

CHAPTER XXXIV: PREPERATIONS

"What do you think of this color?" Tifa asked.

"I love it," Aeris replied.

Yuffie didn't look so enthusiastic.

"You don't like it?" Tifa questioned.

"I didn't say that," Yuffie replied. "Green's just not my color."

"What are you talking about? You wear green all the time," Aeris pointed out.

"Yeah, but what I wear is darker than that," Yuffie replied.

"So it's just that shade of green," Aeris said.

"Yeah, that one's kinda light."

"So you don't like it?" Tifa questioned.

"Not really," Yuffie replied.

"You haven't liked one color I've picked out yet," Tifa said.

"What can I say, I'm fussy," Yuffie replied defensively.

"It's your wedding," Aeris said to Tifa. "Pick out the colors YOU like."

"I know," Tifa replied. "I just want everyone to be happy."

"With this many people involved, I'm not sure that's possible," Aeris replied. "Have you settled on the wedding party yet?"

Tifa looked uncomfortable.

"Speaking of that," she said, giving Yuffie a long look, which the young ninja picked up on immediately.

"What?" she said guardedly.

Tifa bit her lower lip.

"Umm, how would you feel being matched up with Cait?"

The look on Yuffie's face was pretty much the reaction Tifa had obviously been expecting.

"You want to match me with a stuffed toy?" Yuffie exclaimed.

"He's not a stuffed toy," Tifa said. "All right, maybe he is. But he's more than that. He's our friend."

Yuffie was not so easily appeased.

"Oh that's right, he's also a robot with an annoying personality," she said. "Why does he even have to invited, anyway. After all, he was controlled by Reeve, and Reeve's going to be in the wedding party, right? So that's like asking Reeve twice. And besides, it's not like you're going to hurt his feelings."

"Yeah," Tifa conceded. "But he's not controlled by Reeve anymore, and he was with us when we fought Sephiroth. He's one of us, even if he is a robot. I'd feel weird not including him."

"So why can't you put him with someone else?" Yuffie whined.

"Who?" Tifa asked. "Cid's going to be with Aeris. That is, if Cloud ever gets around to asking him to be best man. So Shera's with Reeve. Vincent and Elena, Red and Nipala. You can't split them up You're the only one who's unattached."

"Lucky me," Yuffie grumbled.

"Oh stop complaining," Aeris admonished. "You'll just have to take a few pictures with him. It's not like you're required to hang out with him or anything."

"That's bad enough," Yuffie replied. "What about Barret? Isn't he going to be in the wedding party?"

"You'd want to be with Barret?" Aeris asked in surprise.

"Well, he'd be better than Cait," Yuffie responded. "Who's he going to be matched up with? You didn't even mention him."

"He's not going to be matched up with anyone," Tifa replied.

"What do you mean?" Yuffie said in surprise. "Isn't he going to be in the wedding party?"

"Not exactly," Tifa began.

Just then the door to the room opened and Cloud stuck his head in.

"Are you girls going to be in here all day?" he questioned.

"We're planning the wedding," Tifa told him.

"You've been doing that all day," Cloud replied. "In fact, you've been doing it since we got back from space. It's been almost a week now. What's left to plan?"

"Cloud, this isn't something that can be done in a day," Tifa replied a bit testily. "The weddings only two weeks away, and there's a million preparations to make. Would you rather I asked you to help?"

"No thanks," Cloud replied quickly. "I'll leave it up to you. But you might want to come downstairs. We've got company."

"Who?" Tifa questioned, but Cloud was already out the door.

She looked at the others.

"Guess we better go find out."

The other two followed Tifa as she walked down the stairs of Elmyra's old house. In the parlor below they found Cid, Vincent, Elena, Barret and Amanda.

"Well, this is a surprise," Tifa said, smiling. "What brings you here?"

"We're on our way to Mideel to talk to Dr. Nathan, to see if he knows anything about what happened to Amanda, and we thought you guys might want to come along," Barret said.

"Sure," Cloud said immediately. Then he looked at Tifa. "At least, I want to. The girls have been kinda busy."

"No, I want to go too," Tifa said. "I'd like to find out what he knows as well."

"How are the wedding plans going?" Barret asked.

"That's what they've been busy with," Cloud stated. "Every waking moment."

Tifa rolled her eyes.

"Barret," she said, suddenly looking serious. "I have to ask a favor of you."

Barret looked at her, his brow furrowing.

"A favor. Sure," he replied. "What is it?"

"Never say sure before you hear the favor," Yuffie offered advice.

Barret ignored her.

"It's about the wedding," Tifa began. She hesitated a moment, and Barret frowned.

"Just say what ya gotta say," he said bluntly.

"I'm not sure you'll want to go along with this. I know you probably want to be in the wedding party."

Barret's eyes lifted slightly in surprise, but he said nothing.

"But I would like you to do something else for me. If you don't mind. You know my father was killed by Sephiroth when he destroyed Nibelheim. So I was wondering if maybe you'd like to walk me down the aisle."

Barret stood there for a moment, obviously surprised.

"You want me to give you away?" he questioned.

"I can't think of anyone I'd rather have do it," she said. "After all, of everyone, I've know you the longest. Except for Cloud, of course. You've always looked after me and protected me whenever you could. You've always been almost like a father to me. So please, will you?"

Barret scratched his head and stood looking embarrassed. Then he nodded.

"Well, of course I'll do it, Teef. In fact, I'd be honored."

Tifa smiled.

"Thank you Barret," she said.

"All right!" Aeris said excitedly. "This is so much fun. We should have weddings more often."

"Don't rush us," Yuffie piped up.

Tifa turned to look at Cloud.

"And by the way, don't you have something to say to Cid?" she asked.

It took Cloud a moment to get the picture.

"Oh yeah," he said, swiveling toward Cid. "You wanna be my best man?"

"Sure," Cid replied.

"Okay then," Cloud said, turning back to Tifa. "That's that. Are we ready to get going?"

Tifa just looked at him for a moment, then sighed.

"I guess so."

The Slipstream was parked on a grassy field just outside of Kalm. They quickly piled in and lifted off. Once off the ground Cid let Cloud take over the controls, and he flew most of the way to Mideel. This was the third time he had flown the Slipstream since they had returned, and the trip went without incident. Tifa had to admit she was feeling much more comfortable with Cloud's flying. He seemed to be picking it up very quickly. In fact, lately she had been thinking about asking Cid to give her a lesson or two. But she figured it could wait a little while longer.

They landed on a small airfield that had just recently been built to accommodate the growing commercial and tourist trade of Mideel. In fact, the airport wasn't even complete yet, with only the one runway and a portion of the tower actually finished. From there they made there way into the town, which was now almost twice as large as it had been when they were last here, even before it was destroyed. Not only was it larger, but the layout was completely different, and it took them some time to find the office of Dr. Nathan. But eventually, after getting lost once or twice, they managed to run across it.

The receptionist looked up at them as the entered the small office.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"We'd like to speak Dr. Nathan," Barret spoke up.

"Do you have an appointment," she asked.

"No," Cloud replied. "We're not sick. It's a personal visit."

"Well, he's with a patient right now, and he has appointments through the rest of the day, so I don't know if he'll be available anytime soon. Can I ask the nature of the business?"

"Tell him it's about Hojo's Nathan project," Vincent said, suddenly stepping forward.

The smile that was on the woman's lips faded quickly in the glare of the fiery red eyes of the dark caped man. She stood up.

"I'll just be a moment," she said tersely and disappeared into the other room.

"Is it really necessary to scare the hell out of everyone we run into?" Elena asked.

"I'm merely being direct," Vincent replied calmly. "And it usually gets results, so I don't think you have any reason to complain."

Elena fell silent. A few moments later the nurse returned.

"Dr. Nathan said he would see you," she said, her eyes studiously avoiding Vincent. "He's down the hallway in examination room two."

"Thanks," Cloud said.

They walked down the hall and found the room. Inside Dr. Nathan looked at them closely as they entered.

"Why it's Mr. Strife and Miss. Lockhart," he said in surprise, his face immediately brightening. "What are you doing here?"

"We told your receptionist," Vincent replied. "It's about Hojo and the Nathan project."

Dr. Nathan's smile disappeared immediately.

"Please do not mention that name in my presence," he said.

The other's looked at him in surprise.

He shook his head slowly.

"I'm, sorry. I never thought I would hear those words again," he said sadly. "That was a long time ago, and it's not something I wish to be reminded of. It's all part of the past. What has it got to do with anything now?"

"So you know about it?" Cloud questioned.

"Yes," Dr. Nathan replied.

"It was some kind of project by..." Vincent began, "to inject mako into someone to try to give them the ability to use materia spells without materia. Correct?"

Dr. Nathan nodded.

"But it never worked," he stated. "At first nothing happened. So Hojo kept trying higher and higher doses. Eventually the people got sick, but that didn't deter him. He kept right on increasing the doses until they began to die. And when they did, he would just replace them and try again. It was always the fault of the subject, they were always flawed in some way. At least, that was his opinion. So he kept trying, hoping to find just the right person, just the right mixture. But it always resulted in failure. Early on he wanted to attempt it with a woman, but I and most of the others scientists put our foot down. But Hojo was a devious bastard, much more cunning and evil than any of us had suspected. Not long after we had vetoed the use of a woman, he decided to go ahead with it anyway, without the knowledge of any of us. He secretly poisoned the food of one of the woman on the project with mako. She soon became ill, but by the time we found out what was wrong it was too late to help her. The only chance she had by then was to finish the mako infusions with injections and hope that the project worked, that she somehow survived. We had no choice but to continue. And we couldn't do it without Hojo. He was the only one with the knowledge to successfully carry it out, if it could be done at all. In spite of the fact that I wanted more than anything to kill the man, I was forced to work with him, to save the woman."

"Was that the woman you told me about when I asked you if any females had ever been injected with mako before?" Cloud questioned.

Dr. Nathan nodded.

"Yes," he said. "But in spite of all our efforts, the woman died. The project was a failure, and Hojo fled, before I had a chance to...avenge her."

They all stood there for a moment in silence. Then, much to the surprise of the others, Vincent stepped forward and placed a reassuring hand on the man's shoulder.

"This woman was your wife," he said, more like a statement than question.

Dr. Nathan nodded slowly.

"I too lost much because of Hojo," Vincent said. "But tell me, why did Hojo pick her?"

Dr. Nathan looked up into Vincent's eyes. Eyes that looked suddenly very human.

"Because she was pregnant," he replied.

Dr. Nathan lowered his head.

"I lost them both," he said softly. "Everything I ever cared about. All gone because of some madman's ambition.."

He was interrupted as Amanda stepped forward.

"Pregnant?" she repeated.

Dr. Nathan looked at her for the first time.

"Yes, pregnant," he replied. "The child died too."

"Are you sure?" Amanda questioned, her voice sounding oddly excited.

"Yes," Dr. Nathan replied. "I'm sure. They...he took her away."

Dr. Nathan paused, as if thinking back to the details of the day.

"They took her away. I was so distraught. Hojo took the body. But...but I never actually saw the baby. I never..."

He stopped and looked around at them.

"Did you have a name?" Vincent questioned.

"Huh?" Dr. Nathan asked.

"Did you have a name? Picked out for the baby?"

Dr. Nathan hesitated a second.

"Why yes, it was Amanda."

Amanda's eyes grew wide. Dr. Nathan looked at her and frowned. For a moment, they stood looking at each other. Then something seemed to click. Dr. Nathan's mouth opened, then closed abruptly, as a look of wonder entered his eyes.

"Amanda?" he said hesitantly.

Amanda mouth opened, but nothing came out. Finally she found her voice.

"Father?" she said, the sound barely comprehensible. "My...real father?"

Dr. Nathan looked around at the others, a mixture of bewilderment and euphoria on his face.

"She can do it," Cloud said. "She can use materia spells without materia. The experiment was a success, but it worked for the unborn child, not the woman."

Dr. Nathan shook his head slowly, his face still registering shock. Finally he looked at Amanda again.

"Amanda. My daughter."

Then the spell was broken, and with cries of joy they flew into one another's arms.

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"Well, if that don't beat all," Barret muttered.

They stood on the street outside of Dr. Nathan's office. Aeris had suggested they give the doctor and his daughter some time alone. The others had agreed and quietly slipped out, telling the doctor they'd be back in a while.

"It is kind of amazing, isn't it?" Aeris said. "After all these years, each thinking the other was dead. It's almost like a fairy tale."

"Yup," Cid stated. "Anybody hungry?"

"I am," Cloud responded immediately.

"All you two ever think about is food," Tifa chided.

"Is not," Cloud replied, taking hold of her hand. "I think about you too."

"Ooh, smooth," Cid commented while Tifa just looked away, slightly embarrassed but with a smile on her face.

"I think we passed a place on the way here," Yuffie said. "C'mon."

They started down the road, back the way they had come.

"So you think Amanda will stay here in Mideel now?" Cid asked.

Barret looked unhappy at the prospect.

"Well, he is her father," Cloud said. "I would imagine they'd want to stay together, after all these years of being apart. And I can't see Dr. Nathan going anyplace. He's got a thriving practice here."

"But what about those people who had her?" Barret asked, his voice tinged with worry. "We haven't seen any sign of them, but that doesn't mean that they're not out there somewhere, searching for her. I think she needs some kind of protection."

"We're a long way from Corel," Cloud pointed out. "They probably have no idea where she is. In fact, they might have assumed she's just taken off somewhere and they won't bother with her. After all, it wasn't her they were after, it was you."

"And we still don't know why," Cid reminded them. "And somehow I don't think that they're going to give up so easily. You're the mayor of Corel, Barret, you're a prominent figure. Amanda may be able to hide from them, but you can't. Which reminds me, we're all going to be gathered together at the wedding. Since our little run in with Sephiroth, we've all become rather prominent figures. Whether we like it or not the wedding is going to generate a lot of publicity, and everyone is going to know Barret will be there. It might be a perfect time for whoever is after him to try something. I think we should start thinking about giving some serious thought to security."

"What do you mean?" Cloud said. "We've always been able to look out for ourselves."

"Hell, I know that," Cid replied. "But it's your wedding, for christ sake. Do you really want to have to worry about that sort of thing? I think it might be better if we left that job to someone else, at least for that one day."

"You mean like, hire someone to provide security?" Tifa asked. Cloud was right, they had always taken care of themselves. Had always trusted their own abilities to get them out of any jam. To depend on someone else was something she had never even considered.

"Yeah, I guess," Cid replied. "I mean, c'mon. Do you really want to have to worry about that on your wedding day?"

The others were silent for a moment. Cloud had to admit that Cid had a good point.

"The Turks can provide security," Elena suggested.

"No way!" Yuffie protested immediately.

They looked at her, surprised by the vehemence of her response.

"What's with you?" Cloud questioned.

"Nothing," Yuffie replied. "But all the Turks are going to be quests at the wedding too, even Reno, though god only knows why. And Elena, you're going to be in the wedding party. You're not going to want to be concerned about security either."

"That's true," Cid conceded. "But we don't know much about this sort of thing. Maybe you can recommend someone."

Cloud just nodded, still looking oddly at Yuffie, who was trying hard to ignore him.

"There it is," Cloud said, pointing ahead to a restaurant on the left. It was a small cafe, rather quaint, actually, wedged in between a clothing store and a furniture outlet. It had tables outside, lining the street, and since the day was pleasant, this was where they chose to sit.

Cid made good on his statement that he was hungry, ordering a large steak and setting about devouring it as soon as it arrived with surprising single mindedness, even though it was only late afternoon. Cloud ordered the same thing, though he did not consume it with quite the same gusto. Of the men only Barret, who usually was the one who ate the most, seemed subdued in his eating habits, ordering only a hamburger platter and eating it with decided indifference. He couldn't help but think about Amanda and what might become of her. He was happy she had found her father but was concerned about her as well. In spite of the fact that she had tried to kill him, he had grown fond of her. Ever since he had adopted Marlene he had always had a soft spot for kids, especially girls. And even older ones, really. Which was probably why he had always been protective of Tifa as well. He didn't want to see Amanda leave.

It was foolish of him, he knew, and a bit selfish. After all, it was her father. Her real father. And he obviously cared about her. There was no doubt she would be much better off remaining here.

But that didn't mean he had to like it, now did it?

He had been looking along the street, not really paying attention to what his eyes were seeing. But then he recognized a familiar face approaching.

"It's Reno," he said.

The others turned as Reno came strolling up, his nightstick casually laid over one shoulder.

"Well, isn't this a surprise," he said.

"What are you doing here?" Yuffie exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

"I'm here on business," Reno stated. "Not that it's any of your concern."

"Here on business?" Yuffie snapped. "What kind of business?"

"Like I said, that's none of your concern," Reno replied dismissively.

"Well, we don't want you hanging around here!" Yuffie retorted.

Reno gave her an amused look.

"Since when do you dictate where I go?" he questioned. "You said the same thing to me in Corel. If I didn't know you better, I'd start to think you didn't like me or something."

"Reno..." Yuffie began again, but then stopped, seeing the others all looking at her curiously.

"Well...I just don't trust him," she said, rather defensively as she sat back down. "I find it very odd you're always showing up when we're around."

Reno shrugged.

"Must be fate," he quipped.

"I don't think so," Yuffie grumbled.

"Yuffie," Cloud cut in. "Just exactly what do you think Reno is up to?"

Yuffie did not reply for a moment, staring sullenly at her plate.

"I don't know," she said finally. "But you know the Turks. They're always up to no good. Especially Reno. Are you telling me that you suddenly trust him now?"

"No we don't," Aeris replied. "But Reno hasn't done anything to hurt us in a long time. I don't think his mere pretense is reason enough to get all upset."

"You obviously don't know him as well as you think," Yuffie muttered.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Cloud said, giving her a probing look. "Is there something going on here that we don't know about? Do you know something we don't?"

They sat there in silence for a moment, waiting for Yuffie to answer, something she seemed most disinclined to do. Finally she shrugged and looked up at them.

"No," she said grudgingly. "I just don't trust him, that's all."

They were silent for a moment longer, and Yuffie didn't look like she was going to say anything else.

"In any case, I was just passing by," Reno finally broke the silence. "It was merest coincidence, I assure you. And since it's obvious that my presence is not welcome, I'll just be on my way."

"Reno, you don't have to go," Aeris said kindly. But Reno held up his hand.

"No, I know when I'm not wanted. You all just continue to enjoy yourselves. I have my business to attend to anyway. Good day to you."

Without another word he walked off jauntily down the street.

Aeris looked at Yuffie and frowned.

"Was that really necessary?" she questioned. "I know Reno was our enemy for a long time, but I'd like to think we've all put those days behind us."

Yuffie muttered something the others couldn't hear, but it certainly didn't sound like an agreement.

"All right, why don't we just drop it," Tifa suggested. "We were having such a good day, I don't want to spoil it. C'mon, it looks like we're all done. Let's head back to Dr. Nathans."

"I've got to go the bathroom," Yuffie said. Without another word she got up and walked into the restaurant.

"What's up with her?" Elena questioned.

"I don't know," Cloud said slowly, a thoughtful look on his face. He suddenly turned to the others.

"I've got to go too," he said. "You guys start back. We'll catch up."

Tifa looked at him with a slightly puzzled expression.

"Are you sure?" she questioned.

"Yeah," he said, waving his hand dismissively. "Go on, I'll only be a minute."

Tifa hesitated a moment more, then shrugged.

"Okay, we'll see you back at the office."

Cloud nodded and the others left. He walked into the restaurant and leaned against the wall by the ladies room. Yuffie didn't see him at first when she came out the door.

"What are you up to?" he questioned.

Yuffie jumped and spun around toward him, her hand coming up to her chest when she saw who it was.

"Don't scare me like that!" she exclaimed. "Unless you want me to puke all over your pants."

"I'll keep that in mind next time," Cloud replied. "Now what's going on?"

Yuffie stared at him for just moment. Seeing the determined look on his face she immediately turned away.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"C'mon, Yuffie, no matter what you may think, you're not that good at lying, especially to your friends" he said, stepping toward her. "You've been acting very strangely for a long time now."

She turned toward him and frowned.

"What are you talking about?" she said. "I'm not acting strangely."

"Oh cut it out," he pressed. "Even Aeris can see it. Why are you so jumpy around Reno? You've nearly flipped out every time we've come into contact with him. And you've hanging around with Barret like you're best buddies. Even he thinks it's strange. And you haven't even gone back to visit your father in Wutai since we've returned. I know your relationship with him is strained, but you never stayed away this long. What's going on?"

"There's nothing going on," Yuffie insisted, though her eyes said otherwise.

"C'mon, Yuffie, level with me!" Cloud said, determined not to be put off. "We're your friends. You may have been a thief and a royal pain in the ass when we first met you, but you've changed. You've grown up, Yuffie. You've done a lot of unselfish things for us, things I don't think you would have done just a year or two ago. We depended on you to get help when Cosmo Canyon was taken over by Jenova, and you came through. You're one of us now, and we trust you. I don't think this is one of your stupid schemes. You know something, and you won't tell us for some reason. Don't you trust us?"

Yuffie hesitated, a solemn look on her face. For a long time she just stood there looking at him.

Finally she sighed.

"If Reno finds out I told anyone he's going to kill me."

"Don't worry about Reno," Cloud said.

"No, he REALLY will kill me. He told me he would, and he wasn't kidding!"

Cloud looked at her seriously.

"I think you better tell me the whole story."

Yuffie paused for just a moment before finally giving in completely.

"I was at the Turks headquarters the other day, before we went into outer space. I overheard a man offer Reno a million gil to kill Barret."

"What?" Cloud said in surprise.

"He offered Reno a million gil to kill Barret," Yuffie repeated.

"Who was the man?" Cloud asked.

"I don't remember his name," Yuffie replied.

"Why?" Cloud questioned. "Why did he want to kill Barret?"

"He never said," Yuffie replied. "That wasn't something Reno needed to know. Reno turned him down and the man left, but he didn't look too happy."

"Reno turned him down?" Cloud said, looking even more surprised.

"Uh huh," Yuffie said. "But...he knew I was listening. He might of just said that for my benefit. He might have waited until I left, and then contacted the guy and made a deal. I mean you know Reno, can you picture him turning down that amount of money just because he knows Barret? I'd have thought he'd off his mother for that much gil."

Cloud stood there silently in thought for some time. This was quite a story, but it did go a long way toward explaining Yuffie's recent odd behavior, that was, if she was telling him the truth.

"Yuffie, if you're lying to me..."

"I'm not lying," she said adamantly. "I know I've made up some tall one's before, but this is the truth. After the man left I told Reno we had to warn Barret, but he refused, said it was business, and that the Turks reputation depended on confidentiality. When I told him I'd go tell Barret myself he told me he'd kill me if I did."

Cloud nodded slowly, looking at Yuffie, trying to read her features. She looked sincere, but that was nothing new. But somehow he had a feeling she was telling the truth, for once in her life.

"So, what, you've been following Barret around all this time, to try to protect him?" he questioned.

Yuffie nodded.

"I figured if I couldn't tell anyone, at least I could be there in case something happened."

Cloud was silent for a moment. Could this really be true? Could Yuffie, the little brat who only thought of herself, really have been concerned enough about someone else to do something so unselfish?

She was looking right at him now, her eyes imploring him to believe her. He could detect no hint of deceit in her face.

She had made up lies before, it was true, but they had never been like this. She was a prankster, but everything she had done had been relatively harmless. She had never deliberately tried to hurt anyone. But this, if she was lying about this, it could cause some serious trouble. It didn't sound like the kind of thing Yuffie would make up. He was reasonably convinced she was telling the truth. And if that were true, then she really had grown up.

He smiled and reached out, putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"I'm proud of you," he said.

Yuffie's face twisted into a look of surprise.

"Huh?"

"You were trying to protect Barret. You were thinking of someone besides yourself. You were ready to put yourself in danger for a friend. That's quite a leap for you, Yuffie. I didn't think you had it in you."

"Yeah...well I..." Yuffie stuttered, then stopped and thought about it for a moment, her face brightening. "You know, you're right. I did do that. I ought to be proud of it. I done good, didn't I?"

"You done good," Cloud agreed. "I just wish you would have told us a little sooner. Don't you know you can trust us?"

Yuffie said nothing, but nodded.

"I'm glad I did now," she said. "You don't know how good it feels to get that off my chest. But what are we going to do about it?"

"Don't worry," Cloud said. "We can handle Reno. It's this other man I'm concerned about. I don't think he's going to give up. We've been trying to track down leads from what Amanda has told us, but so far we haven't found anything. Everyplace she's taken us to had been abandoned. Barret thinks they might have given up when they found out Amanda had been unsuccessful, but I don't think that's the case."

"So what do we do?" Yuffie asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Cloud replied. "But now I think we better get back to the others before they start to wonder what happened to us."

Yuffie nodded. Cloud started to turn away.

"Cloud?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for believing me."

Cloud smiled.

"Actually, I can hardly believe it myself," he replied. "Now let's go."

The others were standing outside Dr. Nathan's office when Cloud and Yuffie caught up with them, Amanda with them.

Tifa came up beside Cloud.

"You took your time," she said. Then more softly. "What's up?"

"Later," he whispered in reply. "So, Amanda," he said more loudly. "Are you going to stay here in Mideel?"

Amanda nodded.

"Yes," she said, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "I'd like to thank you all for everything you've done for me."

"It was nothing," Aeris said. "We're just glad everything worked out for you."

They were silent for a moment.

"All right then, I guess this is goodbye," Cid said.

"Seems like we've been saying that a lot lately," Aeris commented.

"For now," Tifa added. "You will be coming to the wedding, won't you?"

"Of course," Amanda said. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Good luck," Cloud contributed.

"You too," Amanda replied.

"We'll see you soon," Aeris said.

Vincent and Elena bade her goodbye as well.

Amanda looked at Yuffie.

"Thank you for everything," she said. "We're still friends, right?"

Yuffie smiled.

"Of course," she said. "It was kinda nice to have someone to hang around with. You'll have to come visit me in Wutai real soon."

"Then Godo will have two people to drive him crazy," Cid stated.

They all grinned, but then Amanda's face became serious as she turned to Barret.

"I know I deceived you..." she started, but Barret cut her off with a shake of his head. He didn't say anything, just looked at her for a moment, then pulled her toward him and crushed her with one of his patented hugs.

"I'll miss ya kid," he said, his eyes moist.

"I'll miss you too," she said softly, when she had caught her breath. "Thank you so much, Barret. I can't possibly repay all you've done for me."

Barret released her and looked embarrassed.

"Aww, I didn't do nothin'."

There was another momentary pause.

"All right, let's get going," Cloud broke the silence. He looked at Amanda. "We'll see you."

She nodded, then they parted company. The group returned to the Slipstream and flew back to Kalm, most of them silent along the way. When they arrived Tifa invited them to stay for dinner, but they all declined. Cid had to get back to Rocket Town to take care of some business, and Barret had to get back to Corel, saying if he didn't do some mayoring soon, they were gonna throw him out of office. Yuffie wanted to get back to Wutai, since she hadn't seen her father since her return from space. Cid offered Vincent a ride too, but he declined, saying he and Elena would get back on their own. A few minutes later the Slipstream was in the air once again.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for dinner?" Tifa directed her question at Vincent and Elena.

"Yes," Vincent said. "Perhaps some other time."

"Okay, I guess we'll see you in two weeks then," she said, sounding a tad disappointed.

Vincent nodded.

"We'll be there," Elena said.

Cloud and Tifa headed back toward Elmyra's house, while Vincent turned and led Elena away from Kalm.

"It seems like so much has changed since we went up into space," Elena said as they walked. "I don't think I'll ever look at our planet quite the same again. I think the trip has given me a greater appreciation for everything this world has to offer."

Vincent nodded.

"It was quite an experience," he agreed.

"I haven't heard from Vernon since we returned," she continued, eyeing him for his reaction. "I wonder what happened to him?"

Vincent shrugged.

"I'm sure he'll turn up again someday, when we least want him to," he said.

Elena nodded. Her opinion of Vernon had changed considerably based on what Vincent had told her. It really didn't matter much to her now whether she saw him again or not, but she did have to admit to a bit of disappointment at not being able to tell him that she knew the truth, that Vincent had trusted her.

She looked at Vincent thoughtfully.

"You're going to transform, aren't you?"

They were walking south. The town was behind them now, the road leading them on a twisting journey through grass covered meadows and hills splashed with oak and ash trees. Vincent paused and looked around. There was no one else in sight.

"The urge has been strong," he stated.

Elena nodded.

"You go ahead. I'll wait here for you."

Vincent paused for a moment, then nodded. He took hold of her hand, then leaned forward and kissed her.

"I'll be back shortly," he said.

Elena nodded but did not speak. Vincent walked off the road, almost immediately disappearing into a tall stand of trees. He stopped and inhaled deeply of the wooded scent permeating the air around him.

When he had found the Chadara on Grouchoon, had found out what they were, and what he was, he had entertained hopes deep in the back of his mind that somehow they would be able to cure him. That had not happened. He had spoken to Roshnialu, using Lai Li as an interpreter, and she had told him she knew of no way to reverse the process Hojo had inflicted upon him. But she had offered some advice. He had heeded it since and had found that the unexpected and almost uncontrollable urges to transform he had been experiencing with greater and greater frequency before the trip had greatly diminished. The advice had been simple. Accept it.

Ever since Hojo had done what he had done to him, Vincent had looked upon it as a form of punishment. It was something horrible, something alien, something that should never have been part of him. Always he had fought against it, against the transformation, against any thought that this horror inside him was anything other than a dreadful disease. He had been ashamed, had tried to hide the fact that he was a monster. Every time he had felt the need to transform, he had fought against it with all his will. But it was something that could not be suppressed, and the more he fought against it, the stronger the urge became.

But now, things were somehow different. Now he realized that the transformation wasn't a curse, but just a natural process for him. It had been hard at first, and he had to fight to no longer think of it in those terms. This creature he turned into was nothing to be ashamed of, was nothing he had to hide. It was as much a part of him as he was when he was not transformed. So now whenever the urge to transform came, he welcomed it instead of fought against it.

Even now he could feel it coming on. Slowly he relaxed his body, letting the change take place at it's own rate.

It was funny how it had worked out. It hadn't taken any magic, or even any science. It was strange, because nothing had really changed except his attitude. Yet it was as if a whole new world had opened up to him. And for the first time in a long long time, he felt truly happy.

He felt his emotions swirling up like a cyclone inside him, but even as it happened, he smiled. And then he gave up thinking altogether, if just for a while.