

CHAPTER XIII: ONE LAST SMALL DETAIL

Tammik stood by a window in the observatory looking out thoughtfully over Cosmo Canyon. He had just received word of Jenova's destruction. He had been shocked to hear it, of course, though he had shown no outward sign. He had thought the Healer invincible. What would they do without him? He looked down at the troops below, this odd combination of men and monsters, and pondered his next step.

The loss of their leader was a tremendous blow, but it did not have to be a fatal one. Without the Healer, there was no one in charge in Gongaga. He could expect no help nor hindrance from them any longer. He was free to pursue his own plans now.

Slowly a smile formed on his lips. He had always been an ambitious man. He had been placed in charge of the assault on Cosmo Canyon because he had shown intelligence and initiative. Whatever situation he faced, he always managed to make the best of it. He had hoped to be a key figure in the empire the Healer had been creating, but now that the Healer was gone, what was to stop him from creating an empire of his own?

It wouldn't be easy, he realized. The Healer had been the one who held them all together. Now that he was gone, Tammik wasn't sure whether the odd coalition he had created would not fracture. Man and monster did not usually fight together side by side. It would take all his skills to keep his force intact.

Still, he thought himself up to the task.

A knock at the door interrupted his musing.

"Enter."

The door opened and the Captain of the Watch poked his head in.

"Sir, the enemy is approaching the gates under a flag of truce."

Tammik did not reply for a moment. They must have heard about the destruction of Jenova as well, and were probably expecting the forces in Cosmo Canyon to break down completely at the loss of their leader. Little did they know how wrong they were.

"I'll go talk to them," he said. "In the meantime you muster the troops. After we hear what they have to say lead an attack and crush them."

The Captain hesitated a moment.

"They're under a flag of truce," he reminded Tammik.

"I'm well aware of that," Tammik replied, looking at the man evenly. "You have your orders."

"Yes sir," the man said. He saluted smartly and retreated out the door.

Tammik followed more slowly. A few minutes later he stood on a ridge of land looking out over the plain beyond the canyon, not far from where Red had stood when he spoke to Jenova's Disciples. Below him he could see a small force approaching the entrance to the canyon. He looked them over quickly and nodded in satisfaction. No more than fifty men. He had nearly eight hundred troops, though the majority of them were monsters with little intelligence or capability to act as a unified force. Nonetheless, it was more than enough to deal with those approaching.

As they came closer he saw that they were led by two large red lion like creatures. He found a smile forming on his face again. He had hoped it would be the rabble that had escaped from Cosmo Canyon. They had been a thorn in his side from the moment he taken command here, although once the Mako cannon had been completed their attacks had diminished. Still, they were the most dangerous opponent in the region. Once they were destroyed there would be no more opposition for him to deal with in this territory, and he could think less about defense and more about expanding into new regions.

Red called his party to a halt and looked around slowly. Nipala and Barret stood beside him. There was a wooden gate in front of them, blocking their way. Though it was a pale shadow of the huge stone gates the riders had destroyed, it was still useful enough for defense. He could see both men and monsters looking down at him from a deck behind the gate and the ridges of land on either side of it.

"You have taken Cosmo Canyon by force from it's rightful owners. We are here to take it back. Jenova has been destroyed. Surrender the canyon and leave here and you will not be harmed."

He looked up and saw one man step forward on the ridge above.

"I am Tammik, commander of Cosmo Canyon," he said, looking at them with scorn. "We are already aware of the destruction of Jenova. Did you think we would run like rabbits upon hearing that news? I am in charge of Cosmo Canyon, not Jenova. What happened in Gongaga is no concern of ours. As for surrendering the canyon, don't make me laugh. I could defend the canyon with ten people against your force. I have almost a hundred times that. You should have stayed in your little hidey-holes. You have been annoying me for some time now, and I have waiting for you to make a mistake. Apparently the destruction of Jenova has made you overconfident, because here you are in front of me. Now I will crush you like the insects you are!

"We are here under a flag of truce," Red exclaimed.

"Tell it to someone who cares," Tammik replied. He lifted his arm and signaled his men below.

Slowly the gates started to swing open.

"Treachery," Red shouted, turning to the others in his party. "Retreat."

"Bastards," Barret yelled, opening up with his gun on the ridge above their heads. Tammik dodge quickly back out of the way. A few of the men above them returned fire. Barret turned and ran, following the others, who were headed north across the plain. There was a forest to the east, but they did not head for it. Behind them their enemy poured out of the gates in hot pursuit.

The canyon guards were well trained, and did not flee in panic, but kept together as a coherent group. Red and Nipala ran on either flank, with Barret in the middle, the three of them acting as rearguard. Their pursuers were not far behind, and gaining. Many of the monsters were fleet of foot, much faster than a human. It was just a matter of time before they were overtaken.

Suddenly, as if by some unspoken command, Red's force came to a halt. They turned to face their pursuers, moving quickly into place to form a battle line.

Their enemy slowed, taken by surprise by this unexpected turn of events. A few of the men shouted and cursed, trying to organize their own forces into a battle line as well. It took them some minutes to do so.

The forest was not far away to the east, and suddenly a figure appeared coming out from under the shadow of the trees. It was a single man mounted on a chocobo. It took a moment for him to be noticed, but when he was a cry went up, and some of the monsters started in his direction.

The man rode out a little ways onto the plain, then stopped. He wore a rather disheveled blue suit and he held what looked like a nightstick in his hand. As the monsters approached, he lifted the nightstick.

A blast of electricity shot into the air.

And with that, the forest came alive as a thousand warriors from Wutai poured out of it.

At the same time Red's forces charged forward. For many long seconds their enemy did not react, just remained where it was, looking back and forth between the two forces that were now charging at them, as if unable to grasp the significance of what had just happened. Then suddenly they broke and ran. A few at first, but then more and more, as if opening a sluice gate in a dam, and suddenly the entire force was running back toward the canyon as fast as it could go.

Tammik stood on the ridge above the canyon, staring in shock. He had expected to see his forces totally destroy the last of his enemies, but now the tables had turned, so quickly it nearly made his head spin, and he realized his own forces were now in danger of being routed. But he still had a chance.

He looked down at those below him in the canyon once more.

"Close the gates," he shouted. "Prepare the Mako cannon!"

Two hundred cavalry accompanied Godo's warriors, and now they sped forward across the plain, their war trained chocobo's faster than nearly any monster. They divided in half, circling around their enemy, racing to get in front of them and cut them off. Yuffie rode with them, with Reno not far behind her. As they neared the gates of the canyon she signaled the warriors with her to attack, and as one they wheeled around, and formed up beside her. Yuffie loosened the conformer and slipped it into her hand, then with a piercing battle cry, led the charge directly into the enemy.

They drove into their enemies like a thunderclap, cutting down all who stood in their way. Yuffie rode forward with wild abandon, slicing any who came near with her conformer, while holding a materia orb in her other hand, casting fire on any enemies not within her reach. For the most part their enemies scattered before her, but there was one group near the center, mostly of men, that was holding together. Yuffie was ahead of the others now, and she drove her chocobo right at them, not waiting for her allies to catch up. The conformer flew out, striking down those in front of her, while she twisted to dodge blows coming from all sides. But then a spear flew through the air, embedding itself in her chocobo just beside her leg. The bird collapsed and Yuffie went sprawling to the ground.

Suddenly her enemies were all around her. She scrambled to her feet, realizing for the first time how far she had gotten in front of the others, and just how much trouble she was in. She lashed out with her shuriken. She had dropped her materia orb and she didn't have time to pull out another one.

She felt a blow to her side, and found herself on the ground again. She threw the Conformer once more, cutting down another enemy, but then she turned and saw another man coming at her with sword raised.

There was a flash of lightning and he cried out and fell to the ground. A chocobo appeared before her and Reno reached down his hand.

She grasped hold of it and he pulled her up onto the chocobo behind him. He turned the chocobo around and spurred it on. Some odd looking creatures appeared in front of him, but another blast from his nightstick sent them scurrying away. Yuffie could see more cavalymen not far away, and moments later Reno had joined them.

The cavalry had cut off their enemy, forcing them to stand and fight. Now the foot soldiers suddenly caught up, the main force tearing into their enemy, striking them down like wheat before the scythe. Yuffie looked around to see that their enemy was no longer a coherent force. The battle had disintegrated into a rout.

Tammik still stood on the ridge watching the battle, thought battle it could no longer be called. His forces were in full retreat, being cut down at will by his enemies. He turned away to look up at the top of the hill. The Mako cannon was slowly pivoting toward the field of battle. If he fired now there was no doubt he would wipe out whatever was left of his own force on the field. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate. The blow would destroy what was left of his army, but it would also wipe out his enemy. The small garrison that remained inside Cosmo Canyon just might be able to defend it against any of his enemy that was left after the cannon fired. He could still snatch victory from this.

A low rumbling sound caught his attention, making him turn back toward the field of battle.

At first he could not identify it. But it quickly grew until it was unmistakable. It was the roar of a jet engine.

With a sinking feeling he lifted his eyes to the skies, to see not one, but two black aircraft streaking toward Cosmo Canyon just above the hills to the east.

He twisted round toward the cannon once more.

"Hurry up, you fools!" he shouted. "Fire!"

The men working the cannon scrambled furiously to comply. Tammik looked from the cannon to the jets and back again, and realized that the cannon was going to lose the race. And even as he thought that, he could see a line of smoke trails streak out across the sky from the jets, and a moment later the cannon erupted in a thunderous explosion.

Tammik stood there looking at the remains of the cannon on the hill above him. Slowly he turned and looked out onto the plain once more. The battle was nearly over out there now, his forces totally destroyed. He could see the black jets circling around above him, and one of them fired another barrage of rockets at the wooden gate at the entrance below him. Tammik bowed his head. His plans of building an empire were shattered, after having lasted not even a single day. Jenova was dead, and all his forces had been routed. Tammik had never believed for a moment things could turn out this way.

His hand reached down and slowly he drew the sword he kept by his side. He had failed, and he knew the price of failure.

He lifted his head again, a grim but calm look upon it. Then he lifted up his sword, reversed it, and drove it into his own chest.

Red led the canyon guard through the destroyed gates and into Cosmo Canyon, Nipala and Barret still by his side. There were still men and monsters here, but the resistance was light, and they drove their enemy back easily. There seemed to be no more organized resistance.

He turned around as a squadron of cavalymen rode in. He looked up in surprise to see Reno at the head of it, with Yuffie perched behind him.

"I am surprised to see you back again," Red stated, looking at Reno. "It appears your friends mean more to you than you let on."

"Let's just say that this time I had the proper incentive," Reno replied with his usual sardonic smile.

The roar of jet engines interrupted them. They looked to see the Slipstream and the Vengeful Wind touch down lightly near the entrance to the canyon. The doors on both jets opened up, and those on board disembarked. The crowd around Red parted and he saw Cloud and Ellengio stride up to them, followed closely by the others. They all stood there for a minute looking at one another.

"It appears we have been successful," Red understated. He looked at Ellengio. "It seems your words have proven prophetic. We meet again on the streets of Cosmo Canyon, just as you had wished."

Ellengio smiled.

"Indeed we do," he replied.

Cid stepped forward.

"God damn it," he exclaimed. "Could you guys be any less emotional? In case you didn't notice, we won! Jenova is dead and the canyon is ours again. We kicked ass! So now let's celebrate!"

Later that night the people of Cosmo Canyon gathered in the streets to see the relighting of the eternal flame. Cloud sat right in front, between Aeris and Barret as Red addressed his people.

"Today we have won a great victory. One that will be talked about by our children and our children's children. We have all suffered greatly. Many of you have lost loved ones and all that you possessed. And though I share your sorrow, I know that tomorrow will be a better day. A great evil has been removed from the world, and we have taken back our rightful home."

He turned and beckoned Yuffie to step forward.

"But we did not do this alone," he continued as Yuffie came up beside him. "This victory could never have been achieved without the help of the people of Wutai. Yuffie Kisaragi, as a representative of your people, I wish to offer you our sincerest thanks. We are all in your debt. And may what happened today form a bond of friendship between our two cities that lasts long after we are all gone."

A cheer went up through the crowd, while Yuffie just stood there looking embarrassed. Never in her life had she ever seen such admiration. And it was all for her! She decided she could get used to this hero idea.

"Thanks, Re..Nanaki," she said, fumbling for words. "I hope so too."

She sat down again quickly, still embarrassed but nevertheless loving the attention.

Red's head swiveled around until his gaze fell on the Captain of his guard, who was standing at the end of a cleared pathway in the crowd of people, a torch held proudly in his hands.

"Brogan, bring forth the flame," Red commanded.

The man walked forward until he stood beside Red, who looked at the people surrounding him.

"This torch holds the light of the eternal flame, passed in direct line from another torch that was used to preserve the flame when the canyon was taken from us. This light is a sign from our ancestors that the canyon is under their protection, and signifies their favor. To have lost it would have been to lose a part of our heritage."

He suddenly turned and looked at Cid.

"Cid Highwind, as the man responsible for preserving this flame for our people, I think it would be only fitting if the fire was relit by your hand."

Cid sat there for a moment, cursing under his breath as all eyes turned toward him. If anything, he looked even more embarrassed than Yuffie had.

He didn't move until Shera, who he had gone to get earlier, nudged him. Then he stood up slowly.

"Shit," he muttered.

He stepped forward and stood next to Red. There were more cheers and Cid thought he was going to die of embarrassment.

Brogan handed him the torch. Cid took it and looked at Red, who nodded. Cid shoved the end of the torch into the wood piled up on the platform that held the eternal flame. Almost immediately the kindling mixed in with the wood caught, and moments later the eternal flame once again filled the night air with light.

With the ceremony finished the crowd started to break up, though not many people left the streets. The Inn had brought out some tables and placed them in the street, setting up an open air bar. A band started playing and the people of Cosmo Canyon began their celebration.

Reno made a beeline for the bar, but was interrupted when he suddenly came face to face with Elena and Rude.

He stopped and they looked at each other. Elena seemed slightly embarrassed.

"Reno.." she said, then stopped. He stared at her, but she did not speak, just stood there for a moment.

"I'm sorry," she finally said. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

Reno just looked at them both. Rude said nothing, but nodded his head slowly.

Reno gazed at them for a long time, letting the silence drag out until Elena thought she couldn't stand it anymore.

Finally he broke into a grin and waved his hand dismissively.

"What are you talking about?" he said. "It was all part of my plan. I was just making sure Yuffie did her job, and I needed you two to stay behind and keep the others from killing themselves until I got back with help. You did exactly what you were supposed to do."

Relief flooded Elena's face.

"So we're still a team? We're still Turks?"

"Of course," Reno looked at her as if the very thought of their not being so was preposterous.

"Once a Turk always a Turk," he continued, casting a baleful eye at Vincent, who stood not far away. "Now come on. I hear a drink calling me and I can't wait any longer. This fighting is thirsty work, and if we've ever earned some time to relax, it's today."

With that he put his arm around both of his friends shoulders and led them off to the bar.

Aeris stood watching the eternal flame flicker in front of her, with Cloud still seated beside her. Ellengio, Barret and Shera sat not far away.

"What a beautiful ceremony," Aeris said.

"Uh huh," Cloud replied. He looked at the flame, then up at the stars above them. So much had happened, he could hardly believe it was over. He wished Tifa was with him, but she was back in the hospital at Kalm. She would recover from the damage she sustained in the fight, but it had bought her yet more time in the hospital. Their success was tempered for him by the fact that she could not be with them.

"That was a pretty nifty trick you pulled earlier," he commented. "For a moment there, I thought you might..."

His voice faded.

She reached out and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I kind of surprised myself," she stated.

He gave her a rueful smile. She had recovered fairly quickly after collapsing into Tifa's arms. They had brought Tifa back into the hospital where Dr. Samuels, a black bruise on his forehead, had taken a look at her. When he had assured Cloud she would recover they had left in the Vengeful Wind, heading back to Fort Condor, where they had picked up Priscilla and brought her back to Junon. Cloud had explained to her father what had happened, and why she had run off without permission, and though Conrad had given his daughter a stern look, Cloud suspected the man was actually rather proud of

her. Cloud had given her a kiss as a reward and she had nearly swooned. Perhaps wisely, he never made any mention of Tifa.

"So everything turned out all right," Cloud said, looking at Aeris carefully. "Do you still feel bad about what happened with the crystal materia, about your part in Jenova's return?"

Aeris looked around for a moment before answering, the light of the eternal flame flickering in her eyes.

"So much damage has been done," she replied slowly. "So many have lost their lives. I cannot help but feel some responsibility for that. But there's nothing that can be done about it now, and it could have ended up a lot worse. I suppose it's just a burden I will have to learn to live with, and move on."

Cloud nodded but did not respond.

Aeris head cocked to one side, looking over Cloud's shoulder. He turned but saw only his friends sitting by the fire.

"What?" he asked, but Aeris had already gotten up and was walking over to Shera, who was staring at the fire, her hands holding her swollen stomach. Cloud got up and followed Aeris over.

"Are you all right?" Aeris asked.

Shera turned toward her, a look of half concern and half embarrassment on her face. She started to get up. Aeris and Cloud both gave her a hand.

"Thank you," Shera replied, still clutching her stomach. "I think..."

She looked down at herself.

Aeris eyes widened.

"No," she said.

Shera looked up at her again.

"I think it's time."

Cloud looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"Time for what?" he questioned.

Aeris turned toward him.

"For the baby, you idiot."

"No," it was Cloud's turn.

"What?" Barret called out, coming over to them, followed by Ellengio.

"It's time," Aeris said excitedly. "She going to have the baby. Where's Cid?"

"I don't know," Barret replied. "I saw him head off down the street a while ago."

"Well, go find him!" Aeris exclaimed.

Barret immediately took off down the block. Aeris turned to look at Cloud.

"You to!"

Cloud didn't argue, but ran off the other way, searching through the crowd for a sign of the blonde haired pilot. The streets were crowded with people, and he found it difficult to get through them. With all these people in the street, he could pass right by Cid without even seeing him. Where could he have gone?

The bar.

Cloud pushed his way through the crowd, heading toward the Inn, but the bar was a very popular place this night, and by the time he neared it he could barely move as the crowd pressed around him.

It took him a long time to finally make it to the bar itself. He looked around and spotted the three Turks sitting at the counter, with Vincent standing behind them. He should have known Reno would have staked out prime territory. He made his way over to them.

"Have you seen Cid?" he said when he reached them, shouting to be heard over the sound of the band, which was playing right beside them.

The three Turks shook their heads, but Vincent leaned forward and tugged on Cloud's sleeve.

"He's over there," Vincent said, pointing to the left.

Cloud saw Cid standing in the crowd not far away.

"Cid!" Cloud shouted at the top of his lungs. He had to do it again before Cid turned and acknowledged him. Cid pushed his way through the crowd until he reached them.

"Great party, huh?" he shouted, a drink in one hand and his cigarette in the other.

"Never mind that," Cloud yelled in return. "We've got to go. Shera's in labor!"

"What?" Cid said. "Do me a favor?"

"What?" Elena exclaimed in surprise.

Cloud leaned forward until Cid's ear was right beside him.

"SHERA'S IN LABOR!"

Cid's eyebrows shot up.

"Shit!" he exclaimed.

"C'mon," Cloud said. He started to force his way through the crowd once more. Cid came up beside him, along with Elena and Vincent. Together they formed a wedge that pushed through the throng fairly quickly.

When the crowd thinned they broke into a run. Not long after they were back at the flame. Shera was sitting beside it, Aeris next to her, with Ellengio standing nearby. Cloud saw that Barret had returned as well, and that Red was with him.

Shera stood up when she saw Cid approaching.

"About time," she admonished jokingly.

"So what's going on?" Cid said, looking around as if he were lost.

"I'm having labor pains," Shera replied.

"For how long?" Cid questioned.

"Since right before we arrived here," she replied.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought it might be false labor," she replied. "Besides, I didn't want you to miss the ceremony."

"Who gives a shit about the ceremony," he shouted. "Shera you dumba.."

He stopped and shut his mouth.

"So what do we do?" he said.

"We'll have to get to the hospital," Shera stated.

"I'm afraid that isn't going to be so easy," Red spoke for the first time. "The hospital was torn apart by our unwanted guests. There's no telling whether any of the doctors have survived, and if they have, who knows how long it'll take to find them."

"Well, that's just great," Cid said in disgust.

"Cid, calm down," Shera said. "We'll just have to go back to Rocket Town."

"Shera, are you out of your mind?" Cid exclaimed. "Who says we're going to have enough time?"

"If we don't then we don't," Shera snapped. "You got a better idea?"

Cid looked at her and let out a groan of exasperation.

"Well, let's get a move on, then," he said.

He ran down the street, back toward the entrance to the canyon and the Slipstream beyond. The others followed more slowly, Aeris staying with Shera to offer support. By the time they reached the aircraft the engines were roaring.

Cid sat at the controls, muttering a string of curses. Damn woman still hadn't learned to move her ass. His hands moved nervously over the controls, accidentally activating a switch. He shut it off immediately with a curse. He looked at his hands. They were shaking with excitement.

"Why don't you let me fly it?"

He jerked around to see Vincent standing behind him, looking down at him thoughtfully.

"I know what I'm doing," Cid replied curtly.

He felt a metal hand come down on his shoulder.

"Go in the back and have a cigarette, your nerves are shot."

Cid gave him a baleful look, but he got up out of the seat. Vincent sat down as Cid walked toward the back, still muttering curses.

The Slipstream lifted off and headed north to Rocket Town. Aeris reclined one of the chairs and had Shera lay down in it. She looked toward Vincent in the front.

"Take it nice and easy," she commanded.

A slight nod was her only reply.

Shera lay beside her. The labor pains were coming much more quickly now. A bead of sweat appeared on her brow.

"They're coming pretty fast," she said slowly. "I don't know whether we're going to get there in time."

"Shit," Barret exclaimed. "What are we going to do if she has it here?"

He looked at Aeris, who just shrugged. This was something that even she had no experience with.

"Get out of the way," Elena said, stepping forward. She knelt down beside Shera.

"Do you know what you're doing?" Aeris asked.

Elena nodded.

"The Turks are trained to handle any emergency," she replied. "Part of my training was to assist in two births. Now step back and give the lady some room."

The others obeyed. Cloud walked into the back of the plane, knowing full well that he would only get in the way if he stayed. This was something he had no intention of becoming involved with.

Cid was pacing back and forth, puffing furiously on a cigarette.

"Calm down, Cid," Cloud said reassuringly, even though he doubted it would do much good. "I'm sure we'll make it in time."

Cid did not reply. He tossed away his cigarette, even though it was only half consumed. He paced across the floor, then absently pulled out another one and lit it up.

Cloud just shook his head and took a seat.

In the other room they heard Elena saying something about pushing.

"I can't believe this is happening," Cid remarked, raising his eyes heavenward.

Cloud did not reply. It seemed that whatever they did, it always somehow turned into an adventure.

Cid nearly jumped out of his skin as he heard Shera cry out. They heard Elena yell 'whoa'.

"What the hell is going on in there?" Cid shouted.

"It's almost here!" he heard Aeris cry.

"Oh God," Cid muttered.

He continued his pacing. They heard Elena talking some more, but Cloud could not make out what she was saying. She sounded excited.

Suddenly they heard Vincent's voice.

"We're almost there," he called out.

There was a shout from the others, and suddenly Cid heard a high pitched crying from the next room.

"Cid, get in here!" he heard Barret shout.

He ran forward, with Cloud right behind him. Cid stopped when he saw Shera, lying on the chair with a small bundle in her arms wrapped in one of Cid's spare bomber jackets.

"It's a girl," Shera said softly, a smile hiding the exhaustion on her face.

Sydney Highwind had come into the world at fifteen thousand feet.

Aeris sat on a chair in the kitchen of Cid and Shera's house. It had been a long and exhausting day. One she thought they wouldn't forget for a long time. They had dropped Shera and the baby off at the hospital. The doctors had been surprised, but they had examined the child and it appeared to be perfectly healthy. Elena had done a good job.

Cid had invited them all over to his house afterward, where most of them had immediately collapsed in exhaustion, Cid being the first to go.

She finished the tea she had made herself and walked over to the doorway, looking in the living room. Barret was sleeping soundly on the floor. Cloud had claimed the couch. She thought him asleep as well, but then he opened one eye for a moment and smiled at her. She returned the smile and retreated back into the kitchen. She didn't want to disturb them.

The others had all sacked out wherever they had been able to find room. She thought about going to sleep herself, but even after their busy day for some reason she did not feel tired. She walked over to the front door and stepped out into the night air. A small sound caught her attention, and she turned to see Ellengio sitting on a chair by the side of the house, looking up at the stars.

She walked over to him. He tilted his head slightly to acknowledge her presence, but continued to look at the sky.

Her gaze lifted as well. There was no moon tonight, and the lights of Rocket Town were muted this late in the evening. The sky was a huge painted canopy of stars above their head. They shown above her, brighter and more abundant than she had ever seen. And for every one that she saw, she knew there were thousands others, even farther away and fainter still. In a cosmos that huge anything could happen. She looked at Ellengio and though he must be thinking the same thing. And suddenly she felt a chill, even though the night was warm and there was no wind. The stars above their head went on far beyond their comprehension. They held more beauty than she could imagine, and more terrors, as well.

"It's not over yet, is it?" she said softly.

Ellengio stirred and looked at her. Then he slowly shook his head.

"No it's not."

Reno stepped out of the bathroom unsteadily. He walked out of the Inn and looked around for Rude. The crowds in the streets of Cosmo Canyon had dwindled as the night wore on, and now there were no more than five or six people still outside. Most had long since given up reveling and retired for the night.

He didn't see Rude, but that was not surprising since he could barely see at all. Still, as far as he was concerned the night was young. He had a long way to go before he fell into the drunken stupor he was attempting to so hard to achieve.

"Reno."

He jumped at the sound of his name. He looked around and his eyes slowly focused on a young woman standing in front of him.

"Yuffie!" he exclaimed, his face breaking into a broad grin. "You come to join us? C'mon, we're just gettin' started, and since Elena left all I've had to look at is Rude's ugly mug."

He grabbed hold of her. She did not protest.

"Actually, I came here to tell you something," she said.

"An wha might that be?" he questioned.

She hesitated for a moment, then sidled up next to him, a smile forming on her face.

"I came to thank you for rescuing me in the battle today," she said, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Rescoo...rescue you?" he stammered. "You mean you're actually going to admit that? No more, 'hey, I knew exactly what I was doin'?"

Yuffie shook her head.

"No more, you rescued me, fair and square."

She was right beside him, looking at him carefully, a strange expression on her face. He just stood there, as if unable to comprehend this sudden admission on her part.

Suddenly she leaned forward and kissed him.

Reno eyes shot up. Yuffie wrapped her arms around him, forcing her lips against his, and he stumbled backward and almost fell on his ass.

As quickly as she had come forward, she disengaged. She smiled at him once more, then, before he even knew what had hit him, she scampered off.

"Hey, ain'tcha gonna join us?" he questioned. He stood there waiting for a response, not realizing at first that she was gone. Then he shrugged and the grin returned to his face. Things had really started to look up for him. He was back with Rude and Elena, their enemies had been destroyed, and now Yuffie appeared to have a thing for him. And on top of it all, he had been well paid to boot.

He reached down to pat the wad of gil in his pocket, but then stopped. He felt a sudden chill. The pocket was empty. His hands ran across his body, frantically checking his other pockets, but they were empty too. He stood there for a moment and his face suddenly contorted in rage.

"YUFFIE!!!!!!"

THE END

AUTHORS NOTE: *Well, it's finally done. And not too far past the deadline. Pretty exciting ending, I thought. Wonder what's going to happen next?*

A couple of you picked up on the similarity between the confrontation between Ellengio and Jenova's Disciples with Gandalf and the Black Riders in The Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien. It's just my humble homage to one of my favorite novels.

So Aeris still hasn't made up her mind. It's a tough decision, but she's going to have to choose eventually. I wish I knew who she was going to pick! And what's up with Reno and Yuffie? Do I see romance in the air between these two, or will they kill each other first? Stay tuned.

You might have noticed that Cloud and Tifa did not play a central role in the end of this story. Even though Tifa is my favorite, I decided to let some of the others take center stage for once. Thought it was only fair.

As always, comments welcome at FCVERDE@ix.netcom.com. That's it. Gotta go let my fingers cool off!