

CHAPTER VII: YUFFIE'S REVENGE

Barret ran through the woods, heedless of the branches that clutched at him and left long scratches on his arms and legs. His legs ached and sweat drenched his body. A blood soaked rag covered what was left of his right arm. Though the pain was nearly unbearable, he forced himself to ignore it. His heart pounded in his chest, and exertion was not the only cause.

He came out of the woods and saw Corel in front of him, or what was left of it.

There wasn't much. Some of the town was still burning, but most of it was just a blackened ruin. The smell of charred wood filled the air, as well as the stench of burning flesh.

He ran on, even faster now, though the smoke still lingering in the air nearly choked him. There were people still alive, he saw some of them, wandering seemingly at random down the streets, looking around as if in a daze. All of them shocked by the violent destruction of their once beautiful town.

He reached the street that held his own home, and finally he stopped. The entire block was just a smoldering pile of burnt timbers. He stood there staring for a long time, then slowly walked down the street, as much in shock as any of the others he had passed.

He stopped halfway down the block, in front of a pile of ruins that just yesterday had been his home. He stood there looking at the charred pile of rubble for some time, tears welling in his eyes. He looked around slowly. A man was walking back and forth nearby, his features blackened from smoke and soot, a long ragged cut running down his left leg. Barret almost didn't recognize him at first, but then he realized it was one of his neighbors.

"Harry," he said.

The man just stared at him blankly.

Barret stepped closer and grabbed hold of him.

"Harry!" he nearly shouted.

The man's eyes slowly focused on him.

"Have you seen Myrna?" Barret asked.

Harry shook his head.

"They're all gone," he said slowly. "Everyone, everything. All gone."

"Where's Eleanor? Marlene?" Barret questioned, but Harry just stared off into space.

"All gone," he repeated.

Barret dropped his hand and turned away. He walked slowly across the street, to the house opposite his own. Dyne's house.

He stood there staring at the remains. His house, Dyne's, the entire city. All destroyed. And it was all his fault.

He had trusted Shinra. He had told the townspeople that letting Shinra build a reactor here would be good for the town. He had convinced them, over Dyne's objections. And this is how Shinra had repaid his trust.

He looked at the blackened ruins. They had destroyed everything, the entire town, just because of an accident at the reactor. They had taken everything from him. They had killed everyone he loved.

He fell to his knees and cried out in anguish, pounding his fist on the ground. His body shook with rage. This was more than anyone could bear. Why hadn't they taken him too?

In spite of the horrible wound to his arm his spirit had driven him this far, but now even that was spent. He slowly sank to the ground, no longer able or willing to continue. Everything and everyone he knew was gone, there was no longer any reason to fight.

"I'm comin' to join ya, Myrna," he muttered.

He closed his eyes, and felt consciousness begin to slip away, but just as he hovered on the edge of fading away, a sound caught his attention.

It was the sound of a child crying softly.

His eyes opened, almost involuntarily. He lifted his head and looked around. It sounded like it was coming from the remains of Dyne's house.

He felt resolve suddenly return to him. He stumbled to his feet, even though it made him cry out in pain. He picked his way slowly through the wreckage of the house, listening carefully. Slowly the sound grew louder, until he could hear it clearly right nearby.

He pushed some blackened timbers out of the way, and then he saw her, cuddled up into a ball amid the ruins.

"Marlene!" he cried out.

He swept her up with his arm, tears forming in his eyes once more.

"Marlene, you're alive."

Marlene wrapped her arms around his neck, her crying a constant wail now. He looked her over, she was covered with dirt and soot, but he could find no obvious injuries.

"It's okay, baby," he said soothingly. "It's okay, you'll be all right now."

She calmed down a bit at the sound of his voice, and her crying sank to a quiet whimper. He stumbled back out into the road, looking around. His will had returned when he had heard Marlene, but even that had its limits. The long run through the woods, the acrid smoke that still hung in the air, and the loss of blood from the terrible wound to his arm, all combined to sap what little strength he had left. He felt his head spinning and the world seemed to be fading around him.

He saw someone walking slowly down the road toward him. With the last of his strength he staggered over, his eyes so out of focus that he could not tell whether it was a man or woman.

"Please," he said slowly. "Take care of the girl. Take care of Marlene for me."

He fell to his knees. He eased Marlene down beside himself and tried to look up again, but the effort to lift his head proved too difficult. Slowly he sank down to the ground as the world faded away around him.

"Barret!"

He shook his head and opened his eyes. Cid stood beside him, looking at him with an expression of concern mixed with puzzlement.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Barret sat up and looked around for a moment. The early morning light filtered down through the leaves of the trees around them. He glanced down and saw that he was covered with sweat.

"Yeah," he replied slowly. "Just reliving some bad memories."

Cid nodded slowly.

"About Corel?"

Barret nodded.

"Yeah," he replied. "Apparently that village we passed through left an impression. How'd you know?"

"I thought I heard you say Marlene's name," Cid replied.

"Yeah," Barret replied slowly. "Marlene."

He missed her more than ever.

He looked around.

"Where's Mosato?"

Cid motioned to his left. Barret turned and saw Yuffie sitting under a tree by a small brook not far away. Mosato sat on the grass nearby.

"Looks like Yuffie's found a new friend," Barret observed.

"Yeah," Cid said with a grin. "He has been following her around a lot lately. I suppose that's only natural. He's lost his whole family, everyone he knew, I guess, and she is a lot closer to his age than us old bastards. Although I shudder to think what

kind of role model she would be."

Yuffie sat with her back to them, hunched over something in front of her, but they could not see what it was. Mosato sat to her left, not too close, but close enough to see the faint green glow of the materia she held in her hands. Yuffie was staring at it, her face a mask of concentration.

Suddenly she looked up. There was a small sapling growing by the stream in front of her. A wisp of smoke rose from the topmost branch, and for a moment they saw a brief flicker of flame, but almost immediately it disappeared, leaving only one leaf slightly scorched.

"Damn," Yuffie muttered in frustration. "Doesn't any of this stuff work?"

She dropped the fire materia into her poach and rummaged through it for a moment. Then she pulled out another orb. She sat there and stared at it. For a long time nothing seemed to happen. Then it slowly began to glow a faint red.

"Tidal wave," Yuffie said softly.

Tiny flashes of light appeared about her, and for a moment it looked as if she were surrounded by multicolored fireflies. Then something appeared in the air over the brook in front of her, a long snakelike creature about the size of a chipmunk.

The creature opened its mouth and let out a high pitched squeak. A ripple of water flashed across the brook, splashing up onto the grass beside them.

Mosato laughed in delight.

"How cute," he exclaimed.

The creature faded away. Yuffie turned to look at Mosato angrily.

"It's not supposed to be cute," she said. "It's supposed to be big and dangerous."

She thrust the materia back in her bag in disgust and stood up.

"None of my materia works properly," she said loudly, looking back at Cid and Barret.

Barret just shrugged.

"Maybe our materia just doesn't work here," Cid said.

"Maybe," Yuffie replied. "I need to find some new materia and see if it works, then I'll know if it's our materia or something else."

"Well, I'm sure we'll run across some somewhere along the line," Cid said.

"Maybe you're not doing it right," Mosato suggested.

Yuffie turned to look at him sharply.

"What do you mean, not doing it right. Listen, kid, I've been using materia since before I could walk. I know how it works, all right."

"My father used to say that looking in materia was like looking down a well, you had to look deep down inside, and then, when you saw the bottom, you could release the materia."

"What are you talking about?" Yuffie said dismissively. "That's not how you do it at all. You have to visualize the result, and then concentrate on it, believe that it will happen."

"That's not what my Dad told me," Mosato replied.

"Well, what's your Dad know anyway?" she said harshly. Immediately she regretted it.

"Was your Dad in the village when..."

Mosato shook his head.

"He left us a long time ago," Mosato said slowly. "Soldiers came and took him away one night."

Mosato looked down at the ground.

Yuffie stood there, suddenly at a loss for words. She felt like kicking herself for being so insensitive. He was only a kid.

"Yeah, well, sorry kid..." she said lamely.

Mosato did not reply.

"C'mon, let's get going, you two," she heard Cid call out. "It's getting late. We shouldn't be far from Unthor now."

"Let's go," she said, glad for the interruption. She walked over and joined the others. Mosato followed silently behind.

Cid led them south through the tall pine trees. The forest floor was covered with a brown mat of pine needles beneath their feet. The ground sloped gently down to the left, and every once in a while Yuffie could glimpse the dark thread of the road winding through the valley below.

Not long afterward they came upon a grassy knoll, devoid of trees. They walked up onto it, blinking in the bright sunlight. The ground dropped away steeply beyond it, and down past the bottom of the slope they could see a sprinkling of houses that marked the outskirts of the city of Unthor.

Barret shaded his eyes and looked at the buildings below.

"Well, looks like we made it," he said. He turned to Mosato.

"Do you know where your Uncle's house is?"

Mosato nodded.

"Good," he said. "I don't think it would be healthy for us to go around asking directions."

"Let's go," Cid said.

They walked down the slope. When they reached the bottom the trees fell away and were replaced by open farmland. Mosato led them to the east along a narrow stream until they came upon an old wooden bridge. A dirt road ran along the creek on the other side. They crossed over and followed the road as it curved slowly to the south. There was open farmland all around them now, and Yuffie felt uncomfortable no longer surrounded by the trees.

"Do you really think it's a good idea to be walking around in the open like this?" she asked. "Suppose someone sees us?"

Cid shrugged.

"I don't really like it myself," he replied. "But I don't think we have much choice. Hopefully anyone who sees us will just think we're farmhands."

Yuffie did not reply, but the look on her face made it obvious what she thought of that idea.

They continued down the road, each of them keeping a watchful eye on the landscape around them. Eventually they did see a few other people, but they were working out in the fields, far from the road.

The sun was climbing high toward noon when Mosato suddenly pointed ahead.

"There's my Uncle's farm."

"Good," Yuffie exclaimed. "Now maybe we can get something decent to eat."

The road traveled in a wide curve to the south, around the fields, and quite a ways out of their way. Mosato hopped over the low fence along the road and headed straight for the farmhouse.

"C'mon," he said. "This way's quicker."

The others scrambled over the fence and followed him. There were four large buildings ahead of them. The one farthest away was the farmhouse itself. To the left stood two large barns. Cid could see a couple of cows and a small fenced area holding half a dozen pigs. To the right was what looked like a garage. There was a tractor pulled up on the side and two large wooden doors stood partially open in the front. He thought he could see a familiar outline in the darkness inside.

He ran over and took a look in. Barret turned back to look at him. The others were far ahead now.

"C'mon Cid," he said "The youngsters are leaving us behind."

Cid nodded and ran to catch up. He reached them just as they arrived at the front gate of the main house. Mosato ran forward and banged on the front door.

The door opened as the others came up beside him. A tall man in overalls looked at them for a moment, a frown on his face, but it was immediately replaced by a look of surprise when he saw Mosato.

"Mosato!" he said, looking totally bewildered. "What are you doing here. How...I thought you were dead."

"No Uncle Tybor," Mosato said. "I escaped. These people helped me."

For a moment Tybor said nothing, but then he suddenly looked around, past them.

"C'mon in," he said hurriedly.

They all walked into the farmhouse. Tybor motioned for them to sit down. A woman came in from another room. She saw Mosato and just stood there in shock.

"Hi, Aunt Grace," he said.

"You're alive," she said softly.

"Yes," Tybor said. "We heard the village had been destroyed."

He turned to look at the others.

"How did he survive?"

Cid explained how they had arrived on this continent and what had happened to them.

Tybor nodded when Cid had finished, but he didn't say anything for a long time.

"Well, it seems like a miracle that you all made it this far without getting caught," he said finally. "I may know some people who can help you. I'll go see if I can get in touch with them."

"Grace," he said, looking up. "I'm going to go out for a while. Could you find something for our guests to eat, I'm sure they're hungry from their long trip."

The woman nodded and walked into the kitchen. Tybor excused himself and followed her in.

Barret sat back in his chair.

"Well, looks like we may have finally gotten a break."

"Let's hope so," Cid replied.

"I wonder what they have to eat," Yuffie muttered. She glanced into the kitchen. She could see Tybor and Grace standing by the sink, talking quietly. She could not hear what they were saying, but Tybor was moving his hands as if agitated.

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it will be better than potato chips and soda," Barret said.

Tybor looked up at the sound of Barret's voice and noticed her. He glared at his wife, then turned and walked out of the room. Grace glanced at her, then turned away and started preparing their food. Yuffie walked back into the other room, a thoughtful look on her face.

"I suppose," she said.

Grace came back in a short time later and served them. The food was excellent, not that any of them would have been fussy. When they were finished Grace took away their plates and disappeared into the kitchen once more.

Cid and Barret sat at the table discussing what their next move might be. Yuffie sat there looking at Mosato, who was in a rocking chair on the far side of the room.

"You know," she said. "They really didn't seem that happy to see him."

Cid turned to look at her.

"What?"

"Tybor and Grace," she said. "They didn't seem all that happy to see Mosato. They thought he was dead, but there were no kisses or hugs. Just, oh, you're alive. How nice. It just seemed kind of strange to me. They seemed more nervous than happy."

"Maybe they're just not the affectionate type," Barret suggested.

Cid looked at her thoughtfully.

"So what do you think that means?" he asked.

Yuffie shrugged.

"I don't know," she replied.

Just then the front door opened and Tybor walked in, a distressed look on his face. Cid, Barret and Yuffie all looked in shocked silence as six Mysteele soldiers rushed in behind him.

Barret and Cid jumped to their feet.

"What the hell..." Barret exclaimed.

"Do not move!" the Commander of the guards shouted. They were all armed and had their weapons out. "The house is surrounded. You have no where to run. Surrender immediately!"

For a moment no one moved. Cid glanced over at his spear leaning against the wall. It was only a few feet away, but he knew that it might as well be a hundred miles. He could not possibly reach it before the guns trained on them cut him down. Yuffie was still sitting by the table, her mouth open. Her shuriken was at her side, but it would take her much too long to bring it into play. He looked at Barret, whose weapon was always handy, but who could not possibly get them all by himself. Finally he glanced out the window and saw other soldiers standing in the front yard.

It only took him seconds to come to the conclusion that they were hopelessly outnumbered.

"We surrender," he said sullenly.

Grace came into the room and without a word walked slowly over to stand by Tybor.

The Commander nodded to his men. They came forward to take the prisoner's weapons. Cid saw Yuffie's hand slip down by her shuriken.

"Yuffie!" he said.

She turned to look at him angrily. He slowly shook his head.

She gave a snort of disgust and stood up to let the man take her weapon.

"All right," the Commander said. "Bring them along."

One of the soldiers walked up to Mosato and prodded him to come along with them. Barret turned to Tybor.

"You'd turn in your own flesh and blood?" he said accusingly.

Tybor's face paled.

"We had no choice," he said. "They would have found out. They would kill all of us and destroy the entire village. Just like they did to Mosato's town. There is nothing we can do. He is already dead."

The soldier behind Barret prodded him along.

Barret walked forward, staring at Tybor the entire way.

"You make me sick!" he exclaimed as he was pushed out the door.

Tybor made no response.

There was a truck outside, and the prisoner's were led into it. Barret sat down beside Cid, still muttering curses. Yuffie and Mosato sat down opposite them. Two soldiers eased themselves down at the back of the truck, eyeing them cautiously.

They did not go very far. As soon as the truck stopped the soldiers in the back hopped out and motioned for them to do the same. They jumped down from the truck and were led into a large gray building that was obviously a jailhouse. They walked past guards and then were led into a large room with four holding cells. The Commander opened one up and motioned for them to enter.

They walked in and the Commander closed the door behind them. He locked it and turned away, but just as he did Yuffie reached through the bars and grabbed hold of him.

"Please don't leave me in here," she pleaded. "I'm claustrophobic. I can't stand being locked up. And besides, you can't leave me in here with these two," she continued, looking back at Barret and Cid. "One snores so loud it could wake the dead and the other one smokes like a chimney. I'll go crazy stuck in here with them!"

The Commander pulled away from her and looked at her as if she already was.

"Gee, I'd feel real bad about that," he said humorlessly. Then he turned and walked out to the room.

Barret came up beside her.

"What the hell was that all about?"

Yuffie grinned and held out her hand. In it was a small key.

Barret and Cid both looked at her in surprise.

"Damn," Barret said. "Yuffie, I take back half the nasty things I've said about you."

"That makes me feel so much better," she replied.

She reached through the bars by the lock, but Cid put a hand on her shoulder.

"Let's wait a little while until things calm down a bit," he suggested.

She hesitated for a moment, not really pleased with the idea, but then she let her arms drop to her sides.

Cid sat down. Barret paced back and forth while Yuffie drummed anxiously on the side of the bunk with her fingers. They waited almost half an hour, which was as long as Cid thought either of them could stand.

Finally Cid stood up, listening carefully. There had been a lot of activity when they first arrived, but now things seemed to have calmed down. He could hear nothing in the next room except the mournful wail of a country song on the radio.

"All right," he said. "Let's get out of here."

Yuffie jumped up immediately and walked over to the bars. She slipped her hands through and in moments the door was open. Cid walked out and looked cautiously into the other room. He could see the Commander sitting in a chair nearby. His back was to them.

Barret came up behind him. He must have heard something, for suddenly he turned around. He looked up and his mouth dropped open as Barret's gun arm struck him on the side of the head. He fell to the ground.

Cid and Yuffie grabbed their weapons. Barret looked through the drawers on the desk the Commander was sitting by and grunted in satisfaction when he came across the bullets they had removed from his gun.

Cid walked over to another door that led down a hallway to the entrance. He could hear a murmur of voices.

"There's more still out there," he said.

Barret finished loading his weapon and held up his arm.

"Yeah, but this time it's our turn to surprise them. Let's rock and roll!"

They ran down the hall. Barret in the lead, with Cid behind him, and then Mosato with Yuffie bringing up the rear. They ran straight for the entrance. The first few rooms they passed they heard shouts of surprise, but a blast from Barret's gun turned them into screams of fear as the soldiers inside ducked for cover. A couple of men ran out into the hallway in front of them, but were dropped by Cid's spear and Yuffie's shuriken. In moments, they were out the front door and in the street.

"What now?" Barret shouted as they ran down the road. Already he could see that the soldiers had gotten over their initial surprise and were starting to organize a pursuit.

"This way," Cid shouted. He led them off the road and out into a nearby field. They ran up a low hill, and then Cid turned left. He hopped over a low fence and ran toward a large cornfield.

Yuffie heard the sound of shots behind them. She increased her speed, and had actually gotten ahead of Cid and Barret when they plunged into the corn.

They ran on, concealed at least momentarily by the tall stalks that surrounded them. Cid took the lead once more, and they followed him as he went south, but Barret knew they couldn't hide here forever.

"Where are we going?" he said.

"To the last place they'll look for us," Cid responded. "If we cut across the fields it shouldn't take us much more time to get back there than it took them to bring us here in the truck."

"What do you mean?" Yuffie said. "Back where?"

"To Tybor's farm," Cid replied.

"What the hell do we want to go back there for?" Barret said in surprise.

"They have something we need," Cid responded.

They reached the end of the cornfield and once more found themselves in the open. Yuffie looked back but saw no sign of pursuit at the moment.

"And what might that be?" Barret questioned.

They hopped over another fence and crossed a dirt road.

"Transportation," Cid replied.

They ran out into another field covered with some kind of knee high plant that Yuffie did not recognize. Barret was about to question Cid further when Cid suddenly turned and looked down the road behind them.

"Get down!" he said sharply.

They fell to the ground. A moment later a jeep rocketed by on the road behind them. It did not slow, and as quickly as it had appeared, it was gone. They stood up again.

"Hurry up," Cid said.

They ran on, past two more fields and three more fences. Finally they saw the familiar buildings of Tybor's farm looming up ahead of them. Cid headed straight for the garage.

Yuffie saw the tractor parked outside.

"You're not planning on getting us out of here on that?" she exclaimed.

Cid ran up to the doors of the garage and pulled one open.

"No, this," he said.

They looked inside and saw a single engine propeller plane.

"Tybor must use it to dust his crops," Cid said. "I noticed it when we came by last time."

He climbed up into the cockpit.

"Let's hope it works."

Barret looked back toward the farmhouse. He saw a jeep pull up in front of it and some men pile out.

"Yeah, let's hope so," he muttered.

There was a loud whining sound. The propeller spun a few times, then stopped.

Cid started cursing.

The whining sound came again. The propeller spun. The motor coughed, then roared to life.

"Hop in!" Cid yelled.

Barret ran over and pulled the other door open, then he climbed into the plane, followed closely by Mosato. Yuffie just stood there looking at them.

"Isn't there any other way?"

Suddenly the wood in the door by her head splintered as a bullet embedded itself in it.

"C'mon," Barret shouted.

The plane jerked forward. Yuffie ran around the side. Barret was leaning over and grabbed her hand, then he pulled her aboard. She fell into the seat in the back beside Mosato.

The plane rumbled out into the open. Barret looked toward the farmhouse and saw half a dozen soldiers running toward them. He opened up with his gun and they scattered.

"Ha, take that, ya dumb..." he glanced back at Mosato and shut his mouth.

Cid guided the plane into the open field, slowly picking up speed. Even above the engine he heard a volley of shots from behind them, but they were pulling away now, and none found their mark.

Yuffie turned to look behind them.

"We're getting away," she said.

The soldiers had stopped running after them, seeing that they no longer had any chance of catching up. They were going very fast now, but the plane continued to bump along the ground. The field ended ahead of them with another of the ever present fences, and beyond that, a narrow river. It seemed to be approaching at an alarming pace.

Barret turned to look at Cid.

"Aren't we supposed to be going up?"

Cid did not turn to look at him.

"The plane wasn't meant to carry this many people," he replied.

Barret glanced ahead again.

"Which means..." he prompted.

"Well, we can't turn back now," Cid replied. "I'll give her all she's got and hope for the best."

"Oh great," they heard Yuffie exclaim behind them.

Cid did not reply, just kept staring at the river ahead with a look of grim determination on his face.

The fence was closer now, much closer, and speeding toward them much too quickly. The engine was giving off a high pitched whine that left Barret with the impression it would seize up at any moment.

The nose of the plane lifted up, but the back wheels still thumped along the field. The fence was seconds away now. Barret found himself saying 'up, up' under his breath. He thought he heard Yuffie saying the same thing.

The fence disappeared below them. The plane shuddered, and for a moment the nose dipped again, straight toward the water. Yuffie cried out, but then the plane lifted up. They skimmed just above the water for a moment, and then the ground fell away below them.

"We did it!" Barret exclaimed.

Cid broke into a grin.

"I didn't doubt it for a minute," he said smugly.

Barret looked back to see the farmhouses rapidly fading away behind them. Cid continued to climb for a while as he turned the plane slowly to the west.

"Next stop, Mysteele," he said.

"Well, just do me a favor and hurry up," Yuffie said, already starting to look pale. "I don't want to stay on this thing any longer than absolutely necessary."

"Actually, I'd like to check out what this thing can do," Cid said, giving Barret a wink. "I've heard you can do some pretty fancy stunts on these old propeller planes."

Yuffie leaned forward and gave him a withering look.

"Don't even think about it," she said menacingly.

Cid and Barret both laughed.

"Don't worry," he said more seriously. "Since you were so helpful back there in the jail, I'll try and fly us in a nice straight line."

"That's better," she said, sitting back in her seat.

Suddenly something streaked by the left side of the plane.

"Shit!" Cid exclaimed. He jerked his head around and looked behind them just as something much larger flashed by overhead.

"What the hell was that?" Barret exclaimed.

"It's a fighter plane," Cid said grimly. "They fired a missile at us. The dumb shit. It must have been a heat seeker, and this piston engine doesn't give off enough heat for it to lock on to. If he had come up behind us and used his cannon, we'd be toast by now."

The jet had flown by them and was now circling back around.

"That's great," Yuffie stated. "But what's to prevent it from doing that now?"

"Not a hell of a lot," Cid replied, watching the jet carefully. "We can't outrun it, and we certainly don't have anything to fight it with."

The plane had completed its turn and now was coming straight at them.

"So what do we do?" Yuffie said nervously.

"Well," Cid replied thoughtfully. "We do have one thing that they don't."

"And what's that?" she said.

Cid turned to glance back at her.

"The best damn pilot in the world," he replied. "Hold onto your panties!"

The plane dropped like a stone.

"Oh shit!" Yuffie yelled.

They heard the roar of the jet's cannon, but the shells streaked by above them through vacant air. Cid pulled them out of their dive just above the ground. To the right the land rose up in a long chain of mountains. Cid turned sharply in that direction.

"Barret, try to keep an eye on the other plane and tell me where it is," he said.

"It's coming right at us," Barret replied.

"Damn," Cid muttered. He brought the stick hard over again. The plane yawed and turned sharply to the right as they heard cannon fire again.

"Oh Gawd!" Yuffie moaned.

Cid took a moment to glance back quickly.

"He was closer that time," he observed. "He's learning. But he still doesn't know everything."

They were flying alongside the river now. The same river they had nearly flown into at the end of their takeoff. But now it was much wider. Ahead they could see a low bridge spanning it. Cid headed straight for it.

"He's coming around again," Barret said.

Cid did not reply. He dropped down lower. There were some boats on the river, and the people on board looked up at them in surprise. Yuffie thought they were going to take the mast off one boat, but they flew just above it. The bridge was much closer now.

"Un Cid," Yuffie said thickly, as if she was having difficulty speaking. "Aren't you going to pull up?"

He did not reply, just stared at the bridge ahead of them, and if anything the plane dropped lower.

"Oh no," Yuffie said faintly now that it was clear he was intent on flying underneath it.

There was a short burst of gunfire behind them, the trailing plane pulled up. Yuffie held her breath as the dark underside of the bridge flashed by, then they were out on the other side.

Cid pulled back on the stick and they were pushed back in their seats as the plane climbed steeply. Then it quickly leveled off. Cid looked around. Now matter how good a pilot he was, he couldn't keep up this game of cat and mouse forever. Eventually he was going to run out of tricks. He had to find some way to shake the other plane. Not so easy when it could fly twice as fast. He scanned the ground below them, and eventually saw something that gave him an idea.

"Here she comes," Barret said.

Cid pulled the stick back even harder and the plane looped vertically and plunged toward the earth once more. He heard Yuffie whimpering in the back.

He dove down, headed for the base of one of the mountains. Barret looked ahead and saw a line of railroad tracks below them. He followed them toward the mountain until they disappeared into a tunnel. Cid seemed to be headed straight for it.

Barret turned to look at him.

"You're not thinkin' of going in there, are ya?" he asked.

Cid grinned and nodded.

"You bet your ass I am."

Yuffie leaned forward and looked ahead. The tunnel loomed quite clearly ahead of them now.

"Oh no," she muttered again and sat back in her chair.

The tunnel grew rapidly. Yuffie closed her eyes. When she opened them again a moment later the world had grown very dark. She could see the rock walls of the tunnel, they looked perilously close.

"Let's hope the landing gear wasn't damaged by hitting that fence," Cid said.

"You're going to land?" Barret asked in surprise.

"Yeah," Cid replied. "I've got a plan."

"We're doomed," Yuffie commented. "What if he follows us in?"

"What are you, nuts?" Cid replied. "Only an idiot would fly into a train tunnel. He'll go and wait for us on the other side. We'll be sitting ducks."

The plane touched the ground. They bounced down the tracks for a short way until they came to an abrupt halt.

"Everybody out," Cid exclaimed, jumping out of the plane. "C'mon, help me turn this thing around. Hurry! We can't take too long or he'll get suspicious."

The others jumped out as well. They grabbed the tail and quickly pushed the plane around until it was facing the way they had come.

"Back in!" Cid shouted.

They piled back in the plane. They bumped back down the tracks again, and just as they emerged once more from the tunnel the plane lifted into the air again.

"Okay," Cid said. "We're only going to get one chance at this, so we better make it work. He's going to be waiting at the other end of the tunnel. He's not going to be expecting us to come out this way."

He looked at Barret.

"I'll try and get us close enough to give you a shot at him."

Barret nodded.

"You're going to try to shoot it down with a handgun?" Yuffie said incredulously. "Why don't we just make a run for it now?"

"It wouldn't work," Cid replied, shaking his head. "It'll only be minutes before he realizes we're not coming out that way. There's no way we could get away in that time. This is our only chance."

Yuffie just groaned.

Cid flew the plane around the side of the mountain, not far above the ground. The jet would be circling by the tunnel exit. He didn't want to be spotted.

They flew past a low ridge, and then they saw it, just about where Cid had expected. He banked the plane, keeping it low to the ground. Odds were the pilot was concentrating on the tunnel exit, but he still had to be careful.

They followed the other plane, slowly coming up on it until they were almost directly underneath. Cid turned to look at

Barret.

"You ready?"

Barret rested his arm against the side of the plane for support and took aim.

"Ready as I'll ever be," he said.

Cid gunned the engine and pulled the stick back once again. The plane climbed rapidly, coming up beneath and almost directly behind the jet.

There was a rapid burst of gunfire as Barret opened up. Cid pushed the throttle forward as far as it would go, trying to get as close as possible. For a minute that seemed to take a week to pass, the two planes seemed frozen in space, neither gaining nor losing ground to one another. Barret continued to pour ammo into the air, but it didn't seem to be having any effect.

Suddenly with a burst of speed the jet pulled away from them and shot up into the air. It turned and rapidly circled back toward them. But even as it did so Cid saw a trail of smoke coming from the fuselage.

"We hit it," he shouted. "We got it!"

The plane had circled round and was coming straight for them once more.

"It doesn't seem to be going down," Barret observed.

There was a blast of gunfire. Cid clenched his teeth and pulled the stick to the side. They dived once again, but this time the other plane followed. Cid could hear the roar of the cannons plainly now, and suddenly he heard a cracking sound as bullets tore into one wing.

"We're hit!" he exclaimed.

He swung the plane sharply to the left and down again, corkscrewing around until they were upside down. Then he pulled the stick back and began to climb again. He looked around desperately.

"Where is he?"

Barret pointed to the left and down. "There!"

Cid turned to look. The other plane was below them now. It had not pulled out of its dive. The trail of smoke behind it was much thicker now. It slowly spiraled down, and Cid could see it was plainly out of control. The ground came up to meet it and it disappeared in a huge fireball.

"We got 'em!" Cid said triumphantly.

Barret was grinning beside him.

"We sure did," he agreed. "Now what was that about shooting them down with a handgun?" he continued, turning to look at Yuffie.

She was sitting there, her hands wrapped around her stomach. She looked at him with a nauseated expression on her face.

"Yuffie, you okay?" he asked.

She shook her head. Her face was a very peculiar shade of green. She leaned forward.

"Yuffie no!" Barret managed to exclaim, which almost but did not quite drown out the unpleasant noise she made.

"Ohhh YUCH!"