

IC H A P T E R X V I I I : C H A O S R O U N D T W O

Cid didn't like the way things were going, he didn't like it at all. Not about his repairs, he had all the parts he needed and was well on his way to having the Slipstream in the air again soon. In fact, he was hoping to have the bird flying again by late tonight or early tomorrow. That really wasn't fast enough to satisfy him but then again, any time at all wouldn't have been fast enough for him for that. Considering the plane was stranded on a deserted island hours from civilization and he had no help, well, except for Cait who hardly counted at all except as a gopher, and no facilities, he should really be happy that it wasn't going to take him even longer.

No, what he really wasn't happy about was what was happening with the rest of Avalanche. Cloud and Aeris vanishing on some mysterious chocobo, Reeve and Tifa taking off on some cockamamie trip to Round Island to look for them with not even enough fuel to get back, Vincent turning into the Chaos beast and going ballistic (not to mention killing Lucrecia) and Shera having to scoot back and forth across the face of practically the entire planet trying to help them all out when she should be here helping him. She might not be the fastest person in the world but at least she was efficient, and though he was loath to admit it, knew what she was doing. The plane probably could have been in the air already if he had had some decent help, and he should have had her ferry some of his maintenance team over here as soon as this had happened but no, he was the Captain and he could handle it. He didn't really consider himself a man with an inflated ego but when it came to aircraft, well, he did have a tendency to be a bit of a know it all.

Not that it wasn't warranted, of course. He was, after all, the best damn pilot on the Planet.

At any rate, he was worried. Nobody seemed to know what they were doing. People were running around willy nilly, with no apparent plan in mind. Cid had fought in the Midgar Wutai war, had been a squadron commander. The title of Captain had been earned, not handed to him, and he knew something about battle tactics, knew that the side with the initiative usually had the advantage, and right now their nebulous enemy definitely had the advantage. In order to fight effectively you had to be one step ahead of your enemy and not behind, and right now, he felt like behind was exactly where they were. Behind the eight ball.

Cloud might be impulsive and not always right in the head, but he had always kept them focused on their objective, whatever it might have been. Somehow he'd always managed to break a problem down to it's simplest terms and figured out what needed to be done. Cid didn't even think he did it consciously, it was just some ingrained instinct. He had a way of pulling them all together. He supposed that was the mark of a true leader.

Hmm, seemed funny to think of ole' Spike as a leader, but there it was. Seemed they could use a bit of his intuition, or whatever it was, right now.

Still, unless Cloud blew in on that chocobo just as mysteriously as he left, that wasn't going to happen. They needed someone else to take the reins, to make the decision, to be the leader.

Cid thought maybe that was his job now. After all, he had commanded men, had even led Avalanche for a little while when Cloud had been in Mideel suffering from mako poisoning. Of course, he couldn't really do that sitting here on this island.

Still, that wasn't going to happen. The Slipstream had to be his priority right now. They needed the ship to get around, and, circumstances being as they were, he was the only one available to repair it. He was worried that things were rudderless right now, but it didn't seem there was much he could do about it. Once he got the Slipstream back in the air, then he could worry about other things.

And that wasn't all he was worried about. He glanced over his shoulder, toward the horizon to the south. The sky over his head was clear, but in that direction it was dark. Black clouds had been building up there all day long, spreading slowly toward him. He had been hoping it would move off in another direction, but that wasn't happening. It was coming straight at him, and he could see occasional flashes of light as lightening lit up the sky in that direction. It was still far off, but it was coming. There was a storm brewing, a big one.

Just his luck.

"Cait, give me a hand with this, would ya?"

The big Mog came lumbering over under the aircraft to where Cid was working.

"Just hold that strut in place for me," Cid requested, pointing. He had been working on the landing gear all morning, one of which had snapped when he had crash landed. The engines had been repaired, and the plane could actually fly, but it couldn't get off the ground without it's wheels, of course. It was one of the last things that needed to be repaired.

Cait did as Cid indicated.

"Have you had any breakfast this morning?" Cait inquired.

"No Cait, I haven't had time," Cid replied. "I'm trying to get this thing repaired before that storm gets here."

"It's not good to go without breakfast you know," Cait told him. "It's the most important meal of the day."

Cid gave him a look but said nothing. There was no point. He had never been all that impressed with Cait. His love of machinery did not extend to robot cats or Mog's, apparently. Sometimes he did marvel at how well the AI that controlled Cait worked. Other times it was blatantly obvious how much that same AI needed to be improved. Reeve had programmed Cait to act as much like a normal human being as possible, including engaging in small talk, just the kind of thing Cid had no interest whatsoever in, especially with a machine. It was bad enough he had to put up with it with humans. He would have been much happier, right now, if Reeve had spent a little less time filling Cait's memory chips up with small talk and more with technical manuals.

Of course, that was just another thing he couldn't do much about, but even so, that didn't mean he had to pay any attention to Cait's drivel.

Instead he concentrated on the task at hand. In order to reconnect the wiring on the landing Cid had to literally climb up on the landing gear itself to get to the belly of the plane. In a shop he would have had equipment to do this, but of course, here everything was jury rigged. It was quite an awkward position, not to mention uncomfortable, which was why he had Cait helping brace things. He'd learned long ago that no matter how simple the actual repair, nothing was ever easy.

Even so it was difficult to work with the wiring. He needed two hands to make the connections, yet he needed one hand to hold on so he wouldn't fall. Since he didn't have three hands, he had to wrap his arm around one of the metal struts supporting the landing gear whenever he had to make a connection, which resulted, at times, in some major contortions on his part.

During one particularly arduous contortion the wiring crimper slipped out of his hand. The natural reaction was to lunge for it to try to prevent it from falling to the ground, which would necessitate a trip back down himself to pick it up again. Unfortunately, due to the delicate nature of his position, the resultant lunge threw him off balance. His arm that was under a strut holding him in place shifted enough to slip out of position, threatening to leave him following the crimper to the ground whether he wished to or not.

He let go of the wire he had in his other hand, and, arms flailing, managed to grab hold of the strut with his other hand, thus halting his wild flailing and the threat of dropping the few feet to the ground.

That wasn't quite the end of it, however, as his attempts to save himself from falling had unintended consequences. The landing gear had four large bolts that held it in place, only one of which Cid had attached. He had been in a hurry to get things going, and had attached the one just to keep it in place, planning on finishing the job later on after all the other work had been done. The landing gear wasn't holding up the plane at the moment. Since it had broken he had erected a wooden scaffolding to support the aircraft, and had figured the single bolt would be more than adequate to do the job until he was done and the scaffolding was taken down. His added weight, plus its sudden shift, however, was more than the bolt could handle, and with quite a loud snap it suddenly sheared off and the entire landing gear apparatus tilted suddenly. Cid hadn't expected this sudden movement, and this time he really did fall, landing on his rear end and then pitching backward onto his back, looking up at the landing gear, realizing what had happened, and also realizing that three hundred pounds of landing gear was about to fall, as luck would have it, right on top of him. He cringed backward, but the ground was unyielding beneath him, and there wasn't time to roll out of the way, merely enough to bring his hands up in front of himself to protect his face, not that he thought it would do much good.

Or at least, he hadn't thought he'd have time to get out of the way. Yet after what was probably the longest five seconds of his life he realized that for some reason he hadn't been crushed yet, and that if he was going to be, it should have happened about four seconds ago. Curious as to why this had occurred he lowered his hands, to see Cait standing beside him, holding onto the landing gear and preventing it from falling, looking at him with what seemed like an inquisitive expression on his face.

"Are you all right Cid?"

Slowly Cid got up and brushed himself off.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," he said after a moment.

He looked up at the landing gear. Then walked over to his tools.

"Could you move that over a bit so I can attach all the bolts?" he questioned.

"Sure."

Cait shifted the landing gear, getting it back into it's proper place, a feat no human could have accomplished by himself.

Cid slowly walked back over to Cait, thinking maybe, just maybe, having a robot as a helper wasn't such a bad thing after all.

"I can't believe how annoying she is."

Reno lifted his drink off the counter and swirled it a bit in his hand, looking at the ice inside, then took a sip.

"She's what, nineteen years old now and she still acts like a ten year old."

Rude sat beside him, a drink carefully cradled in his hands as well. They both sat at the bar in the Inn at Rocket Town. They had arrived just before dusk. Yuffie had gone off to get something to eat, claiming to be on the verge of starvation, and had pointedly only asked Ichiero to accompany her. From where they were sitting, Reno could see both Yuffie and her companion through the door, seated in the dining room of the Inn.

"When is she going to grow up? You know, when she was younger her antics were kind of cute, but it's starting to get old now, don't you think?"

Rude made no reply, just as he hadn't replied to any of Reno's musing since they had arrived here.

"And don't think I'm saying that because I'm interested in her because I'm not," Reno went on. "There is no smitten here, okay? In fact, I'll be happy when this is all over and I don't have to listen to her incessant whining anymore."

Rude made no comment about the fact that it wasn't Yuffie's incessant whining he was hearing a lot of at the moment.

"I don't even know why we have her along. She's not going to be any help, that's for sure. She certainly didn't do us any good the first time we ran into Vincent. I can see it's going to be up to us to see that she doesn't do anything stupid, just like it always has. We'd be better off without both her and her little samurai friend."

Reno placed his elbows on the counter in front of him and folded his hands, resting his head on them.

"She's worse than Elena. At least Elena could follow orders. With Yuffie, if you want her to do something, the best way to get her to do it is to tell her not to do it."

"We had a feeling we'd find you here."

They turned to see Red, Lai Li and Shera, obviously having just entered, walking over to them.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in," Reno commented.

Rude stood up and kissed Lai Li.

"What are you guys doing here?" he questioned. "Make any progress?"

"Well, we hope so," Lai Li replied. "We altered the formula to Lucrecia's drug enough so that the Chadara cells should be susceptible to it again. If we give him a large dose, we believe it could kill off all the Chadara cells at once and turn Vincent back into Vincent again."

"And if it doesn't?" Rude asked.

"It could kill him," Lai Li replied. "It's very risky, but it seems to be the only chance we have."

"Where's Elena?" Reno questioned.

"She went back to Junon," Shera spoke up.

"Back to Junon? Why? I thought she was worried about her precious Vincent."

Shera shrugged.

"She's mixed up," she replied. "Give her some time."

"She might not have any time," Reno replied. "You just said this could kill Vincent. I thought she'd at least want to see him again."

"I don't know what to tell you," Shera said. "She's not really thinking straight."

"When did she ever?" Reno muttered.

"Okay, so you have this drug with you?" Rude asked.

"Yeah, we have it prepared," Red stated. "All we have to do is find Vincent and inject it into him, neither of which might be easy."

"Well, with the Bronco here we'll have a much better chance of finding him, and chasing him if he decides to take off again," Reno said.

"Indeed," Red agreed.

"Where's Yuffie?" Shera asked.

"In there," Reno said, pointing to the dining room. "Having diner with samurai boy."

Shera really didn't have a reply to that.

"All right, I better get going then," she said instead. "I have to pick up Sydney at my sisters. You have the Bronco. Try to keep it in one piece or Cid will never forgive you"

"Gee, you make it sound like we're incapable of taking care of it," Reno told her.

She gave him a look.

"Let's just say I've seen you guys in action before. It's getting kind of late. If you decide to start your search tomorrow and need a place to stay tonight, you're welcome to come over."

"Thanks," Lai Li said.

Rude sat back down with Lai Li next to him while Shera departed. Red looked at the others. They didn't seem in any hurry to go anywhere.

"Shouldn't we begin our search now?"

"Relax Red, we just got here," Reno replied. "I need a few drinks to get my motivation back. We had a tough day and need to recuperate before zooming off again. Besides, Vincent's not going to get away. He's out in the wilderness somewhere and he's not going to do any harm there. This is the nearest town and if he comes here, well, then we won't have to search for him at all, now will we? I think we should take Shera's advice and make a fresh start in the morning."

Red wasn't all that happy with that idea, but he had to admit it had some merit, and from looking at the others, it seemed they were inclined to agree with Reno.

"Very well," Red said. "If we don't hear anything we'll stay here tonight and start out early in the morning."

"But not too early," Reno commented.

Red didn't reply.

It wasn't much longer before Yuffie and Ichiero were done with their dinner and came out into the lounge to join the others. After that they all walked back to Cid's house to take Shera up on her invitation to have them stay with her. She and Cid had only one guest room, which wasn't nearly enough, of course, so she just got out some extra blankets and they all ended up sacking out wherever they could find room.

Yuffie usually didn't have any problem sleeping, but that night, for some reason, she was restless. The fact she was sleeping on the floor and not in a comfortable bed probably had something to do with it, thought that couldn't be the only reason, for she had sleep on floors before, and even stranger places. She was hot, and the room seemed stuffy and the air stagnant. She tossed and turned for some time, long after the others had fallen silent, but she couldn't seem to get comfortable. Eventually she got up, deciding lying there thinking about sleep was just making things worse. She walked over to the front door, stepping lightly and silently over the bodies of Rude and Red, figuring a little fresh air would make her feel a bit better, if not help her sleep.

It wasn't cold out. It was a warm summer night and the slight breeze actually felt good,. She stepped outside, then stopped suddenly when she saw a dark figure sitting on the stoop in front of her. She relaxed some, though not completely, when she realized it was only Reno.

"Oh, it's you," she said, making no attempt to hide the disappointment in her voice.

Reno turned to look at her, the orange spark of light from his cigarette bobbing in the air.

"Hey pest. Whatsmatter, couldn't sleep?"

She didn't reply for a moment, just stood there looking at him, not sure whether to stay or retreat back inside. Eventually deciding it would be pointless to go back to her tossing and turning, she came over and sat down on the stoop beside him.

"Not really," she replied. "Thought I'd come out here and get a little fresh air. I didn't expect to find you out here polluting it."

"There's plenty of fresh air over there," Reno replied, waving his hand off in a random direction.

Yuffie made a face but did not deign to reply to that. Instead she just stared off into the night.

Reno inhaled deeply from his cigarette. Neither one spoke for some time, then the Turk turned to look at her.

"So how was our dinner with your little friend?"

Yuffie took some time to consider that.

"Fine," she said eventually. "And he's not little."

"Well, not compared to you, no," Reno answered. "I thought you were trying to get rid of him, yet you seem to be buddies all of a sudden."

Yuffie gave him a look.

"Jealous?"

"Hardly."

"I don't know," she continued. "Considering the choices, he seemed like the best company available."

"Hey, I can be a lot better company than him," Reno stated. "That is, if I wanted to."

"Yeah right."

"It's true," Reno went on. "Okay, so he's got a nice shiny sword. Big deal. Any jerk can carry one of those. I mean, look at Cloud, right? What I lack in swordsmanship I more than make up for in charm."

"Reno, you are so full of it."

"It's true!"

"Right. Let me ask you something. Are there other people in that little fantasy world you're in or are you all by yourself?"

Reno glared at her for a moment before deciding the question was not worth answering.

"So what, does that mean you're going to marry the little twerp after all?"

Yuffie looked at him carefully, trying to figure out just why he seemed so interested.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "Would it bother you if I did?"

"Of course it wouldn't bother me," Reno retorted immediately. "Why would it bother me? Do whatever you want, I don't care."

Yuffie just sat there for a moment, then leaned closer to him.

"Are you suuuure it doesn't bother you?"

"Yes, I'm sure!"

"I don't know," she said, slowly shaking her head. "If you don't care, why do you keep asking me about it?"

"I'm not asking you about it!"

"Yes you are! You just did!"

"I'm not asking you about it *frequently*. I'm just curious. Can't a guy be curious?"

"Yeah, sure, but I think it's more than that."

"It is not! You think I'm interested in you or something? You're nothing but a big pest. Its not like you're even attractive or anything."

"*What?*"

"You heard me."

"You are so full of it."

"Yeah, well, I'm not the only one."

"You've kissed me. More than once!" Yuffie pointed out.

"So?"

"So you wouldn't kiss me if you didn't think I was attractive. You're just saying that because you're a jerk."

"I am not."

"So then why did you kiss me?"

"No reason."

"No reason at all? That's pretty stupid."

"Fine, then, then, just to annoy you."

"Oh yeah right, like I believe that."

"I don't care if you believe it or not, it's the truth."

"It is not."

"Is too!"

"Some of us are trying to *sleep*!"

They fell silent as the sound of Rude's disembodied voice through the window faded away.

"You really do think I'm attractive, don't you?" Yuffie eventually commented, keeping her voice down.

"No."

"*Fine*. I don't think you are either. And don't even think about trying to ever kiss me again."

He turned to face her.

"Oh really, and what exactly would you do if I tried."

"I'd kick your ass."

"Ha, I'd like to see that."

"You know I can."

"You can not. You couldn't kick your way out of a paper bag."

"I can too. I'll prove it to you."

"Prove it to me how?"

"Just try it."

"Just try what?"

"Try to kiss me."

"You want me to kiss you?"

"No."

"Good."

And then he kissed her.

It didn't last long. For a moment she seemed to be enjoying it, but only for a moment. After that she pulled back and the slap that struck him across the face was so hard it knocked him to the ground and left his ears ringing.

"Ouch."

Reno rubbed his cheek, looking not the least bit offended.

"Damn woman, you sure can pack a punch."

"I told you I could kick your ass," she said.

"Maybe," he replied. "What's with you anyway? I didn't get that kind of treatment last time I kissed you."

"You mean back in Wutai when you threw me in the water?"

"I didn't throw you in the water," he retorted. "I slipped. And I wouldn't have if you hadn't paranoid me out about Godo being after my head."

"What, so it was my fault?" she questioned.

"Of course. Surely you don't think I..."

He stopped. Yuffie heard it too. Off in the distance someone was shouting, thought they couldn't make out what he was saying.

"What the hell is that?" Reno muttered.

Before Yuffie could respond they heard another sound.

A scream. It came their left, toward the southern end of town.

Reno paused for a moment.

"Get the others."

Not bothering to wait for a response he ran down the street, the sudden certainty of what, or rather who, he would find welling up inside him. Sound traveled far at night, faster than he had thought. The scream hadn't sounded all that far away, just down the block, as a matter of fact, but when he reached the corner he saw nothing. The shouts and screams were louder, however, but still a ways ahead. He had to traverse several blocks, to the very outskirts of town, until he came upon the source of all the shouting. As it were, his instincts were correct, for he saw the hulking figure of Vincent, or rather, the Chaos beast, outlined against the glow of a house on fire behind him. People were streaming past him, running and shouting, but Reno paid them no mind, fighting his way through them while slipping his nightstick into his hand.

He glanced behind him, looking for the others, but there was no sign of them. It would probably take Yuffie a few minutes to shake the sleep out of them. Until then he was on his own.

Great. He had no illusions about his ability to take on the Chaos beast by himself. The best he could hope for was to slow it down a bit. He needed help, and he needed it fast.

Until then, however, he would have to make do.

Vincent had been ambling down the street, tearing up anything that happened to catch his eye. Now he stopped to rip apart a streetlamp whose light, for whatever reason, apparently greatly offended him.

Seeing an opportunity to strike at a stationary target, Reno brought up his nightstick and pressed the activation button for a force pyramid. Hell, it might not hold Chaos for very long, but hopefully a small delay was all he needed.

Reno wasn't sure how smart the Chaos beast was. He didn't know if Vincent still had any say in what the beast did. He knew the creature had some rudimentary intelligence. After all, it didn't usually attack Vincent's friends. Reno didn't think it was as fully intelligent as a man (otherwise, why go around tearing up lampposts?) but perhaps it was smarter than it looked. As soon as the yellowish glow of the pyramid began to form around it, it let out a huge roar and lunged to the side,

tearing apart the field before it even had a chance to form. It might not be as smart as a man but it had obviously learned something from their last encounter.

In fact, not only was it intelligent enough to realize the danger, but it was also smart enough to divine the source of the attack, for suddenly it reared up and stared straight at Reno.

Suddenly Reno felt very puny. This was not good. This was not good at *all*.

With a ferocious roar the Chaos beast charged right at him. With a flick of a button Reno switched his weapon to electric discharge and fired a blast straight at the creature hurtling at him. The beast roared again and pulled back and Reno turned and ran.

He knew he couldn't outdistance the beast. He had seen the Chaos beast in action more than once, and knew it was unbelievably fast. No, he was just trying to put some distance between the two of them, to give himself a little breathing room and a chance to take another shot at it without being trampled.

And so it was that after just a short distance he spun around again, raising his nightstick to fire a second shot, and nearly got disemboweled as the Chaos beast claws raked the air just in front of him.

"Shit!" he muttered, lunging to the side, firing his weapon at almost the same time. Could it be that the Chaos beast had somehow gotten even faster than it had been?

Again his shot struck home, but this time the beast hardly paused at all, just shook his head for a moment, as if to say, is that the best you have?

Unfortunately, it was.

Beginning to feel a bit desperate, Reno looked around for someplace to hide. Choices were sparse. The door to a nearby house stood only a few meters away, but it was closed, and Reno had a feeling that in the time it took for him to open it, he would be hamburger. A couple of barrels to the right of him, standing by the side of the building. Nuh uh. The Chaos beast would tear through them as if they were made of tissue. A large oak tree to his right, in the center of the yard. Could the Chaos beast climb?

Even if it couldn't he knew it could fly. Besides, it would take him longer to climb the tree than open that door he had already dismissed.

Not having any other option, he ran over to the tree and put it between them.

The Chaos beast lunged at him, but he dodged to the side, putting the tree between them again. Fortunately it was an old tree, large and sturdy, and not even the Chaos beast had the strength to go straight through it. Still, Reno kept looking around, hoping most of all to see Yuffie and the others appear out of the darkness. He knew he couldn't keep up this game of cat and mouse for long.

Indeed, the Chaos beast lunged around the tree again, and Reno sprang to the side, just barely in time. He had felt the wind from its claws on that one. The thing was amazingly fast.

They circled the tree, and in less dire circumstances Reno would have thought it funny, the beast chasing him around the tree like some sort of twisted kids game of tag. Unfortunately getting tagged by Vincent's claws was a consequence a bit more serious for him than any kids game.

He risked a glance behind him and saw that door beckoning to him again. The door, of course, would not stop Vincent, but once inside he might be able to find a place to hide, or give Vincent the slip, or at least put more distance between them than the entirely inadequate few feet that now separated them. He wasn't any closer to the door than he had been, but the bulk of the tree stood between him and his tormentor, and that would slow Vincent down for a few seconds at least. Plus, he might be able to put a hitch in Vincent's step himself.

He stepped to the left, momentarily giving the Chaos beast a clear path to him, then fired his nightstick yet again.

Without even waiting to observe the result, he turned and tore ass for the door.

He didn't look back. He didn't have time and it wouldn't do any good anyway. It would probably just make him hesitate or trip and fall. If the Chaos beast was going to get him before he opened the door, there wasn't any sense in watching it happen. He was either going to make it or he wasn't, and looking back wasn't going to make him move any faster.

As he reached the door he heard a roar, a deafening roar. It sounded like it came from right behind him. As he flung open the door he felt his back muscles tighten, expecting to feel the sharp claws tearing into them.

At the same time as the roar, however, he noticed something else, a bright green light from behind him as well.

The door was open now, and he wasn't dead. He had heard the beasts feet pounding on the ground behind him, nearly making it shake with each step, but now it had stopped. The beast had halted. The roar that had emanated from it had been a roar of pain.

He spun around. The green glow had been unmistakable. He had used materia often enough to recognize the light of one.

Yuffie stood a short distance away, one hand holding her shuriken, the other clasped around what was obviously a materia orb. Obvious, because even as he looked, it glowed again and a streak of lightning shot down on top of the Chaos beast.

Another roar followed. Reno ran to the side, for the moment out of harms way. He could see the others in the darkness too, converging on the Chaos beast from different directions, which seemed to confuse it, at least for the moment.

"You have the drug?" Reno shouted.

"Lai Li has it," he heard Red call out.

Reno ran over to Lai Li, who was standing next to Rude, behind the others. Red and Ichiero, in the meantime, rushed forward. Red leaped at the Chaos beast. He wasn't nearly as big as his adversary, but he was a lot bigger than a human, and his size gave him at least a chance to stand and face the Chaos beast on equal footing for at least a little while. Ichiero rushed in as well, his sword flashing. Reno had to admit the kid had guts. He slashed his sword against the Chaos beast's leg, drawing blood but even so it was just a scratch. He payed a high price as Vincent lashed out, claws raking across the young samurai, whose armor protected him from serious injury, fortunately, yet the blow still sent him sprawling backwards.

"What do we have to do with it?" Reno asked, looking down at the syringe in Lai Li's hand. A stupid question really, but he didn't stop to think about that.

"We have to inject it in him," she replied. "His hide is thick, and it might not penetrate just anywhere. Red thinks his neck would be the best spot to try."

"So someone has to get close enough to stick this needle in his neck?" Reno rephrased.

Lai Li nodded.

Yuffie came running up beside them.

"What are you waiting for?" she exclaimed. "Red and Ichiero aren't going to be able to hold him off for long!"

Lai Li just looked at them, then over at the Chaos beast. They didn't think she was going to attempt this, did they?

"I'll do it," Rude spoke up.

"No, I will," Reno said.

They stood there looking at one another. Neither one of them made a move to take the syringe.

Yuffie stood beside them, and she could tell by the expression on their faces that neither one of them were anxious to do this. In a moment that she could only explain later as temporary insanity, she found herself opening her own mouth.

"I'll do it!"

She grabbed hold of the syringe before either of the others could reply.

"Yuffie, give that back," Reno protested.

Yuffie did no such thing.

"I'll do it," she repeated. "I'm a ninja remember? I'm faster then either of you. Beside, like you said last time, he knows me."

"That didn't seem to help any last time," Reno pointed out.

"Yeah, well, maybe he's..."

She stopped as Red fell from the sky in a heap just a few feet from them.

She turned to look at the Chaos beast as Red painfully pulled himself to his feet. The creature roared, so loud it almost made their ears hurt, and swatted at Ichiero, who was still pestering it. Suddenly it grabbed hold of a cart that was sitting by the side of a house, lifting it up as if it were a toy and tossing it in Ichiero's direction. The cart splintered on the ground, smashing into dozens of pieces as the samurai dove out of the way.

Yuffie paled.

Reno came up beside her, but when he went to reach for the syringe she pulled it away.

"I'll do it," she said yet again, though this time with much less resolve in her voice. She turned to look at Reno.

"You'll, you'll protect me, right?"

Reno just stared at her for a moment. Where had that come from?

"Yeah, whatever you say. Just lets get this done!"

They spread out, surrounding the Chaos beast, making it more difficult for the beast to judge where the next attack would come from, slipping in when given a chance then quickly retreating before the Chaos beast could strike back, like a pack of wild dogs taking on a much larger animal. Yuffie moved in as close as she dared, trying not to draw attention to herself, waiting for just the right moment. She would probably only get one chance at this and she had to time it just right. Frankly she wasn't sure if she was up to it. She wasn't anxious to try but she knew she couldn't wait too long. At any moment the Chaos beast could decide it had had enough of this and take to the air.

All around the Chaos beast the others fainted in and out, trying to distract the beast and at the same time maneuver it closer to Yuffie. A couple of times she almost lunged forward but at the last moment stopped herself, each time not sure if she was doing it because the timing wasn't right or she was just scared to death to try, or both. With each hesitation the situation seemed to get more desperate. They were all depending on her. She had told them she would do it. It was too late to back out now. She had to bite the bullet and get it over with.

She had been inching slowly closer to Vincent. Red sprang in and slashed at the beast's leg, then leaped back again, out of the way as the Chaos beast's claws slashed through the air where the red beast had been a moment before. The movement brought the Chaos beast closer to Yuffie, and with its body extended, its neck was exposed to her and unprotected.

Without giving herself a chance to think about it, she lunged forward.

She wasn't sure how it happened. She had been certain she would hit her mark, certain that the Chaos beast could not react in time to stop her.

She was wrong.

Moving almost preternaturally its arm shot up, catching her own arm just below the elbow and knocking it away. The syringe flew out of her hand, eluding her desperate grab for it. The blow had knocked her off balance as well, and she found herself falling backwards.

She blinked, sitting up, still not believing what had happened, then looked up to see the Chaos beast looming over her.

She opened her mouth, but that was the only reaction she had time for before the claws raked down at her.

Reno had been a little to Yuffie's left. He had used the nightstick to try to distract the beast, but hadn't had much more luck than any of the others. He had been watching Yuffie carefully and had seen her tense her muscles right before her lunge. As soon as he saw that, he ran forward. He had seen her arm shoot out, and the Chaos beast intercept it, knocking it away and Yuffie to the ground, had seen it spin around, lifting its razor sharp claws to tear into her. By that time he was only a step away. Somewhere in the back of his mind he realized that he had been pressing madly on the activation button of his nightstick but nothing was happening. He had obviously used up all of its charge. Not knowing what else to do, he threw himself down on top of Yuffie just as the Chaos beast's claws came swooping down.

Yuffie felt something slam into her, realizing a split second after it happened that it was a body. A moment later she heard the sickening sound of tearing flesh, and the body gave a sort of gurgling cry, half between a scream and a moan, and she recognized the voice as that of Reno, though it was a sound she had never heard come from his lips before, nor ever thought to. Then she heard shouts and the roar of the Chaos beast. She couldn't see what was going on, for Reno was still on top of her. She managed to push him off. His body was limp, which scared her, and her arm, the one that she had used to push him off her, was wet, covered with a dark fluid that could only be one thing.

"Reno! You idiot! What did you do that for?"

He didn't answer. He just lay there. His shirt was shredded, and his back was covered with what was obviously blood, the same blood that covered her arm, though it looked black in the darkness.

She grabbed hold of him, bending down, looking for some sign of life. She couldn't tell if he was breathing. She went to feel for a pulse, but then realized she had no idea where to find one. She bent her head, placing it on his chest, trying to listen for a heartbeat.

She wasn't paying attention to the battle anymore. Fortunately for her, it had moved away from her. The others had redoubled their attacks when they saw Reno and Yuffie go down. The Chaos beast had lashed out at them, mostly in vain, as they continued to harass it, trying and succeeding to get it to move away from their fallen comrades. Finally deciding it had had enough for one night, it suddenly opened its wings and lifted into the air.

Red looked up at it until he was sure it was retreating, then turned to where Yuffie and Reno were. It was dark and he couldn't tell exactly what had happened to them, whether either one or both had been hurt. He saw Yuffie at least on her knees.

"Are you all right?" he called out.

"Yes, but Reno's been hurt," she exclaimed, and they could all hear the panic seeping into her voice. "He's been hurt *bad!*"