied. "So am I."

~*~

Down in the hold the chief petty officer looked around at the stored crates with satisfaction. It might be a rough crossing. The journey across to the other continents rarely went by without hitting at least one storm. But the crew had done a good job of securing the cargo. It didn't look like any of it would shift in a storm.

He started up the steps but then stopped suddenly, listening. He thought he had heard something over to his left, beyond the crates. He paused for a moment deciding whether he should go take a look, but then shrugged and continued up the stairs. Even a well kept ship still had its compliment of rats.

He got to the top of the stairs and closed the hatch behind him. For a moment all was silent down in the hold, but then a man stepped out from behind the crates. He was an older man with graying hair. He walked slowly over to the stairway and looked up, his face expressionless, but there was a strange glint in his emerald green eyes.

THE END

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AUTHORS NOTE: Whew! That was a long one! But I decided not to hold back at all on this one. I made the others a little short because I wasn't sure whether I could keep your attention with a long one, but I've gained some confidence that you'll keep reading them.

Well, they FINALLY said it. And it's about time, don't you think? Could it be that Cloud and Tifa will finally have some time to spend with each other after waiting for so long? Do you think they'll be able to find happiness together? Do you think they'll finally be able to settle down and have some peace and quiet?

Don't count on it. Hehehe.

And what of Aeris? Seems she has lost Cloud but now has two suitors of her own to choose from. Which is it gonna be? I had my mind made up on Zack (in fact, the main reason I brought him back was to have someone for Aeris) but now I'm not so sure. Does anybody out there have an opinion? I'm still leaning towards Zack at the moment, but maybe if someone argues persuasively enough for Reeve they could change my mind. Let's hear it.

A word about Tifa's confrontation with Wisteria. I thought the stupidest part of the original game was Tifa's slapping match with Scarlet. I mean c'mon, a martial arts expert engaged in a slapping match? Puleez! Tifa would have kicked her butt. So I decided to show you what SHOULD have happened, and I had a lot of fun doing it.

Keep sending me those comments. I just eat 'em up at FCVERDE@ix.netcom.com

Til next time.