

ICHAFTER XXXVI: EPILOGUE

"So Ice was really Vincent's brother, Vernon?" Yuffie asked.

"Yes," Vincent acknowledged. "He was working for the Fog all along."

Yuffie nodded slowly. She shifted her weight, trying to get comfortable in the hospital bed she had been in for the last two days.

"And Scotch, that guy who worked for Don Corneo, he was the leader of the Fog?"

"Yup," Cloud said. "He's confessed to everything, though he's tried to lay all the blame on Ice."

The other members of Avalanche and the Turks were all gathered around Yuffie's bed. It made the room quite crowded, but she didn't seem to mind. she turned to look at Reno.

"And you was the one who stopped him?" she said, shaking her head slowly.

Reno just shrugged.

"It is hard to believe, isn't it?" Aeris said. "Looks like you're true colors have finally come out, Reno. You really do care about your friends."

Reno looked at her as if she had lost her mind.

"What are you talking about?" he replied. "I don't give a damn about Barret or anyone else in Avalanche."

"Oh get real," Yuffie interceded. "You saved Barret's life, and you passed up a million gil to do it. That's not the Reno we used to know. Admit it, you've changed."

"Don't be ridiculous," Reno scoffed. "It had nothing to do with friendship. It was all business."

"Huh?" Cloud said, looking puzzled. "How can you say that? They offered you a million gil."

"Big deal," Reno replied. "If I'd have taken the job I would have made a million gil, but by getting rid of the competition, I've left people with no alternative but to send their business to us. I talked to my financial advisers. They told me if things had kept up, by the end of next year, the Fog would have taken almost two million in revenues away from the Turks. That money's all going into our pocket now."

The others just stared at him.

"You set them up?" Cloud said incredulously.

"Is it really that much of a surprise?" Reno stated modestly.

"I don't believe it!" Yuffie exclaimed.

Reno shrugged.

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

Cloud sat back in the chair he was in, shaking his head.

"You may be a pain in the ass, but I have to admit, you're pretty slick."

Reno took a little bow in acknowledgment.

"Why thank you. And if I must say so myself, you're just as lame as ever"

Cloud shook his head again, but there was a smile on his face.

Reno looked at Yuffie.

"So you see, you really didn't have anything to worry about. You would have been better off if you had stayed home. I was afraid if something happened, you would just get in the way."

"Thanks a lot," Yuffie replied.

"What do you mean?" Barret asked.

"Yuffie overheard a client offer me the million gil to kill you. I turned them down, but I suspect Yuffie thought I went running after him to tell him I agreed as soon as she walked out the door. I made her promise not to tell you..."

"You threatened to kill me!" Yuffie exclaimed.

Reno shrugged.

"Hey, it was business," he said by way of explanation. "Anyway, I should have also made her promise to stay away from you. She's been following you around all this time, getting in the way, to try to protect you."

Barret's eyebrows lifted. He turned to look at Yuffie, who just nodded.

"Yuffie, I don't know what to say," he said, deeply touched. "After all the nasty things I've said about you. Thank you."

Yuffie just looked down at the ground, suddenly embarrassed.

"It was a very nice thing you did Yuffie," Tifa said. "We all think so. And we also don't think that a thank you is enough. So we got you a little gift."

Yuffie immediately sat up in her bed.

"Really? What? What?" she questioned.

"Easy, don't get too excited," Cloud said with a laugh. "The doctor said you could leave tomorrow. You don't want to have a relapse."

"I'm fine," Yuffie replied. "Let's see!"

Tifa looked at her warily.

"I'm almost afraid to show you now," she said warily. Then she produced a cloth bag and held it out. Yuffie's eyes lit up.

"Is that..."

She snatched the bag and overturned it on her bed. A dozen materia orbs fell into her lap.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, sorting through them gleefully.

The others laughed.

"I know it's not as much as you had before, but it was the best we could do on such short notice," Tifa told her. "The stuff is getting kind of hard to find."

"I know," Yuffie nodded in agreement. "I'm surprised you got this much. Where'd you find it all?"

"We bought it from Altim," Cid admitted. "We didn't ask him where he got it from, and he wasn't volunteering the information."

"Thanks guys!" Yuffie said.

"You're welcome," Tifa replied.

They fell silent. Yuffie finished inspecting her new materia and put it back in the bag.

"And we've got another surprise for you too," Aeris said. "You have another visitor."

Yuffie looked up, puzzled.

"Who?" she questioned. But even as she said it her father walked in the door.

"Hello Yuffie."

"Godo," she said evenly. "What are you doing here?"

"He's been here the whole time," Aeris told her. "He came as soon as he heard you were shot. He was by your bed all day yesterday, while you were unconscious."

"You didn't have to do that," Yuffie said.

Cloud and the others who were sitting stood up.

"Well, I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about, and we've all got some things to."

"You don't have to leave," Yuffie protested.

"We'll be back soon," Aeris replied. "We'll see you tomorrow before you leave."

"But..." Yuffie said uselessly as the others filed out. In a minute she was alone with Godo. He sat down on the side of her bed.

"How are you feeling?"

Yuffie shrugged.

"Fine, I guess."

"You've been through a lot," he said.

Yuffie just looked away.

"What are you doing here?" she suddenly blurted out.

Godo looked at her as if he had been stung.

"You were hurt, you're my daughter," he replied. "I was worried about you."

Yuffie looked at him, a hard look in her eyes.

"Look, I know we've never seen eye to eye," Godo continued. "I know you don't agree with a lot of the things I did. I know you don't think I've been a very good father. It wasn't easy for me, with your mother gone and with me trying to run a country. It may have seemed like I had more important things to do than take care of you, but you were always uppermost in my thoughts. Just because we've disagreed doesn't mean that I don't care about you."

Yuffie just sat there, almost as if she wasn't listening.

"I heard what you did for Barret, or what you tried to do," he added. "That was very unselfish of you. In spite of all the mistakes I made bringing you up, you're turned out to be a fine young lady. I can't take any credit for that. But I want you to know that I'm proud of you."

Yuffie did not reply, nor did she meet her father's gaze.

Godo sighed.

"All right," he said. "I...I just wanted to tell you that. And that I'm sorry about your friend. I'll leave you alone now."

He slowly stood up, and then walked toward the door. Yuffie felt a stab of pain through her stomach at the mention of Amanda. She looked up. Her father was no longer facing her. He was walking slowly away, head bowed. Only once before had he looked so...defeated.

Her lip quivered. No matter how she felt about the decisions he had made, no matter how wrong they might have been, even she had to admit he had tried to do his best for Wutai. Things had always looked black and white to her. You did right or you did wrong. There was no in between. But the older she got the more she realized how untrue that was. It wasn't that simple. For the first time in her life she was beginning to understand the difficulty of the decisions Godo had made. She had always been certain she would have done things differently. But now she wasn't so sure. It had been a difficult time, who could say whether what Godo did was right or wrong? Even so, since the fall of Shinra Wutai had come a long way towards regaining its old status as one of the premier countries in the world. Maybe, just maybe, God's decisions hadn't been so bad after all.

"Dad."

Godo stopped in mid stride. He turned around to face Yuffie, his look unreadable.

"It's been a long time since you called me that," he stated.

"Her name was...Amanda," Yuffie said softly.

The others had told her what had happened earlier today, right after she had regained consciousness. They had been worried about how she would take it, but she had demanded to know from the moment she woke up. It wasn't really a surprise anyway. She didn't remember much after being shot. Her surprise and disbelief, the pain, the realization that she was probably going to die. And then the hand on her arm, the gentle touch, and the soothing feeling that had flowed through her right before she had lost consciousness.

"She...she saved my life," Yuffie said slowly. She had cried when they had told her, cried until she couldn't squeeze out anymore tears. She thought she had cried herself out then, but now she felt tears beginning to run down her cheeks once again. "She used her powers on me, even though...even though she was going to die herself. She could have saved herself, but she didn't. I don't know why she did it. She didn't have to. I don't know why I'm alive and she's not. I don't..."

Her voice choked off. Godo stepped back over to the bed and sat down again beside her. She tried to speak again, but no words came. She looked at him, then reached out her arms. He leaned forward and pulled her toward him, and she fell into his arms and cried like a baby.

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"I'm sorry."

Tifa looked at Cloud as they walked into Elmyra's house.

"For what?" she asked.

"I'm sorry about what happened at the reception. I wanted everything to be perfect, but it didn't turn out that way. Now, every time we think back to our wedding day, there's going to be a shadow hanging over it."

Tifa took hold of his hand. He was right, of course, but there was nothing anyone could do about it.

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," she said optimistically. "We can think back to the wedding and honor Amanda's memory at the same time. You shouldn't feel bad. There was nothing you or anyone else could have done about it. I guess it's just not our nature to have things run smoothly."

"You can say that again," Cloud said wryly. "But we've managed to get through it all, now haven't we?"

"Yes we did," Tifa said with a smile. She walked over to the window and peered out. The last rays of sunlight filtered through the sky from the west. In the opposite direction, dark clouds were gathering. Already she could see flashes of lightning crossing the sky in that direction, although they were too far away to hear any sound. She paused for a moment to look at them.

Cloud came up behind her and put his arms around her.

"What are you looking at?" he questioned.

"Looks like there's a storm coming," she said thoughtfully. "It takes me back to that day I left the hospital myself. When I was so unsure about what lie ahead."

Cloud nodded.

"You wanted to know if it was over," he said. "How do you feel about it now?"

Tifa shook her head.

"I don't know," she said softly.

"We've gone to the Jenova home world. We've made sure they never return. We've cut it off at the source. What more could we do?"

"Never is a long time," Tifa replied. "There's so many things that could happen. We've thought it was over before, and yet it didn't end. It never seems to end. Sometimes I don't think it ever will."

Cloud pulled her closer to him.

"You know, you've changed too. Whatever happened to that optimistic young girl I used to know, the one that never seemed to be down, the one that always had a cheerful word for everyone?"

Tifa turned to look at him, then shrugged.

"I guess I have changed," she said. "I used to think that nothing could stop us, that we could do anything we wanted. But I've seen too much. I know how fragile and precious life is. I know how easily it can be lost."

Cloud did not reply. It was obvious that Tifa was falling into one of her pensive moods, and he knew from experience he would just have to ride it out.

"A lot of bad things have happened, but a lot of good as well," he pointed out. "Shinra, Jenova, Hojo and Sephiroth are all gone. The world is a better place for what we have done."

Tifa didn't reply for a moment, as if pondering his words.

"I suppose that's true," she replied. "We have done good. I just wonder if we'll ever get a chance to live in peace ourselves."

"I'm sure we will," Cloud reassured her.

She looked back out the window.

"I'm not so sure," she said doubtfully. "Cloud, do you remember what Jenova showed us? I told you about my vision, about what happened to our child. Do you suppose..."

Cloud looked at her sharply.

"Is that what you're worried about?" he questioned. "You know those were just visions. You know they weren't true. It was just a cheap trick. Aeris said so herself."

Tifa nodded.

"I know, but still. You still have the Jenova cells inside you. Nothing we can do can change that. I know it's not your fault, but I worry..."

Cloud pulled her closer to him.

"Those cells were implanted in me," he said. "Which means they're not inheritable. Red even told me so. It can't happen."

Tifa looked at him in surprise.

"Red told you? When did you talk to him about it?"

"Right after we got back," Cloud replied.

Tifa gave him a penetrating look.

"So you were worried too," she said.

"Let's just say I had it in the back of my mind," he conceded.

Tifa turned around in his arms until she was facing him.

"You were as worried as I was, weren't you?"

"You'll never get me to admit that," he replied. "But like I said, it ain't gonna happen. And if that isn't going to happen, then none of the others probably will, either."

Tifa looked up at him.

"So I don't have to worry about you slicing me up like a shish-kabob?"

"Never," he replied seriously. "I would rather die myself."

"Don't say that," she said. "I was just teasing."

"I know," he replied. "But I've got a feeling. I think that this time it really is over. Jenova's gone, Shinra, Sephiroth, hell, even the Fog is wiped out. We've paid our dues, and now it's time to reap the rewards. It's time for us to live happily ever after."

There was a crack of thunder. Tifa jumped in Cloud's arms, then smiled, nestling her head against his chest.

"I hope you're right," she said. "Because there's nothing I want more in the world than to spend the rest of my days peacefully with you. I love you Cloud Strife."

Cloud looked down at her and smiled.

"We've been through a lot. We've had more adventures than a dozen ordinary people. But I can think of nothing I'd like more. I love you too, Tifa Strife."

He lifted her head up and their lips met. He and Tifa had been through a lot on this journey, they had both lost and found many things. They had seen new places and made lifelong friends. After growing up together and parting ways, it was like

they had come full circle. It seemed ironic that they had traveled so far only to find one another again. It was funny, but in the end the greatest gift had been right in front of him the whole time. And now that he had finally found it, he was never going to let it go.

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Talon glanced up at the clock. Nearly six thirty. Another late night. Not that that was anything unusual. He had to admit there was a lot more to being mayor of Gongaga than he thought when he agreed to the job. In fact, if he had known then what he knew now he probably would have refused. Unfortunately, he hadn't known, and since he was a hero from the battle against the Healer, he had been an obvious choice for the job.

Still, he had to admit all this work was getting to him. The clean up of the reactor the Healer had built was a major chore, taking up much more of his time than he would have liked. Plus there were still excess monsters roaming the countryside that had to be taken care of as well, another result of the Healer's interference. The frames were complaining that the harvest wasn't nearly as good as it had been when the Healer was in control. Was it his fault he didn't have Jenova's powers, that he couldn't just wave his hand and make plants grow? He was tempted to ask them if they thought they had been better off being slaves with full stomachs, but he knew that wouldn't get him anywhere.

Still, there had been some progress, and it looked as if next year would be better. In the long run, they were on course, it was just difficult to get people to take the long view sometimes.

He really needed to get another assistant. Even the two he had were not enough. But the budget was still tight, and they would probably not see any improvement for a year or two yet, so it might be better to tighten his belt and live with it, just like he was telling everyone else. If he couldn't see the big picture, how could he expect others to?

He stood up and started to gather his papers together when the intercom buzzed. He pressed a button on it.

"Yes?"

"There's a man here to see you. A Mr. Van Cleff," came his secretaries voice. "He doesn't have an appointment, but he says it's important."

Talon rolled his eyes. How many times had he heard that before? Everyone's business was important, to them.

He glanced up at the clock again. He was already late, what difference would a few more minutes make?

"Well, what is it about, anyway?" Talon inquired.

"He didn't say, exactly. All he would tell me is it has something to do with a Mall."

THE END