

## CHAPTER V: VERNON'S STORY

It took them a little over a half hour to reach Kalm. The whole time Vernon kept up a string of chatter about absolutely nothing of significance, so much so that Elena found it difficult to get a word in edgewise, hard as that was to believe. Meanwhile Vincent maintained his usual grim silence, but she could tell by the look on his face that he was not pleased with the situation. She looked from one to the other, amazed at the contrast and the fact that they could be brothers. At first she didn't see a resemblance. Vernon's eyes were brown, and he looked much older than Vincent, with a few streaks of grey in his black hair. But she realized that was probably because of the time Vincent had spent in the coffin, and as they walked along and she looked back and forth between them she realized there were similarities. The shape of their face was the same, but even more than physical appearance was the look in their eye, the way they moved, and the pretense she felt from both of them. From the way they acted toward one another, and especially the way Vincent was acting, she had a feeling she was going to hear a very interesting story, but when she brought up the subject Vincent had cut her off abruptly, saying they would discuss it later in Kalm. It was the only time he spoke the whole trip back.

Once in Kalm they stopped at Elmyra's house, but Cloud and Tifa were not there, so they walked over to the Inn.

Elena dumped the papers she was carrying on a shelf beside the television and sat down on the bed, happy to be relieved of her burden. Vernon dropped onto the bed beside her, resting on his elbows, his feet stretched out.

Vincent put his papers down at a desk near the window and deliberately started to sift through them.

"So how come I've never heard anything about you before?" Elena asked Vernon, barely able to conceal her excitement at the chance to finally learn something about Vincent from someone who might actually be interested in sustaining a conversation.

Vernon glanced over at Vincent, who was doing his best to ignore them.

"Not surprised he never mentioned me," he said. "My older brother never really approved of me. Seemed to think I didn't take life seriously enough."

He paused for a moment to wait for any comment from Vincent, but none was forthcoming.

"So when was the last time you two saw one another?" Elena questioned.

Vernon thought for a moment.

"Must be close to thirty years now," he mused.

"Twenty seven," Vincent replied.

Vernon cast him a glance.

"For someone who isn't paying any attention to us, you've got sharp ears."

Vincent did not reply.

"Twenty seven then," Vernon went on, still looking at Vincent. "Surprised you recognized me after all these years. What was I, seventeen then?"

Vincent remained silent.

"Long time to hold a grudge," Vernon said slowly.

Vincent looked up and gave Vernon such a withering glance that Elena turned pale.

"What are you doing here, Vernon?" Vincent questioned.

"Just wanted to see how my big bro was doing," Vernon replied, apparently unaffected by Vincent's look. "Heard about your little stay in the graveyard hotel, and wanted to see if you were okay. You're a difficult person to track down."

"Not difficult enough, apparently," Vincent replied. "As you can see, I'm fine. So don't you think it's about time you left?"

"Talk about the bums rush," Vernon replied. "C'mon, aren't you even a wee bit curious as to how I've been all these years?"

"Not particularly," Vincent responded immediately.

Vernon gave him a look.

"Fine," he said, standing up suddenly. "I know when I'm not wanted. It's obvious the passage of time has not changed anything between us. I thought after all these years...."

He paused and looked at Vincent for a moment.

"Oh never mind. I guess it doesn't matter what I thought," he said finally and walked toward the door.

"Wait!" Elena exclaimed, getting up herself. She couldn't believe Vincent was just going to let his brother walk out.

"Let him go," Vincent said sharply.

"Vernon..." Elena began, but Vernon held up his hand.

"No, don't bother. My brother is right. I should never have come by. He's obviously perfectly happy with the way things are."

With that Vernon walked out the door. Elena stood there with her mouth open. Then she turned to Vincent. He had never been a charmer, but she couldn't believe he would treat his own brother in such a manner.

"How could you do that?"

Vincent returned her look, his face expressionless. Then he lowered his gaze to the papers in front of him once more.

Elena stood there for a moment, until it was plain he was not going to reply. She felt rage suddenly welling up inside her.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" she shouted. "What could he have possibly done for you to treat him like that?"

Vincent did not look up from his papers.

Elena took a step toward him.

"Answer me, dammit!"

Vincent's head jerked up, a look of surprise momentarily appearing on his face, but just as quickly it disappeared. He hesitated for a second.

"You don't know anything about him," he said calmly.

"So tell me!" she spat out. "Why do you hate him so much? What happened between you two?"

Again he hesitated, looking at her carefully, his face totally unreadable, but he had an odd look in his fiery red eyes.

"I don't want to talk about it," he stated.

She stood there for a moment, the rage plain on her face.

"That's the problem," she said grimly. "You never want to talk about anything!"

Then she turned and followed Vernon out the door.

Vincent sat there looking at the door for a long time, a pained expression on his face. Then he slowly turned back to his work.

Elena walked rapidly down the hallway, almost in tears. After all this time, he still didn't trust her. She couldn't say how much it hurt to know that.

She walked down the stairs, not really paying attention to where she was going. Ahead of her she saw Vernon walking into the bar just off the lobby.

"Vernon," she called out.

He turned toward her, unhurriedly. He waited for her to come up beside him and they walked into the bar together and Vernon ordered them drinks.

"My brother hasn't changed at all," he commented as they sat down at a table.

"What was that all about?" the words tumbled out quickly. She felt if she didn't get some answers she would burst.

"Just Vincent being Vincent," Vernon replied.

Elena looked at him angrily.

"Must all you Valentines speak in riddles?"

Vernon sat back in his chair and chuckled at that.

"By no means," he replied. "My brother and I are nothing alike, as you may have guessed already. I have no qualms about telling you the story, though it is not a particularly pleasant one, and I don't think Vincent will be too thrilled if I do."

"I don't care," Elena replied. "I want to know what happened between you two."

"And you know you won't get it from him," Vernon replied.

Elena nodded.

"Very well," he stated. "I can hardly get in any worse trouble for telling the tale. Has my brother told you anything about us at all?"

"No," Elena replied. Vincent had never mentioned his family, or anyone from his past, for that matter. "He's never said anything. Talking to him is like trying to get information from a stone."

Vernon grinned.

"You know him well," he said, and then his face became serious.

"It all happened a long time ago," he started. He paused for a moment to swallow down half his drink. "I was only fourteen. Vincent four years older and Victoria seventeen."

"Victoria?" Elena questioned.

"Our sister," Vernon replied. "Yes, I know, our parents had a thing for V's."

"He never mentioned a sister either," Elena stated.

"He wouldn't have," Vernon replied. "They were very close, those two. Much closer to each other than to me, but they were closer in age too, being only a year apart. Like I said, it was long ago, but I'll never forget that day, much as I'd like to. Our parents were out for the evening. It was just the three of us at home. Vincent had just joined Shinra the day before and we had staged a rather impromptu party for him. Nothing fancy, no others guests, just the three of us and a lot of liquor."

"Being so young, I didn't get to do much drinking. Vincent and Victoria really shouldn't have either, but Vincent had always been a kind of crazy kid. A real rebel type, you know, and had gotten in trouble with our parents I don't know how many times, so this was really nothing new for him."

Another interesting fact she hadn't known, but Elena did not interrupt.

"After a while both Vincent and Victoria were pretty drunk, Vincent especially. I kept telling them to take it easy on the stuff but they ignored me. He kept going on and on about his job at Shinra. How he was finally going to make a name for himself. How he was going to join the Turks and become someone to be reckoned with. He even showed off the uniform he had been given, and his gun."

Elena took a sip from her own drink. Just from the way Vernon had spoken the last sentence gave her an uneasy feeling.

"I told him to put the gun away, but Victoria wanted to see it. She was almost as drunk as he was. He gave it to her and she started pointing it at things in the room, which made me real nervous, but Vincent said it was okay because it was unloaded. Eventually he asked for it back, but she wouldn't give it to him. He kept asking and she kept saying no until he finally got up and chased her around the room, both of them laughing hysterically. He caught her and tried to pull the gun away, and that's when it went off."

"Oh God," Elena said softly.

Vernon put his drink to his lips once more and downed the rest of it.

"Victoria died almost instantly," Vernon finished, placing his glass down on the table in front of him. "The bullet pierced her heart. Just an inch or two off and she might have lived. Just an inch..."

"Poor Vincent," Elena said. She had no idea. Of course, he had never spoken of it. She could see why he would not want to. The memories must be nearly unbearable. After all he had gone through with Lucrecia and Hojo, and now to find out about this on top of it. It was a wonder the man was still sane.

Elena finished her drink and sat there, looking down at the table in silence.

But even as she felt sympathy for him, she also felt he shouldn't have shut her out. He could have told her. She might even have been able to help. Would he ever learn that he didn't have to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders alone? She would gladly help him shoulder the burden, if he would just let her.

Finally she looked up again at Vernon.

"What a horrible thing to happen," she said. "But that still doesn't explain why he dislikes you so much."

Vernon nodded slowly.

"I think it's because I remind him of her," he answered slowly. "Of the times we were together. And also because I was always such a screw up. He thought I was lazy, but can I help it if I was a typical teenager and not ruthlessly ambitious the way he was? He always said I'd never amount to anything. He was worse than our parents."

"After the accident, we didn't see much of him. He left home. He started at Shinra and put all that was left of his heart into that. He spent almost all his time there, and soon got the promotion to the Turks just like he'd wanted. I spoke to him a couple of times after that, telling him that it wasn't his fault, that nobody blamed him, but I could see he wasn't going for it. We lost touch soon after he became a Turk, and I haven't seen him since, although I always tried to find out what he was up to. But then he got involved in that Nibelheim thing and disappeared. I thought sure he was dead, but I never found out anything until recently. As soon as I heard he was alive I came looking for him, but like I said earlier, he ain't so easy to find. Now I think I was just wasting my time."

Elena reached out and took hold of his arm.

"No, you haven't wasted your time," she replied. "Even if Vincent doesn't welcome you, I'm glad you came. Even though the story was unpleasant, just like you said, I'm still glad you told me. I feel better knowing something about Vincent's past, no matter what it may be."

Vernon looked at her and smiled slowly.

"Glad to be of some help then," he replied. "And how did a beautiful lass like you get involved with my brother anyway?"

Elena blushed.

"It's a long story," she replied. "It would take hours to tell, and I think I better get back to Vincent soon. I feel sort of like I've betrayed him, running off to hear the story from you when he obviously didn't want me to know."

Vernon waved his hand at her.

"Nonsense," he replied. "My brother would be a fool to hold it against you. And whatever else he may be, he's no fool. Go on back to him."

Elena nodded and stood up.

"I'd like to tell you the story," she said. "And also hear more about Vincent and your family. I'll have a little talk with Vincent, and try to put in a good word for you. Maybe I can get him to change his mind."

Vernon snorted.

"More likely to stop the sun from rising," he commented.

"Perhaps," she replied. "But I will try nevertheless. In the meantime, you'll be around?"

He sat there for a moment in thought, then nodded slowly.

"I'll be here at the Inn," he replied. "For a few days at least."

Elena nodded slowly. Now that she had found this source of information she was reluctant to leave him. There was so much she wanted to know, but she needed to get back to Vincent.

"All right then," she said. "I'll talk to you later."

"I'll be here," Vernon agreed.

She walked away, glancing back once to see Vernon approaching the bar. Then he disappeared from view as she entered the lobby once more. She walked slowly back up the steps and back into their room. Vincent sat as she left him, still sifting through the papers. He looked up as she came in.

"Has my brother regaled you with his infinite wisdom?"

Elena slowly walked over and looked down at him.

"Vincent..." she began, but faltered. She felt oddly empty, all her emotions used up. What was there to say?

"He told me about your sister," she finally stated, looking into his eyes. They did not flicker.

"He told you lies."

She shook her head.

"Then tell me the truth," she challenged, though her voice held no emotion.

He put down the paper he had been reading and looked up at her. Slowly he got up and stepped over to her, his arms encircling her, all the time without taking his eyes off her.

"I told you I don't want to talk about it," he said evenly.

"But why not?" she pleaded. "Why not just this once..."

Before she could finish he leaned forward and kissed her.

She pulled her head back.

"Just once let me know what's..."

He kissed her again, pulling her to him. She felt his long black hair brush against her cheek. She pulled away again, more slowly.

"What's going on in that head of yours," she said softly.

He slid one hand up behind her back until it caressed her hair.

"I told you, I don't," kiss, "want to", kiss, "talk" kiss, "about it", longer kiss. With each one, she felt her resistance and her anger melting away. With each one she found herself pushing her lips against his with greater passion. She wanted to yell at him, chide him for so obviously trying to avoid the conversation, but the words died in her throat, swept away by the need to have him close, to feel his body, his lips against her own. No one had ever made her feel the way he did, no one had ever made her so totally lose control. It frightened her, and exhilarated her at the same time. Even as her hands slipped around his shoulders she could hear a small part of her brain still protesting, telling her not to be so weak, not to give in, but it was too little too late. With an inward sigh, she once again gave up all thought of logic in the hands of this maddeningly pig headed yet inescapably captivating man.

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Aeris walked into the workshop and saw Reeve stooping beside Cait Sith, who was sitting on the floor beside him, one leg obviously damaged. Elmyra stood beside them. They all looked up as she came in.

"Reeve, what happened?"

Aeris walked quickly over to him, followed by Cloud, Cid, and Tifa. Reeve stood up slowly, looking drained.

"I messed up," Reeve confessed. "I programmed Cait to protect any member of Avalanche if someone attacked them. But it never occurred to me that two members of Avalanche might get into a fight. With no programming to guide him, the results were unpredictable. I guess he deduced that Zack was the aggressor and went after him."

"You got into a fight with Zack?" Cloud exclaimed.

"Not exactly," Reeve replied. "It was more of an argument. Zack went to grab hold of me and Cait interpreted that as a danger. He overreacted. That's another thing I'll have to adjust."

Aeris just looked at him, plainly unhappy.

"And no one has seen Zack since?" she questioned.

"He was seen at the stables," Reeve replied. "We know he took a chocobo and left Ifalna. But no one knows where he went, and he didn't tell anyone. After Cait attacked him he almost attacked me with his sword."

"What?" Aeris said, shocked.

Reeve shook his head.

"It's all right, he came to his senses quickly, but he was very upset. The way he ran off, I don't know what he'll do."

The others stood there in silence, none of them pleased with this news. Reeve pointed to the large weapon lying on the floor beside the doorway.

"He even left his sword behind."

"We've got to find him," Aeris stated, voice filled with concern.

"But where will we look?" Tifa questioned. "He could have gone anywhere. If he had a chocobo, he could be miles away by now."

Cloud nodded in agreement. If Zack had run off and didn't want to be found, then they were unlikely to find any trace of him. His training in SOLDIER and his time with Bennis had taught him how to avoid being tracked. He looked around and realized that everyone was looking at him.

"You were closest to him," Cid pointed out. "Any ideas where he might go?"

Cloud shook his head.

"We were very close once, but that was a long time ago. So much has changed since then, I doubt if I could guess. If he doesn't want to be found, even an expert wouldn't be able to track him down. But it could be we're all overreacting. He might just need some time by himself to cool down, and then he'll come back. It may turn out to be nothing."

"Can we take that chance?" Tifa asked.

"I don't see that we have much choice," Cloud replied. "Like I said, if he doesn't want us to find him, we won't."

"So what are we supposed to do, just wait around here until he shows up again?" Reeve stated, clearly unhappy with that idea.

"No," Aeris replied immediately. "I'm going to look for him, regardless of whether we can find him or not. I won't have him running around alone like this if there's anything I can do about it. You don't have to come with me if you don't want to."

"Of course we'll come with you," Tifa stated.

Cloud nodded. It couldn't hurt to look, though he thought it unlikely they would find anything. Still, it was probably better than just standing around waiting.

"Very well," he said. "But if we're going to look, at least let's try to organize it. We should split up into groups. We can search the surrounding area more efficiently that way."

"But where will we search?" Tifa questioned. "He might have just run off into the woods somewhere."

"If he took a chocobo, it's not likely he's going to be anywhere nearby," Cid pointed out.

"I'm afraid you're right," Cloud replied. "Seems like he's planning on going far away. The only two towns anywhere near here are Bone Village and Icicle Inn. Maybe we better start there."

Aeris nodded agreement.

"All right," Cloud continued. "Aeris, you and Reeve head for Bone Village. Tifa and I will check out Icicle Inn. Cid, you take the Slipstream up and look around. If he's on one of the roads, maybe you can spot him from the air. Elmyra, you stay here to coordinate things, and to let us know if he comes back."

Cid headed back to his aircraft. All the others but Elmyra headed for the stables. Tifa found Aeris walking beside her. Aeris looked her over.

"Are you all right?" she asked, glancing at Cloud to make sure he couldn't hear. "I wish you would have stayed at Cosmo Canyon with Red and Ellengio."

"I'm fine," Tifa replied. "The headache is almost gone. Besides, what would you have told Cloud?"

Aeris shrugged.

"I would have come up with something," she said slowly.

"Don't worry about me right now," Tifa continued. "What about Zack? You don't think he'll do anything stupid, do you?"

"I don't know," Aeris replied. They had spent a lot of time together since they had found Zack again, but she couldn't say that she knew him well. There was just so much different about him. So much new to learn. She sighed. "It's all my fault."

"Oh stop it," Tifa admonished. "You can't control what other people do. Stop punishing yourself for every little thing that goes wrong in the world. We'll straighten it all out. Zack just needs a cool down a little. Cloud's right. We'll go out of our minds hunting all over the place for him and he'll probably show up back here tomorrow as if nothing happened."

Aeris did not look reassured.

"I hope so."

They reached the stables. One of the stable hands brought out four chocobos and they mounted up.

"All right," Cloud said. "Let's get going. Keep your eyes open, and stay in contact. If anybody finds any sign of him, let us all know immediately. There's only about four more hours of daylight left. That's barely enough time for us to get to Icicle Inn before it gets dark."

He looked around. No one had any questions, and they all appeared ready to go. He spurred his chocobo forward, and the others followed. A few minutes later they saw the Slipstream streak by overhead, disappearing quickly to the south. They rode swiftly until they were clear of the ancient forest that surrounded Ifalna, then Cloud and Tifa turned west. There were no roads between Ifalna and Icicle Inn, at least not yet. Nevertheless they made good time at first over the open plain. But gradually the trees started to close in around them, and after about an hour of travel they found themselves in a trackless wilderness forested with tall pine trees and scrub brush. The country became broken and the ground uneven, and often a gully would appear in front of them filled with an impassably thick tangle of bushes. Their pace slowed to a walk.

To the north Tifa could see a long line of tall mountains peeking through the trees occasionally. Crossing over those peaks would greatly lessen their trip, but they were some of the tallest mountains on the planet, and no trail had been found that passed over them. Without mountain chocobo's they could not go that way. Aeris, Red and Reeve had traveled underneath, but the odds of finding their trail by chance in this wilderness was vanishingly small. They would just have to take the long way round.

Suddenly Cloud stopped his mount, his head coming up. He stood there for a moment looking this way and that.

Tifa came up beside him.

"What is it?" she questioned.

He hesitated for a moment, his eyes roving the forest around them.

"Not sure," he replied. "I think there's something out there."

Tifa looked around, but she saw nothing out of the ordinary. Cloud spurred his chocobo and they moved forward again, but both of them kept alert, their eyes on the forest around them.

The forest became thicker as they progressed, a clear trail more difficult to pick out. They continued to look around, and though they saw nothing, Tifa felt uneasy. A couple of times she thought she saw something out of the corner of her eye, but each time she turned to look there was nothing there.

Cloud suddenly held up his hand and they halted. For a moment after the chocobos stopped they could hear movement in the brush to their left. Then silence.

"Something is tracking us," Cloud stated, unsheathing his sword.

They rode on a little further, Tifa's nerves on edge. Out in the open the chocobos could outrun nearly anything they ran into, but here in the forest the birds were of little advantage.

They wound their way through the trees, going as fast as they could through the dense underbrush. Suddenly Cloud's chocobo halted once again, and Tifa nearly ran into the back of him.

"What?" she said.

Cloud tried to spur the chocobo forward, but it balked, warking nervously and trying to back up. Cloud looked up.

"There's something in front of us," he said.

Suddenly there was an explosion of motion in the bushes to their right. A large whitish gray wolf dashed out of the trees and leapt at Tifa's chocobo. The bird screamed as the wolf's teeth clamped down on it's thigh. Tifa, startled by the sudden attack, was nearly thrown from the saddle as the bird attempted desperately to wrench itself free. For a moment she thought sure that she was going to fall, but then Cloud's chocobo was right beside her. His sword came down, and with a howl, the wolf reluctantly let go of it's prey and dashed off into the woods again.

Cloud grabbed hold of the reins of her chocobo to steady it.

"Are you all right?" he exclaimed.

Tifa nodded. She looked down at her chocobo and saw the wound bleeding severely above it's leg.

"My chocobo's hurt," she stated.

Cloud gazed at the forest around them. He could hear movement all around them.

"There's more than one of them," he observed. "Looks like a pack of northern wolves. You usually don't see them this far south. We've got to get to open ground."

Tifa nodded, looking around. The forest looked the same in all directions to her.

"Which way?"

Cloud turned back and forth, examining the forest around them. Finally he pointed to the left.

"This way," he stated. "The ground slopes up a little in that direction. If we can get high enough, we may be able to spot some open ground. C'mon."

He started off, Tifa right behind him, her chocobo limping slightly. She looked down at the wound once again. It was pretty severe, and even if they reached open ground, might slow the bird. She wished she had brought some materia along, but they left so quickly, she hadn't even thought about it.

"Did you bring any materia?" she asked.

Cloud shook his head.

Another wolf (or perhaps the same one) dashed out of the bushes, lunging straight at Tifa's chocobo again. This time Tifa was ready. As the wolf bore down on them her foot shot out, catching it directly below the jaw, snapping it's head back. The wolf fell back, then scampered away. She turned in time to see Cloud fending off another wolf who she had not seen coming from the other side.

"They're pretty intelligent animals," Cloud stated. "They know your bird is wounded. They'll keep attacking it, trying to wear us down. We've got to find a place to defend ourselves."

Tifa nodded and they continued to push their way through the forest. For almost fifteen minutes they made their way slowly uphill, skirmishing every now and then with the wolves, who seemed to be getting bolder and bolder with each attack. Finally they neared the summit of a small hill and found themselves beneath a large rocky outcropping. The trees were thinner here, and they could see their tormentors. There were at least seven wolves following them.

Cloud rode over to the wall of rock and dismounted.

"This is as good a place as any," he said as Tifa slipped off her chocobo. "We can see them coming and they won't be able to get behind us."

Cloud and Tifa stood side by side, the chocobos behind them, and waited for the wolves to attack.

The wolves circled around in front of them, with no apparent order and seemingly reluctant to attack the party now that they had attained a better defensive position. But eventually some came forward, closing in on them, snapping their jaws and feinting at them, but jumping back when either Cloud or Tifa went after them.

"They're trying to draw us away from the chocobos," Cloud stated.

Tifa nodded and they stood their ground. The feinting went on for some time, but then the wolves drew back once more, and then suddenly all dashed forward at once.

"Here they come!" Cloud exclaimed.

Tifa didn't need a warning. The first one reached her and her fist shot out, taking the wolf on the snout and snapping its head back. With a yelp it fell back. But two others were right beside it. She kicked out, feeling her foot strike, but the blow was off balance and she knew she hadn't done any damage. At the same time she twisted to the side, tumbling out of the way as a set of jaws snapped where she had just stood.

She rolled to the side as another wolf lunged at her. She grabbed hold of it and pulled it down beside her, arms locked around its neck as its jaw snapped inches from her face. She could feel its hot breath, the smell almost gagging her. She rolled over it, pinning it to the ground beneath her as she kicked out at another one. Then she twisted round, raising herself up and driving her elbow down on the back of its neck. The wolf fell to the ground.

She leapt to her feet, looking around to see that the other wolves were retreating once again. Cloud stood not far away, two dead wolves at his feet and a fire burning in his eyes. He started forward, lunging after another wolf that was slow to retreat.

"Cloud!" she called out.

He stopped and looked at her, then nodded and walked back to his position in front of the chocobos.

The wolves had not retreated very far, and now had once more returned to their vigil of circling around them.

"Well, at least we're wearing them down," Tifa commented, looking at the three dead wolves in front of them.

"Funny you should mention that," Cloud said. She saw him pointing to the forest once more. She turned to look and saw five more wolves loping up the slope to join in the hunt.

Tifa felt her heart sink. She had thought they were narrowing the odds, but now instead of four wolves there were nine. With no materia, how long could they continue to defend themselves?

"What do we do now?" she questioned.

Before Cloud could reply the wolves, emboldened by their reinforcements, charged at them again.

A wolf leaped through the air, directly at Tifa. She stepped to the side and the beast went right past her. She turned and kicked, striking it in the rear and sending it forward to crash into the wall of rock behind them. She spun around immediately, and grabbed another wolf by the neck just as its jaws were about to snap down on her. She kicked it in the stomach, then leapt to the side as two more came at her. She struck out, almost blindly, but they were all around her now, and she was likely to hit one no matter which direction she swung in. She cried out as she felt jaws lock onto her left arm. She twisted round, striking the wolf with an open palm in the center of its forehead. It fell to the ground just as another lunged at her.

She put up her arm to block the beast, but it suddenly howled in pain and collapsed to the ground, Cloud's sword having slashed through its underbelly. He had heard her cry out and come to her assistance. He swung his sword in a wide arc and cleared the area around them momentarily.

They looked back. Cloud had had to abandon his position in front of the chocobos to come to Tifa's aid, and with that the wolves had gotten through. Two of them now hung on the wounded chocobo, and with a screaming cry, it fell to the ground. The other wolves immediately dashed forward to help finish the bird off.

Tifa started for the downed bird, but Cloud grabbed hold of her arm.

"C'mon," he shouted.

He ran over to the remaining chocobo and hastily mounted, pulling Tifa up behind him. They were unimpeded. The wolves were all concentrating on tearing apart the bird that had fallen. Cloud spurred the chocobo, and they fled into the woods.

They rode straight west, as fast as they could go, but the forest was still thick around them, and the going was slow. Tifa kept looking back, but there was no sign of pursuit. Nevertheless, that didn't make her feel much better.

"I wish we could go faster," she said after a while.

Cloud shrugged.

"It doesn't matter now," he said calmly. "They won't follow us. The chocobo they got will feed them for quite some time. They've got no more reason to come after us."

Tifa fell silent, her arms wrapped around his waist. She felt bad for the bird, but there was nothing they could do about it. And the fact that the wolves had taken it had probably saved their lives.

Cloud glanced back and saw blood running down Tifa's arm. He halted the chocobo.

"I really should take a look at that," he said.

"No," she said immediately. "I don't care if they're following us or not, let's get a little further away first. It's okay, I'm fine."

He looked at her for a moment, then nodded. They rode on for perhaps half an hour, when suddenly, as if walking through a door, the forest fell away and they saw the sun sinking down just above a broad plain that ran for miles in front of them.

Cloud stopped and they both dismounted. Tifa's wound was a ragged tear, worse than she had let on but nothing life threatening. He cleaned out the wound, knowing that wounds from the teeth of northern wolves were notorious for becoming infected. Then he wrapped a bandage around it.

"That'll hold you until we can find some restore materia," he stated.

She moved her arm experimentally. It was fine until she tried to lift it above her shoulder. Just have to avoid doing that.

"Thank you Doctor Strife," she said with a smile.

"You're welcome," he replied. He looked to the west, shading his eyes from the glare of the sun, which now stood just above the horizon.

"We better get going," he observed. "We lost a lot of time in our little encounter. We're not likely to get to Icicle Inn before nightfall now. Looks like we'll have to postpone our search until tomorrow."

He remounted and helped Tifa up behind him. Now that he had mentioned it, she realized just how tired she was. He was right. No matter how worried they were about Zack, she wanted nothing more at this point than to flop down in a nice warm bed and get some serious rest. It had been a busy day.

As they rode on into the rapidly fading light, she couldn't help but shake her head.

Every day seemed to be a busy one lately.