

IC HAPTER XXXV: DREAMS FULFILLED, DREAMS SHATTERED

"It's almost time," Aeris said.

"I know," Tifa replied, turning toward her. "How do I look?"

"You're already asked me that fifty times," Aeris replied. They were alone in a small room off to the side of the entrance to Aeris church. If they listened carefully, they could here the hubbub of the crowd outside as the church filled up in preparation for the event that was about to occur. "You look beautiful."

Tifa gave her a nervous smile.

"Thanks."

"Are you scared?" Aeris asked.

Tifa nodded.

"Terrified."

"Of what?"

Tifa groped for words to express what she was feeling.

"I don't know," she said. "Tripping and falling. Getting an incapacitating headache. Having Cloud lose his mind in the middle of our vows. Having Sephiroth suddenly leap up out of the audience. A tidal wave."

"A tidal wave?" Aeris interrupted. "You realize, of course, that we're nowhere near the ocean."

Tifa just looked at her.

"Well, you never know!"

Aeris put her arm around Tifa's shoulders.

"You're not going to get a headache, and if you do, Amanda taught you how to handle it. Cloud's not going to lose his mind. That's all over with. And Sephiroth is dead, and he's not going to come back to interrupt your wedding. As for the tidal wave, I don't think I even have to go into that."

Tifa nodded sheepishly.

"What about tripping and falling? You didn't mention that," she pointed out.

"That's the one fear that might actually have merit," Aeris replied. "But if you do, just get up and smile. You're the bride, you can do whatever you damn well want. I have a feeling no one would dare to laugh at you."

"Thanks for the reassurance," Tifa said.

"Think nothing of it," Aeris replied. "That's what a Maid of Honor is for, to help you through this. There's really nothing to be worried about. I mean, you love him, right?"

"Of course," Tifa replied immediately.

"And he loves you?"

Tifa nodded.

"Yes, he does."

"So. isn't that all that's really important? The rest is all just window dressing. None of it really matters that much, now does it? So don't worry about anything going wrong. Even if something did, it's not going to change the way you feel about each other."

"I know but..." Tifa said doubtfully.

"C'mon, it's your wedding day," Aeris chided her. "For just this one day, forget about all your troubles. Forget about everything else and go out there and enjoy yourself. Leave the worrying to someone else."

"Like you?" Tifa asked.

"If it will make you feel better, I'll stand here frozen in fear for you the rest of the night," Aeris volunteered.

Tifa grinned.

"Okay, I get the picture. And you can't do that. We need you in the wedding party. It wouldn't be the same without you, Aeris."

Suddenly the door swung open and Yuffie appeared, looking very uncomfortable in her winter green dress.

"C'mon out, it's starting!" she said excitedly.

Aeris turned toward Tifa.

"Are you ready?" she asked, not able to hide the excitement in her voice.

Tifa looked down at her long white gown one more time, like she had a thousand times already, but nothing was out of place. She could never remember being more nervous than this in her entire life, not even when they had fought Sephiroth. But she had always been better at facing enemies than she was at facing her feelings.

She took a deep breath, then nodded.

She followed Aeris and Yuffie out into the vestibule. She could glimpse the inside of the church from here, though she could not see the altar from where she was standing. The place looked packed, and she could see some of the people looking back into the entrance to try to catch a glimpse of her.

The vestibule itself was crowded with the girls from the wedding party, photographers, security, with the rather large form of Barret, looking completely out of place in a black suit, standing in the middle of them, with Marlene, dressed in similar fashion to the other ladies as the flower girl, almost lost beside him.

Tifa looked around, smiling at everyone. It all seemed so surreal, almost like a dream. She felt a strange sort of detachment. After all this time, after all these years, after fighting so hard by Cloud's side, her dream was finally going to come true. Her dream that so many times had seemed like it would never be achieved. It all seemed too good to be true.

The music started, and the rumble of talking died down. On cue Marlene stepped forward, starting down the aisle. One by one, as the time came, the others followed, Elena looking very dignified and serious, Nipala padding down the aisle, head held high. Shera, with a grin all the way, Yuffie, trying her best not to stumble, and Aeris, giving Tifa a quick wink before proceeding and looking perfectly at ease as she made her way to the altar.

The music paused for a moment, then the wedding march began to play. Tifa felt a thrill of excitement run through her. She stepped forward into the entrance way, for the first time being able to see and be seen by the entire congregation. Barret came up beside her. She looked at him and smiled as he offered his arm. She could tell he was as nervous as she. His face was dead serious, and his eyes were locked straight ahead.

"Just don't trip on my gown," she couldn't help but say. If anything his face went paler still.

Then they were walking forward. Tifa could see all eyes upon her as she made her way steadily toward the altar, but she no longer felt nervous. The dreamlike quality, the feeling of detachment was stronger than ever. Almost it seemed like she was watching herself as she walked down the aisle. No longer a participant, but just another observer.

She looked forward to the altar. All her friends were there now, gathered together, looking at her as she made her way toward them. Cloud stood at the foot of the altar, just to the right of the aisle. In his black tux she thought he had never looked so handsome. Her eyes locked on him, and she could see he was looking at her too. Aeris was right, nothing else mattered. This was their day, their time. She didn't want to take her eyes off him, didn't want to see anything else. No one else could share what they felt between them. In a room filled with people, they were alone together.

She didn't even notice when she reached the front, or when Barret stepped away to take a seat beside Elmyra. She just kept her eyes focused on Cloud as he replaced Barret beside her. And she could see he was looking at her too. How could she explain the look she saw there? It was almost as if he knew what she was thinking. As if he understood that this was their moment, that they were sharing something, something no one else could see or understand.

After all the anticipation, it seemed as if everything was going so quickly. Before she knew it they were reciting their vows. She sighed inwardly with relief when she spoke without making a mistake, though she could hear the tremor in her voice, but the whole time, she was looking straight at Cloud, and the words came from her heart.

And he did the same. Standing so straight, saying them with such confidence, his eyes never leaving hers. She couldn't help but marvel at how far he had come from that confused young man she had found lying at the side of the road at the Midgar train station, so long ago it almost seemed like another lifetime. He had been so unsure of himself then, of what he wanted out of life, of even who he was. They had all changed, but the change in Cloud had been the most profound. He had grown up so much, and she couldn't be more proud of him.

And then she found herself speaking again, saying something she had been preparing for all her life, it seemed, the words clear, though her heart quivered at the sound of them.

"I do."

Two little words, but words filled with so much meaning. She had worried that she would hesitate, would not have the courage to speak them, but they came out easily, eagerly. She had changed too, she realized. She had grown up as well. She didn't want to hide her feelings anymore. Not ever again.

She was still looking at Cloud. There were other faces all around her, but it was as if they didn't exist. There were other voices, but she barely heard them. Then it was Cloud's turn to speak, and his voice was crystal clear as he repeated her words.

"I do."

A moment later Cloud took hold of her hand and slipped the wedding ring on her finger. She knew Cid had been holding the ring, but she never saw how it got into Cloud's hand. For the life of her, she never saw him take his eyes off her.

Afterwards Tifa could barely remember what anyone else had said during the ceremony. But the next words she would remember for the rest of her life.

"Then by the power invested in me, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

The both smiled, even though she felt the swirl of emotions welling up inside her. As his lips pressed against hers, she almost started to cry, but with great difficulty managed to get a hold of herself. No matter what it took, she was going to keep a little bit of her dignity. She was sure no one would blame her if she did cry, but she prided herself on staying in control. She would have embarrassed to cry now, in front of all these people, no matter what the reason.

Wedding album

Then it was over. She turned and walked back down the aisle, accompanied for the first time in her life by her husband. Her nervousness suddenly gone, she looked around and saw all the smiling faces of the well wishers as if for the first time. She smiled in return, waving with one hand, her other firmly held by Cloud. They stepped out of the church, half of her feeling relief and the other half sorry it was over. As the others filed out the mood immediately lightened as they began to look forward to the reception.

"All right, time to party!" Cid exclaimed.

The catering hall, the Imperial Suites, was located just across the street from Aeris church. It took them only a few minutes to make their way inside. The entire third floor had been rented. It even had a separate suite for the wedding party. The band started to play as soon as the room began to fill up, and Tifa felt herself finally begin to feel at ease. They had done it! It was over, and had gone without a hitch. She looked over at Aeris, who returned her gaze and smiled.

"I didn't trip!" she called out.

Aeris nodded.

"And there was no tidal wave either," she replied.

Cloud gave them both a strange look.

"Gawd, I can't wait to get out of this dress," Yuffie complained. "Do I have to wear it for the entire reception?"

"Yes," Aeris replied.

"How long is this gonna last again?" Yuffie questioned.

"For as long as we want!" Elena said.

"Probably about four hours," Aeris answered more realistically.

"Four hours!" Yuffie said with a groan. "I'll never last that long in this. Can't I just change real quick. Who's gonna care?"

"I will," Aeris replied, her voice surprisingly stern. "You can't change, so quit your complaining. And don't try to slip away and do it anyway, cause if I find you have I'll have the guys strip you naked!"

Yuffie looked at her with a shocked expression on her face.

"I don't see why you would want to anyway," Aeris continued. "You look beautiful in that."

Yuffie looked even more surprised. For a moment she just stood there, then she looked down at herself and then back at Aeris.

"You really think so?" she said.

"Of course," Aeris replied. "Just ask anyone."

Yuffie gave a bemused smile and then walked away. Reeve came up beside Aeris.

"What's gotten into you?" he asked. "I never heard you talk like that before, though I agree completely. Personally, I hope she doesn't try anything. The thought of seeing her running around naked makes me shiver."

"Oh stop," Aeris said. "You'd probably enjoy it."

Reeve gave her a pained look.

"And I'm just trying to to make sure everything runs smoothly for my best friends wedding," Aeris continued. "If that means I have to get tough with people, then so be it."

Reeve smiled.

"Okay then," he said. "I'll have to be at my best behavior then. I wouldn't want to have any of that wrath aimed in my direction."

Aeris gave him a probing look.

"Are you making fun of me?" she questioned.

Reeve raised his hands in a protestation of innocence.

"Not me," he said. "Wouldn't think of it."

Aeris did not look convinced.

By this time the hall had filled up. The party was in full swing now, the dance floor crowded with quests. Even though Tifa's nervousness was gone, the dreamlike quality of the night remained. Things seemed to continue to move at a blur. The cutting of the cake, the first dance as husband and wife, the most excellent meal. Each event seemed to fly by in front of her eyes, as if she were watching it on film. She had to keep telling herself over and over that this was all real, that it wasn't a dream, though it seemed she was having a hard time believing it.

Though it seemed like a dream, each moment was indelibly stamped on her memory, and she found that years later she could still recall some of the smallest details. Even so, some highlights stood out especially. When she tossed the bouquet, she threw it so high it bounced off the chandelier, changing direction so suddenly it caught all the girls off guard, and inexplicably landed right in Yuffie's hands. She dropped it immediately, as if it were too hot to handle, looking around as if she hoped no one noticed. Elena swooped in and grabbed it then, but it was too late. Even better was when Cloud threw the garter. It seemed to be making a beeline for Reeve, but at the last second it was intercepted, and the others looked around, Yuffie with a gasp of horror, to see it dangling from the end of Reno's nightstick.

A chair had been brought forward, and Yuffie, with much whining and pleading for it to be anybody but him, was forced to sit. With an enormous smirk, Reno had slid the garter up onto her leg. Higher and higher it had gone, despite her protests. Even when she smacked him across the face he doggedly kept going, and it was quite plain that even then he had had a bit much to drink and was a little numb. Yuffie's next blow, however, could not be ignored, and even Tifa groaned as Reno found himself sprawled suddenly on the floor, looking around with no apparent idea what had happened. The imprint of Yuffie's hand on his cheek could still be made out nearly an hour later.

After they had eaten Cloud and Tifa made the rounds, visiting every table. The party had been going on for over two hours now, and the guests had had plenty of time to have some drinks and loosen up, something a few of them were very good at. Reno and Cid had already taken control of the band and were belting out their own versions of some popular songs, in

some cases taking quite a few liberties with the lyrics. Yuffie seemed to have gotten into the swing of things too, and was dancing with just about anyone who was willing, in spite of her dress. Much to her surprise, Tifa had even seen her dancing with Cait.

Amanda was there as well, as she had promised. She was wearing a gray gown, that perfectly set off her silver hair. Rude and Lai Li sat together at one of the tables, holding hands and watching the dancers and especially Reno with bemused expressions. Tifa saw Altim briefly in the crowd, mingling with the guests. Even though he had promised not to, she wondered how many of them would find themselves bereft of wallet by the time they arrived home.

But that wasn't something she was going to worry about. Not tonight. She was just going to enjoy herself, just as Aeris had said. It was their night, Cloud and hers, and it was going to be perfect.

They passed Vincent and Elena. Tifa could hear Elena bugging Vincent to dance, but he did not seem anxious to budge. Tifa shook her head slowly. She didn't envy Elena. Somehow she suspected wild horses would not be able to drag Vincent onto the dance floor.

A moment after they had passed, one of the security guards walked up to Elena.

"There's a man at the entrance who says he needs to talk to you in private," the man said. "Says his name is Vernon."

Elena looked at the guard in surprise, then turned to Vincent, who started to get up, his eyes suddenly darkening.

"No," she said, putting her hand out to stop him. "I'll go talk to him. I think it might be better if you wait here, Vincent. We don't need a brawl breaking out at Cloud and Tifa's wedding."

Vincent hesitated for a moment, obviously not thrilled with her suggestion. But eventually he nodded and sat back down.

"Just be quick," was all he said.

Elena nodded and got up. She took the elevator down to the first floor. Vernon was waiting for her at the entrance, under the watchful eye of a security guard.

"I need to talk to you," he said, before she could even speak.

"I don't think you have anything to say to me," Elena stated. "Vincent has told me everything."

Vernon looked surprised but quickly recovered.

"He told you his version," he stated.

"He told me the truth!" Elena snapped.

Vernon glanced over at the guard.

"Would it be possible for us to talk in private?" he asked her.

Elena looked at the guard as well. She didn't think Vernon had anything to say that he couldn't say here. Nevertheless, she gave a nod of her head.

"C'mon."

She led him off to the side, toward a room that wasn't being used at the moment.

"We can talk here," she said as she walked in. "But you better make it quick. I want to get back to the party. I can't see why this couldn't wait..."

She was cut off as sparks flew in front of her eyes. Vernon had been behind her as she walked into the room, and the blow caught her totally unprepared. She staggered forward, and would have fallen to the ground had not Vernon caught hold of her and eased her down himself. He quickly walked over to the door and glanced out, but the guard was no longer paying any attention to them. He shut the door. He stooped down to check to make sure Elena was out, then opened a utility bag he had slung over his shoulder. He quickly pulled out the suit inside and slipped it on. Taking out a silenced gun he slipped that inside his suit jacket. He knew he didn't have much time. A moment later he was at the door again, opening it. He paused until the guard was looking the other way. Then he quickly slipped out and got on the elevator, heading up to the third floor.

"Yuffie!"

Yuffie looked up as she walked off the dance floor to see Amanda standing nearby.

"You look like you're having fun," Amanda commented.

Yuffie flopped down in a seat.

"Well, I figured as long as I have to be here in this annoying dress, I might as well enjoy myself," she said.

Amanda nodded. Yuffie looked at her.

"So how bout you. Are you having a good time?"

Amanda nodded again.

"Uh huh."

"I haven't seen you out on the dance floor," Yuffie observed.

Amanda looked down at the floor.

"I never learned how to dance," he admitted. "I was always cooped up in the lab. I never did anything like this. Between my training and my education, I never had any time to have fun."

Yuffie looked at her sympathetically.

"Well, we'll have to do something about that then," she said. "As soon as I catch my breath, that is."

Amanda looked less than excited about the idea.

"I couldn't go out there," she said, looking at the dance floor. "I'd make a complete fool of myself."

Yuffie dismissed her argument with a shake of her head.

"Don't you know that that's what parties are for?"

She stood up.

"Let's take a little walk. The wedding party has a suite all to ourselves. Would you like to come and see it?"

Amanda brightened immediately.

"Sure," she said.

Yuffie led her out of the room and into a nearby hallway. Not far across the room Vernon, who had been standing watching them from by the entrance, moved quickly through the crowd. No one noticed as he slipped out not far behind them.

Yuffie made a quick turn and entered the suite, furnished quite similar to a luxurious lounge. Yuffie sat down on the couch and pulled off her shoes. She stretched out her legs.

"Ahh, that feels good," she said. "I needed to get away from there for a little while. I just wish I could ditch this dress."

Amanda was looking admiringly around the room.

"This whole place is so beautiful," she observed. "The wedding, everything, was just so great. I didn't know things like this went on. I'm in awe."

Yuffie nodded.

"There's even a bar in here," she pointed out. "Go ahead and pour yourself a drink."

"I'm too young to drink," Amanda protested.

"Oh stop," Yuffie replied. She got up and walked over to the bar.

"This is a special occasion. I don't think anyone will object if you have one drink."

Amanda looked doubtful, but she didn't say anything.

"You've missed out on a lot," Yuffie said.

She stepped behind the bar and rummaged around, pulling out a few bottles. She set two glasses on the counter and made them both a drink.

"There are a lot of things you're never experienced. You've got a lot of catching up to do, and I can't think of a better time. After the wedding, you have to come to Wutai to visit me. We can have a hell of a time together."

Amanda smiled.

"I'd like that," she said.

Yuffie finished making the drinks and slid one toward Amanda, looking up. The only hint that anything was wrong was the sudden furrowing of her brow. She wasn't looking at Amanda, she was looking past her, toward the entrance to the suite. Amanda noticed her mouth begin to open, but before she could speak there was another sound. A muffled sound, like a hand slapping against a pillow. Yuffie was propelled backwards, blood spurting through the air, landing on the wall behind her and the counter where their drinks stood.

Amanda swung around, horrified. Her brain barely registering what was happening. A man stood in the entrance, a gun in his hand. A gun now leveled at her.

For a split second they stood there facing each other. A single word managed to escape her lips

"Ice."

Then the gun fired again. She put up her hands in a useless attempt to defend herself. She was flung backward, slamming against the side of the bar, and then falling to the ground, pulling a bar stool along with her. Suddenly she couldn't breathe. Agonizing pain shot through her body, from her back, where she had hit it on the counter, from her knee, that had smacked against the bar stool, from her head, that had rapped the floor heavily when she had landed, and from her chest. She thought she groaned, but she could not be sure. Her ears didn't seem to be working anymore, nor half her other senses. She looked down at her dress, watching in disbelief as the blood soaked into it. It couldn't be real, she couldn't get herself to believe what she was seeing. But at the same time she felt a cold knot growing in her stomach. There was blood everywhere, it covered her dress. The pain was terrible. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't get up. She had been shot! Ice had shot her!

She turned toward him, but he was already walking away, and all she saw was his back as he disappeared out the door. She tried to cry out, to call for help, but though her mouth moved, no words came out. She had to get help, she had to do something!

Her head swam. She didn't want to die like this. She didn't want it all to end here, after all she had been through. She looked down at herself again, still unable to believe this had happened to her. There was blood everywhere. How much could one lose, before it was too late?

She felt her hand rap against the bar stool, and realized that she could move it. She clutched it against her chest, trying fruitlessly to stop the flow of blood. She felt light headed, and knew that she could pass out at any moment.

She turned her head. Her hands shook uncontrollably. She felt her heart pounding in her chest. She tried to tell herself to relax, that she would just lose more blood this way, but she couldn't. All she could think about was that she didn't want to die.

And then she remembered Yuffie. She turned her head, but she could not see her friend. The bar was in the way. Ice had obviously come here to make Amanda pay for not doing her job, for betraying them. Yuffie was just an innocent bystander. She had had nothing to do with any of this. Yet now she was shot too, could die also.

Amanda groaned and lifted herself up, her head spinning.

It wasn't fair! Yuffie couldn't die because of her mistakes. She couldn't let it happen. She had to do something. She would do anything...

She staggered up, crawling on her hands and knees, one slow step at a time. The room seemed filled with haze, and the slightest movement seemed an impossible chore. The pain was gone now, her whole body numb. Probably from loss of blood, she thought abstractly. In spite of that she fought her way onward, forcing one hand in front of the other, ignoring her exhaustion, and the trail of blood she left behind her.

Yuffie was lying against the wall. She was not moving, and a pool of blood had formed beneath her as well. Amanda struggled over to her, tears streaming from her eyes. Her hand reached out, but all she could manage was a feeble shake. Yuffie did not respond.

Amanda collapsed to the floor, feeling the last of her strength rapidly ebbing. She looked up at the bar. There was a phone on the counter, not ten feet away, but to her it might as well have been a million miles. It was too late. There was nothing she could do. There was nothing anyone could do.

She heard her breath coming in ragged gasps. Her chest heaved, and even with her desperate breathing she couldn't seem to get enough air. She sank down, her head hitting hard once again, but she felt no more pain, only a sudden jarring. Yuffie was right beside her now. Slowly her hand reached out until it rested on her friend. Amanda was beginning to believe that it really was over now, that she wasn't going to survive. She had harboured hopes that someone would come in, that someone would find them, but it didn't seem likely. She didn't want to die like this, but even more she didn't want to see Yuffie die. There was just one chance now, there was only one thing she could do that might help, that might make up for what she had done.

She cleared her mind, trying to concentrate. It was difficult. She wanted more than anything to just lay her head down and rest, to close her eyes and slip off into oblivion, but she couldn't do that yet. She didn't care anymore. She didn't care what happened to herself, but she wasn't going to let her friend die, not matter what it took.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there, her ragged breathing her only movement. It seemed like a lifetime of agony, but she wouldn't quit. And finally she felt the power welling up within her. For a second it coursed through her, the energy that she had felt so many times before, and then it passed out of her. For a moment she felt triumphant as the power flowed into Yuffie, and then it was gone, and with it the last of her strength.

Her head fell back, the green glow in her eyes fading into nothingness.

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"More champagne?" Cloud asked.

Tifa hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"Okay, but I think that will be enough for me."

Cloud filled both their glasses.

"You haven't had much," he said. "This is a celebration, remember? You're supposed to enjoy yourself."

"There's a difference between having fun and getting drunk," she said.

Tifa glanced toward the front of the room, where Reno and Cid were still singing.

"At least, to some of us. I don't think it would be very proper for the bride to get drunk."

"Not proper, maybe," Cloud replied with a smirk. "But it would certainly be memorable."

"That's not the way I want to be remembered," she replied.

Cloud nodded. He took a sip from his drink and looked at Tifa.

"So...has it turned out as well as you expected?"

Tifa turned toward him and smiled.

"It's wonderful," she said. "The best night of my life. Everything has been perfect. Thank you."

"You're the one who did all the planning," Cloud replied. "And Cid and Aeris have made sure the night has run smoothly. I haven't done a damn thing."

"You agreed to marry me," she said.

Cloud looked at her.

"That wasn't exactly a sacrifice on my part," he replied. "You're the one who's loyal, determined, devoted and strong, not to mention incredibly beautiful. It's not me who's getting the short end of the stick."

Tifa blushed and took hold of his hand.

"You know I wouldn't trade you for anyone on the planet, or any other planet, for that matter," she said simply.

Aeris, Reeve and Shera appeared out of the crowd.

"When are you two going to dance?" Aeris questioned.

"We did," Cloud replied.

"You danced for the first dance. That was required," Aeris stated. "But I haven't seen you on the floor since. The night's half over already. You're missing out."

Cloud lifted his champagne glass.

"I don't think so," he replied.

Tifa picked up the bottle.

"Join us," she said. "Let's have a toast."

The others found their glasses and Tifa filled them. Reeve held his up.

"To Cloud and Tifa," he said.

Tifa shook her head.

"To good friends," she suggested.

The others nodded.

"To good friends," Reeve agreed.

He brought the glass to his lips when Aeris interrupted.

"Where's everyone else? We should have them all here."

Shera looked up toward the front of the room.

"Cid's not difficult to spot," she said wryly. "I'll see if I can get him over here."

She walked away.

"And there's Vincent," Reeve said, spotting him at a table not far away. "I'll get him."

He strode off as well.

"I think I saw Yuffie going out to the suite," Aeris stated. "I'll go get her."

"Where's Barret?" Tifa asked.

Cloud pointed out on the dance floor.

"There he is, dancing with Marlene."

Tifa followed Cloud's gaze. Barret was in the middle of the dance floor, an obviously tired Marlene in his arms, clinging to his shoulder, as he swayed slowly to the music.

"That's so cute," Tifa said, smiling.

"I almost hate to interrupt," Cloud agreed as they walked over to him.

"Barret, c'mon, we're going to have a toast," he said.

Barret nodded and followed them back to the table. Marlene stirred in his arms and yawned.

"She's exhausted," Tifa said.

Barret nodded.

"It's a bit past her bedtime," he said. "She's not used to all this excitement."

He looked around for a moment for someplace to put Marlene down.

"There's a couch in the suite," Tifa said. "Why don't we take her in there."

Barret nodded and they started across the room, Cloud last in line. The night had gone quickly, but he had to admit things had gone very smoothly. Though he hadn't shown it, he had been as nervous as Tifa right before the wedding. He had been certain he would end up doing something stupid somewhere along the line. But the wedding had gone without a hitch. For once in his life, he hadn't screwed up.

They had almost reached the door when they heard Aeris' scream.

Barret stopped, and Marlene looked up. Tifa turned to Cloud, a look of shock developing on her face. But before she could say anything Cloud was running past her. Recovering quickly from the initial surprise, Tifa followed in an instant. Even as she did she felt a cold knot forming in the pit of her stomach. The cry had been one of horror, something she had never heard before from Aeris. Obviously something was very wrong.

Even as she ran into the suite behind Cloud she couldn't help but think that the night had been too good to be true.

But even the trepidation she felt didn't prepare her for what she saw when she reached the suite. Cloud stood at the doorway, staring inside. He turned when he saw her behind him, and went to grab hold of her, but she slipped by him. Aeris stood a few steps into the room, her face white as a ghost. The first thing Tifa saw after her was the blood, streaked across the floor and splattered on the walls. And then Amanda and Yuffie lying near the bar.

"Oh my God!" she choked out, her face turning as pale as Aeris and her hand coming up to her mouth.

Cloud grabbed hold of her and took a step back, out of the room as more people rushed by. Suddenly there were people everywhere. Cloud heard cries and shouts, but he couldn't really make out what they were all saying. He wanted to go inside, to see if either of them were still alive. But Tifa clung to him, sobbing into his chest. He didn't want her to see that, and he couldn't leave her now.

Barret stood beside them, still holding Marlene, who was now wide awake, and crying, although Barret had not stepped into the room. Suddenly a security guard was pulling him away.

"C'mon. We've got to get you out of here!" he shouted above the crowd.

Barret resisted.

"I have to see if they're all right," he said.

The man was insistent, still tugging on his arm.

"The assassin is still at large," the man said. "You might be next. You've got a little girl with you. You have to get to safety!"

Barret looked helplessly at Cloud, who nodded. They had all been briefed on the emergency plan. If anything happened, it had been agreed to get Barret out of there as quickly as possible.

"Go ahead," Cloud said.

Barret nodded as the man practically dragged him down the hallway.

"Keep me informed!" Barret yelled out.

He saw Cloud nod before he vanished into the crowd. They reached a doorway leading into a stairwell, and Barret was hustled down it. A dozen people seemed to be around him, most of them security guards, but some guests as well.

"It might be a good idea to have someone else hold your daughter," the security guard suggested as they reached the bottom. "If someone takes a shot at you, you don't want her to get hurt."

Barret nodded, immediately seeing the wisdom in this. He looked around, hoping to hand her to a familiar face. He was surprised to see Rude, Reno and Lai Li in the crowd.

"Here," he said, putting Marlene down and offering her hand to a surprised Lai Li. "Take her."

The young interpreter hesitated for a moment, then took hold of Marlene's hand.

"I don't want to leave you daddy!" Marlene protested through her tears.

"It's okay honey," he said reassuringly. "Everything's going to be fine. Nothing is going to happen to me."

The security guard urged him onward. Barret hurried down the hall, glancing behind every once in a while to make sure Lai Li and Marlene were still with him. Eventually they reached a side entrance to the building.

The security guard swung the doors open. Reno was right behind him, slipping out and looking around keenly. Barret noticed he looked surprisingly sober.

The guard motioned for Barret to come ahead, but Reno held up his hand.

"Wait!"

~*~

"Vincent!"

Vincent turned to see Elena rushing toward him. She stumbled into his arms, her hand coming up to the back of her head. Vincent was shocked to see blood on it when she removed it from her head.

"What happened?" he questioned.

Elena quickly related what had happened after she had gone to speak to Vernon.

Vincent's eyes narrowed when she was done.

"We've got to find him," she said. "I don't know what he's up to, but it can't be anything good."

They stood in the hallway right beside the main room. Elena stopped when she noticed all the people gathered in front of the suite.

"What's going on here?" she asked.

"Yuffie and Amanda have been shot," he replied.

Elena's eyes grew wide.

"What?"

"I've got a feeling these two events are connected," Vincent stated.

"You think Vernon shot Yuffie and Amanda?" Elena said in disbelief. "But why?"

Vincent shook his head slowly.

"I'm not sure," he replied. "But it seems like....c'mon."

He stepped into the hallway, looking around. Cloud, Tifa, Reeve and Aeris were standing not far away. Vincent strode over to them.

"My brother Vernon is here. He's the one who did this," he stated bluntly.

The others looked at him in surprise.

"But why would..." Reeve began.

"There's no time to explain!" Vincent cut him off. "We've got to find him before he does anymore harm."

They took one look at Vincent and realized that arguing would be useless, even if they were so inclined.

"What was he wearing?" Reeve asked.

"A grey sweatshirt and black pants," Elena replied. "But that's not going to help. He left them in the room. He must have changed into something else."

As they talked they walked rapidly back to the main hall. Now they stood in the entrance way. The room was still crowded, although it was thinning out as the security guards slowly led the guests away.

"It would have been a lot simpler if we'd have met him," Cloud said, surveying the room for anyone he didn't recognize, or who looked out of place. He wished he had brought his sword along. He had been sorely tempted.

"I can't believe this," Tifa said. Tears still ran down her cheeks. She looked as if she would collapse at any moment.

"Why don't you go lie down?" Cloud suggested.

She shook her head.

"No," she said, her voice surprisingly firm. "We're going to find out what happened. And I want to be with you when you do."

"There he is!" Vincent exclaimed.

At almost the same time Vernon turned to look at them. Instantly he turned away and dashed for a nearby doorway. He slipped through it even as Vincent barreled across the room after him, the others not far behind.

Beyond the door was a stairwell, and they could hear Vernon's feet clattering up the steps above them. Vincent followed without hesitation, with Cloud right behind him. Reeve turned to look at the girls before he started up. He was tempted to tell them to wait, that it was too dangerous, but he could tell just by the look on their faces that none of them would listen.

"Be careful!" he shouted, then followed Cloud.

The girls ran up right after him. Elena fell behind quickly, the combination of the long gown and the head injury hampering her efforts. Aeris and Tifa were not faring much better, and soon the sound of the others was lost above them. Tifa cursed in frustration, kicking at the bottom of her dress. She had felt sick to her stomach when they had found out what happened, but now she was filled with anger. More than anything she wanted to get her hands on the man who had caused this.

The building had ten floors. They had reached the eighth floor, and Tifa was no longer sure which floor the others had exited on. All she could hear was Elena laboring up not far below them. For all she knew, she could have gone right past them.

"How much longer?" Aeris questioned, panting from the exertion of trying to run up the steps in her gown.

"I don't know," Tifa replied hesitantly. "I'm not sure..."

The sound of a shot up above them interrupted her.

"Cloud!" Tifa shouted, running up the steps with renewed effort. Aeris took a deep breath and plunged after her.

The next floor the door was open. Tifa ran out into a narrow hallway. She could see Reeve's back disappearing into a door not far down it. She ran down the hall and into the room. Immediately she was pulled up short as Cloud grabbed hold of her and pulled her back.

"Watch out!" he snapped.

Tifa looked around. The room must have been a storage area. It was crowded with extra tables and chairs, as well as other furniture. Even as Cloud spoke there was a soft sound, and something thudded against the wall not far from her.

There was a blast of gunfire as Vincent replied in kind.

Cloud let go of Tifa, both of them standing safely along the wall behind a stack of tables.

"Why did you do it, Vernon?" Vincent called out.

There was no response at first. Vincent glanced behind him to see Elena step into the room, her own gun in her hand. Then there was soft laughter.

"Call me Ice," was Vernon's reply. "That's what I go by these days. Members of the Fog don't like to use their real names."

"The Fog," Cloud repeated softly. Amanda had told them all she had known about the rogue organization on the way back to earth.

"So you're here to kill Barret," Vincent said, not as a question. "And Amanda too, I suppose. Yuffie was just in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

"Amanda had to be taught a lesson," Vernon replied. "People have to know that they can't betray the Fog. As for the other girl, what can I say, she just had bad luck."

"Well, it looks like your decision to get revenge has interfered with taking out your primary target," Vincent observed. "I don't think your bosses are going to be too happy to see that you let Barret get away."

"Can't win them all, eh?" Vernon replied, apparently unconcerned. That bothered Cloud, but he didn't say anything.

"So what do we do now, dear brother?" Vernon questioned. "I can't get out, but you can't get at me either. Looks like it's a standoff. Unless, of course, you're planning on doing something heroic. I wouldn't try it if I were you. I'm a very good shot. It seems to run in the family."

"You'd kill your own brother?" Reeve called out.

Vernon burst out into laughter at that.

"Why not?" he replied. "We're not exactly what you would call close. Besides, I've done worse."

"You killed our parents, didn't you Vernon?" Vincent said, his face expressionless, but Elena noticed his hand tightening on his gun.

"Of course," Vernon replied. "It was a simple thing. Too simple. They trusted me so explicitly. And the story I gave to the police. I'm such an actor. They had the money, and I wanted it."

"But you would have inherited it anyway," Vincent told him.

"Not soon enough," Vernon shot back. "I had expenses. Some that I couldn't explain. I couldn't wait til they were obliging enough to die on their own. I had to speed things up, and it was so easy. How could I pass it up? I wanted something and they were in my way, so I had to get them out of the way, just like you and Victoria."

"What do you mean?" Vincent snapped. Elena looked at him and saw his brow furrow.

Vernon laughed again.

"Are you really that stupid, brother? Don't you see? I wanted the money, but even with our parents gone, I knew I would be third in line. That wasn't good enough. That night Victoria died, you didn't leave that gun loaded, I put a bullet in it myself when you weren't looking. You were both so drunk, you didn't even realize. I knew if she died by your gun everyone would think you had done it. No one would suspect a fourteen year old kid of plotting something like that. It was a perfect opportunity, and I wasn't about to let it slip by. By killing Victoria, I got rid of both of you in one fell swoop!"

Vincent stood there for a moment frozen in place.

"You...murdered...Victoria."

Elena stared at Vincent. He has spoken the words almost to himself. Her own hand came up to her mouth in shocked disbelief. No one else said a word.

"Vincent," she said, almost as softly as he had spoken.

It was as if he hadn't heard her. He stood there in silence for a moment, and though he seemed calm he was seething inside. The full weight of what Vernon had told him was slamming down upon him like a hammer. Vernon had killed Victoria. He had done it deliberately. Vincent had known that Vernon was a snake, but never had he imagined he would do something like that. He couldn't conceive of it. Victoria, who would never have hurt a fly, who would have bent over backwards, would have done anything for her younger brother. How could he have done such a wretched thing? How could he snuff out his own sister's life? And for money! It was inconceivable, it was unforgivable, it was an abomination!

"Unfortunately, even our parents inheritance didn't last forever," Vernon went on as if talking to himself. "Eventually I squandered it all. Which meant I had to get a real job. I knew some people who knew some people who put me in contact with the Fog. It seemed like a good fit. I had always been a good shot, just like you, and my total lack of morals hadn't hurt either. It was really the most natural thing in the world for me. Imagine my surprise when I found out that we were going to target Barret Wallace of Avalanche. And who should be another member of Avalanche, why, none other than my long lost brother! Of all the coincidences, that was the strangest. but it was convenient, I have to admit. It let me keep track of you all without raising any suspicions."

"You murdered Victoria!" Vincent cried out, his eyes blazing.

His gun fell to the floor. Seemingly without thought he stepped out of his hiding place, unarmed.

"Vincent!" Elena yelled, but it was too late to stop him. She could see Vernon now, his gun in his hand, pointed straight at Vincent.

"Yes, I killed her," Vernon said. "Is it really that much of a shock? Does it bother you that much? You were a Turk. We all know how much value they place on life. I wonder, are you more upset because I killed her, or because I did it right under your nose and you never even suspected?"

Vincent did not reply, just stood there staring at Vernon, who was too far away to see the fury blazing in Vincent's eyes.

"I guess it doesn't matter now anyway," Vernon continued. "It's all over now. I don't suppose it would interest you to know that while I've kept your attention here Barret has fallen into a trap. He should already be dead by now. But the delay is over. It's time I got rid of the last member of my pathetic family."

"You planned it all very well," Vincent said, his voice sounding dead, which sent a chill down Elena's back. "But there's one thing you didn't plan on. There's some thing's even you don't know about me."

Elena had seen Vincent transform before. The process was usually quick, never taking more than a few seconds, but never before had it happened instantaneously. One moment Vincent was standing in front of Vernon, looking stricken, then next moment his form was replaced by a raging beast the towered over Vernon.

Vernon stood rooted in place for a second, stunned to suddenly see this hideous beast where his brother had stood a moment before. A second only, and then he brought the gun up, firing wildly. But by then it was too late. With an ungodly roar Vincent sprang forward, covering the distance between them in an eye blink. A huge claw raked out, and the gun went flying from the torn remains of Vernon's hand and arm. Another claw came down, and Vernon screamed.

The others just stood there, barely recovered from the suddenness of the attack. Vernon's screams rose to a higher pitch, and Elena had to turn away, feeling suddenly nauseous. She stepped back to the others, whose faces were just as pale as her own. A moment later the screaming stopped, cut ominously short. Elena waited for the sound of tearing flesh to halt as well, but it didn't. It just kept going, on and on. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up to see Cloud. He motioned for her to come along. Mechanically, she followed the others as they silently exited the room.

~*~

Sometimes when you want something done right, you're got to do it yourself.

It had been a long time since Scotch had taken such an active role in a job. As the boss he had gotten used to delegating, and usually things were taken care of without much trouble. But this job seemed to have been cursed right from the beginning. It had been over two months since he had agreed to the job, but Barret was still alive. The client was getting antsy, and had already threatened to cancel the deal if it didn't happen soon. With this much gil at stake, Scotch wasn't about to let that happen.

He sat in the bell tower of Aeris' church, the rifle cradled between his legs. There had been plenty of security here during the wedding, but after the ceremony the place had cleared out quickly, and it had been a simple matter to climb up undetected. The security had gone where Barret had gone, and Barret was no longer here.

He looked across the street at the reception hall. From up here he had a panoramic view of the entire area, which included both the main entrance to the hall and the side entrance. No one could get in or out without his observing them.

He should have listened to Ice right from the beginning, he mused. Ice had told him Calin's scheme would never work. But Scotch had had reservations about a direct attack on a member of Avalanche. He had thought Amanda, a young girl who certainly didn't look like an assassin, would have a better chance. He had believed in Calin, and Amanda's abilities. What a mistake that had been.

And what a disaster that had turned out to be. Not only hadn't she killed Barret, but she had told them everything she could about the Fog. She knew all of them, could recognize their faces. She had instantly become an even more important target. If they didn't kill Barret they'd lose out on the money, if they didn't kill Amanda, they might go to jail for a very long time.

It had been Ice's idea to kill two birds with one stone. He was sure he could get into the reception, using his connection to Vincent Valentine. But Scotch had been doubtful he could get both Amanda and Barret before he was discovered. It was just too risky. So Scotch had decided a second assassin was called for, and since this had to be done right this time, he had elected to be that second assassin himself. Once Amanda was disposed of, and her body discovered he knew they would immediately try to get Barret out of the area, and he couldn't get out without walking right into Scotch's sights.

But he had to admit he was getting impatient. He glanced quickly at his watch. Ice hadn't been sure how long it would take him to get in and do the job, but he had estimated it would take place around nine, and it was already almost ten. Scotch had seen some activity a short time ago, and a number of people had come out the side entrance, most of them going back in a short time later. None of them had been Barret, though he had spotted that pesky Turk, Reno.

Rumor had it that the Turks had passed up the job. Scotch had been surprised to hear that. For that much money, he didn't think anyone would have turned it down. He had heard that the Turks and Avalanche had been getting kind of chummy lately, but he never would have thought Reno would pass up that much money for friendship. Now the rumors were flying that the Turks were getting soft. He smiled at that thought. Any suspicion that the Turks weren't up to doing the job like they used to just meant more work for the Fog. The Turks were still the most well know organization, and got a lion's share of the business, but the Fog had been slowly eating into it. With the rumors of them going soft, and if he could finish this job and it got around that the Fog had taken out a member of Avalanche, it just might be that they could supplant the Turks at the top.

But in order for that to happen, this mission had to succeed. Ice was running late, but that didn't mean something had gone wrong. He had faith in Ice. The man had never let him down yet. He should really have listened to him and let him handle this from the very beginning. Oh well, live and learn.

"Well, what do we have here?"

Scotch swung around and leaped to his feet, bringing his rifle up. A man stood just a few feet from him. Scotch recognized him instantly.

"Reno!" he blurted out.

Reno had his arms folded across his chest, his nightstick under the crook of his arm. He didn't seem in the least bit upset to see the rifle pointing at him.

"Hey Scotch, long time no see. My, but you've come a long way since your days as Don Corneo's little gopher," he said casually.

Scotch's brow furrowed.

"And you've come a long way since you were President Shinra's lapdog. Slipped off your leash, have you?"

Reno did not appear phased by Scotch's remark.

"Clever of you to go with two shooters," he said. "Looks like you've got some brains after all. Though hardly enough. It's something the Turks have done many times in the past. And your choice of position wasn't bad either. After all, the church has a great view of the reception hall, and had been thoroughly checked out, but of course, that was before the wedding, not after. Take a devious mind to discern your plan, but fortunately, I was up to the task."

Scotch's frown deepened.

"I didn't come up here to chat, Reno. I came to do a job, one you didn't have the stomach for. Why don't you just turn around and go back the way you came."

"You're just wasting your time, Scotch. Barret's not coming out."

Scotch did not reply for a moment, but his face became red with anger.

"What's your interest in this, Reno? It's just a job, you know that. You were never one to let personal feelings interfere with that. Why are you even here? This is none of your business."

"My reasons are my own concern," Reno replied. "They're of no interest to you. The only thing you need to know is that I'm not going to let you kill Barret."

"You seem to forget that I'm the one with the gun," Scotch observed. "You might not know it, but I once applied to join the Turks myself, not long after you did, in fact. They said I wasn't good enough. I've often wondered why they chose you and not me, and I've also often wondered who would come out on top if we ever went up against one another. I've always wondered who was really the better man."

Scotch lowered his gun.

"I'll even give you a fair chance. I've been told you're pretty quick with that nightstick. Think you're good enough to take me out before I blow your brains out?"

Reno looked at him for a moment, the smirk never leaving his face. Finally he chuckled.

"A shootout? What do I look like, Billy the Kid? If you knew anything about me at all, you'd know I don't operate that way. And you'd also know that I never operate without a partner."

Reno fixed his eyes on something behind Scotch. For a moment Scotch hesitated, thinking it was just another of Reno's tricks, but he knew he had lost when he suddenly felt the cold steel of a gun barrel against the back of his neck.