

CHAPTER VI: AMANDA'S STORY

"Mornin'."

Barret looked up from the stove as Yuffie walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table beside Marlene.

"Morning, Yuffie," Marlene said pleasantly, looking up from the bowl of cereal in front of her.

"Hey squirt," Yuffie replied. She looked over at what Barret was cooking with a great deal of interest.

"Are you making scrambled eggs?" she asked, a hopeful look on her face.

"Actually they're sunny side up," Barret replied. "Though I suppose if you asked nicely I'd be able to manage some scrambled ones."

"Barret, could you pleeeese make me some scrambled eggs?" she asked, batting her eyes at him.

"All right, don't over do it," he muttered. He opened the fridge and pulled out more eggs.

"Amanda still asleep?" he asked as he cracked the eggs into a bowl.

"I peeked in before I went in the shower, and she was still sleeping soundly," Yuffie replied. She had told Barret about their conversation before she had turned in last night.

Barret nodded and slipped the eggs into the frying pan.

Yuffie sat back in her chair and looked him over.

"The picture of domestic bliss," she observed. "This is a side of you I've never seen before. Where's your apron?"

Barret looked at her darkly and pointed the spatula at her.

"A fine way to treat someone who invited you into his house and is now laboring over a hot stove while you sit by and watch idly. Unless you want to come up here and make your own eggs, I suggest you change your tune."

"You're absolutely right, oh domesticated one," Yuffie replied with a curt bow. "But I'm afraid cooking has never been one of my specialties. I think we'd all be better off if I stayed far away from the stove, unless, of course, you're anxious for the company of firemen."

Barret just grumbled under his breath. Marlene looked up at Yuffie with a grin on her face.

"You're funny, Aunt Yuffie. How long are you going to be staying?"

"Not long at all," Barret answered quickly. He looked over at the clock.

"You better get a move on," he said to Marlene. "The bus will be here in a few minutes."

"I know," Marlene said, sounding annoyed at being reminded of something she was well aware of. She spooned the last bit of cereal into her mouth, then stood up.

"Have you got everything?" Barret asked.

"Of course," she replied, hitching her backpack up on her shoulder. Barret came over, stooped down, and gave her a hug. He glanced over at Yuffie.

He leaned forward by Marlene's ear.

"Have you hidden all your valuables?" he questioned softly, but not so softly that Yuffie couldn't overhear.

"Oh Daddy," Marlene said, pushing him away with a smile.

"Have a good day at school," he said, standing up.

"I will," she replied, and hurried out the door.

"What have you been telling her?" Yuffie questioned.

"The truth, of course," Barret replied. He slipped the eggs deftly onto a plate and brought them over to the table. He sat down and they both started eating.

Yuffie took a mouthful and looked up at him in surprise.

"Hey, these are good," she exclaimed. "Have you been taking lessons from Tifa?"

Barret gave her a sour look.

"They're just eggs," he replied. "Even an idiot could make them. Why, I'd bet if you set your mind to it, even you could do it."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Yuffie replied. "But I've found it's much more fun talking someone else into doing it for me."

Barret looked at her darkly.

"That's it, from now on you make your own."

"I don't think you want me to burn down your kitchen," she reminded him.

He pointed up to the cabinets above the stove.

"There's cereal in the cupboard. I'm sure even you can't screw that up."

"Don't be too sure about that," she replied. "I can screw up anything if I set my mind to it."

"I'm sure you co..."

He stopped, looking over her shoulder. She turned and saw Amanda standing in the doorway, looking at them timidly. She still had Barret's enormous rope wrapped around her.

"Hello," Yuffie said, standing up and turning to face her. She indicated another chair at the table. "Have a seat. Would you like something to eat?"

Amanda slowly walked over to the chair and sat down.

"Yes please."

Yuffie sat down again, her eyes still on Amanda, who was looking down at the table in front of her.

"How are you feeling?" Barret asked as he pushed a plate of eggs in front of her.

"Much better, thank you," she said. She glanced up at him for a moment, then lowered her eyes again and started to eat. She must have been very hungry for it only took her a minute or two to clean her plate.

"Would you like some more?" Barret asked.

"No thank you," she replied without looking up.

"Can you tell us what happened last night?" Yuffie asked.

Amanda hesitated for a moment. Finally she looked up at them.

"I...I was being held captive," she replied, her voice unsteady. "I escaped."

"Being held captive by who?" Barret asked.

She shook her head.

"I don't know. They never told me any of their names."

"How long did they have you?" Yuffie questioned.

Amanda turned toward her.

"For as long as I can remember," she replied.

Yuffie raised an eyebrow and gave Barret a glance.

"For as long as you can remember you were held captive?" she said with a hint of skepticism.

Amanda nodded.

"Yes," she replied. "I don't remember much. They did things to me. Things that made me forget"

"What sort of things?" Barret asked, a frown plain on his face. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he didn't like this one bit. The thought that some people were holding this young girl against her will in his town, for God knew how long, did not sit well with him.

"I don't know exactly," she replied uncertainly. "Experiments. There was one man. He always wore a white coat. He stuck needles in me, and it hurt a lot."

"And you don't remember anything from before your captivity?" Barret asked.

Amanda shook her head.

"Very little. I remember a forest. I must have lived in the country somewhere. And mountains and a lake. But I don't remember any people."

Barret sat there looking at her carefully. It was such an odd story, but the girl seemed sincere.

"You said you escaped," he commented. "How?"

"Most of the time they kept me locked in a room," she replied. "But they couldn't keep me in there all the time. They argued about it in front of me sometimes. There were a lot of people there, but most of them I only saw occasionally. But there were three who were always there. The man in the white coat, a tall man who always wore black, and a short older man. The man in black seemed to be in charge, and was always ordering everyone about. I didn't like him. He always wanted me kept locked in my room, but the man in the white coat insisted I needed to get out every once in awhile. He said I had to get some exercise and needed to interact with other people or it would interfere with his experiments. The man in black didn't seem to like it very much, but he permitted it."

"There was a large room where I could exercise, and also a lounge where I could watch television. Although they didn't let me go in there too often. The man in the white coat kind of held that out as a reward if I cooperated with his experiments. But they also let me go into the kitchen sometimes. They had a cook who I helped out once in a while. He was the only one there who didn't seem so bad, although even he never told me his name."

"Anyway, there was almost always someone with me. But on very rare occasions the cook would leave me alone in the kitchen. I guess they thought it was safe to do that since the only way out was through the lounge, and there was always someone in there. But I had noticed a laundry chute at the back of the kitchen. They didn't use it anymore, and I think no one really ever noticed it. Besides, I'm pretty sure they would have thought it too small for a human to fit in, but I was pretty sure I could squeeze through it. For a long time I just thought about it, not doing anything, because I was scared that I would get caught. But about a week ago I just decided that I had to try. But it wasn't until yesterday that they left me alone in the kitchen. I slid down the chute. It was a tight squeeze, and for a minute I thought I was going to get stuck. I almost panicked then, but I managed to get through. I came out in the basement, in some area that didn't seem to be used much. I wandered around for a little while until I saw a window up near the ceiling. I pushed some boxes over to it and climbed up. I couldn't get the window to open, so I had to break it. I think someone must have heard it, because when I slipped through it I heard some shouting from inside. All I wanted to do then was just get away from there, so I ran."

Barret leaned heavily on the table, the frown still on his face.

"And you have no idea who these men were, or what they were doing to you?"

Amanda shook her head slowly.

Yuffie leaned back in her chair.

"Can you take us to the place where they were keeping you?" she asked.

Amanda looked at them nervously.

"I guess so," she said slowly. "I ran for a long time in the rain. I don't know where I was going. But if we can find the street again, I'm pretty sure I can pick out the building. I...I'm not really anxious to go back there."

Barret gave her a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, we won't let anything happen to you."

Amanda smiled feebly in return.

Barret glanced up at the clock.

"You don't have to take us there right now. Unfortunately, I've got to get to work. There's some business I have to take care of that really can't wait. I'll try to get out early and get back here around two. Then we can see if we can find out exactly what's going on here."

He got up and looked at Yuffie.

"Think you can handle putting the dishes away?"

Yuffie made a face

"I think I can manage," she replied.

"Okay, I've got to go," Barret said. He rested a hand on Amanda's shoulder. She looked up at him. "Don't worry. We'll straighten this all out."

Amanda nodded and Barret walked to the door. He cast one last glance at Yuffie.

"And you stay out of trouble!" he said sharply.

Yuffie gave him an innocent look and mouthed 'Moi?'

Barret left and Yuffie shoved the plates in the dishwasher. When she was done she looked at Amanda.

"Well, no sense sitting around here all day," she commented. "Think you're up to finding this place where they were keeping you?"

Amanda looked at her uncertainly.

"Don't you think we should wait for Mr. Wallace to come back?"

Yuffie waved her hand.

"He just worries too much," she replied. "I can take care of myself. I'm a trained ninja, you know."

"No I didn't," Amanda replied.

"Yup," Yuffie went on. "I was with Avalanche when they defeated Sephiroth, stopped Meteor, and saved the planet. In fact, if it hadn't been for me, they probably wouldn't have been able to defeat Sephiroth at all."

She looked at Amanda to see if she had made a suitable impression, but the girl was just looking at her curiously.

"Who's Sephiroth?" she asked.

"Man, you really have been out of it. Never mind," Yuffie said, realizing that her impressive credentials were lost on the young girl. "The point is, I can handle anything that we may run into."

Amanda sat there in silence for a moment, then nodded.

"I suppose," she said, standing up.

"Good," Yuffie stepped back and looked Amanda over. Barret's robe could have wrapped around her small frame two or three times. "But you can't go running around town wearing that. I've got some extra clothes in my backpack. I think they'll fit. While we're out we can pick you up some of your own."

"I don't have any money," Amanda stated.

"Don't worry, I've got Barret's credit card," Yuffie replied.

"He gave you his credit card?" Amanda asked. From the way they were talking, it seemed as if Barret didn't trust Yuffie.

"Uhh, not exactly," Yuffie replied. "I lifted it from his wallet last night."

"You stole it?" Amanda said in surprise. "Don't you think he'll be a little annoyed when he finds out?"

Yuffie shrugged.

"He'll get over it," she replied. "It's not like I'm not using it for a good reason. You've got to have clothes, right?"

"I suppose," Amanda said doubtfully.

"And I'm sure he won't mind if we get something to eat later. After all, we have to eat, right?"

Amanda did not reply.

"All right, let's get going."

They went back upstairs and Yuffie pulled some more clothes out of her backpack. Amanda put them on. Yuffie wasn't very large, but Amanda was smaller still. Even Yuffie's clothes were big on her.

Yuffie looked her over.

"That'll have to do for now," she said critically. "Not too bad. Over-sized is the fashion these days anyway."

Amanda did not protest, and together they left Barret's house and walked out into the street. Yuffie led them back to where they had first met Amanda the night before. From there she let the other girl lead the way. Amanda led them on a twisted trail through the city, obviously unsure of herself, and doubling back a number of times. But eventually they found themselves on a wide street near the railroad tracks, the road lined on either side with old warehouses with rusted metal roofs and peeling paint. This was one of the areas of Corel that still looked as run down as it had before Barret had become Mayor.

"I'm sure we're close," Amanda stated, looking around. "I know it was down here somewhere..."

They walked slowly down the streets. There were half a dozen men loading some crates onto a boxcar by the tracks, but they saw no one else about. The men took no notice of them as they stopped by a narrow alley.

"In here," Amanda said.

They walked into the alley. It was difficult to get through. The ground was covered with debris and garbage, leaving just a narrow path to walk through. A couple of times they had to climb over a pile of refuse that had spilled over and blocked the way.

Yuffie pinched her nose and looked at Amanda.

"Did it smell this bad last night?"

"Even worse," Amanda replied, "With the rain and all, but I didn't care."

They passed a huge overflowing dumpster and then Amanda stopped and pointed to the right.

"There it is," she said.

Yuffie came up beside her and looked down to see a broken basement window just above the ground surrounded by debris. Yuffie bent down and peered inside. She could make out plain concrete walls and floor, fading off into the darkness. The room appeared empty.

Yuffie stooped down and crawled through the window. She dropped silently to the ground and turned around, her shuriken in hand, but no one challenged her. She looked up out the window at Amanda peering in at her.

"C'mon," she said.

Amanda hesitated.

"I don't want to go back in there," she said fearfully.

"I told you you're safe with me," Yuffie dismissed it. "You've got nothing to worry about."

Slowly Amanda crouched down and slipped through the window. She dropped down beside Yuffie.

"Do you really think this is a good idea?" Amanda said.

"Stop worrying, I've got everything under control," Yuffie said confidently. She looked at the window once more.

"Didn't you say you piled some boxes up to get out the window?"

"Yes," Amanda replied. The room they were in was completely empty. "I guess they must have gotten rid of them."

"I guess," Yuffie commented. She dismissed it with a shrug and walked over to the single door in the room, which stood open leading out into a dark corridor. Yuffie stepped into it and looked around.

"Which way?"

Amanda pointed to the right.

"I came from that direction," she stated.

Yuffie walked down the hall. Amanda followed her slowly, obviously unhappy to be here. There were no lights on in the building, but the late morning sunlight shone bright enough through the small windows in the rooms they passed to give the hallway a dull illumination. Not enough to completely dispel the gloom, but more than light enough to navigate their way.

It didn't take them long to find the room at the bottom of the laundry shoot. This one had shelves along the wall and a long table in the center, with the connections for a washing machine and dryer along one wall, but the appliances themselves were long gone.

"This room looks the same," Amanda commented.

Yuffie nodded and took a look at the laundry shoot. It was very small, and she could see how Amanda's captors had not believed anyone could fit through it. If Amanda hadn't told her she'd squeezed through it, she wouldn't have thought it possible.

She walked back out into the hallway. There had to be stairs somewhere. Amanda stayed right behind her.

They found a stairway a short time later, near the end of the hallway. Yuffie silently made her way up, motioning for Amanda to follow slowly and to keep quiet. Amanda hesitated a moment, then followed. Yuffie was gratified to find that Amanda was walking almost as silently as she.

They reached the top of the stairs. There was a door there, ajar. Yuffie stood there for a few moments, listening for any sound of habitation, but all was silent. She looked out the doorway into another hallway.

"The lounge and the gym are right down there," Amanda whispered from behind her.

Yuffie nodded and headed down the hall, weapon ready. Still, her instincts told her that it would not be needed. The place appeared to be deserted.

They reached another door, this one closed. Yuffie put her ear to it and listened for a moment, then stood up. She pulled the door open slowly and glanced inside, then pulled back immediately. Then she opened the door wide and stepped into the room.

Amanda stepped in behind her and they found themselves in a large room completely devoid of furniture.

Amanda looked around for a moment.

"This used to be the lounge," she said softly.

"Looks like they flew the coop," Yuffie said, not bothering to lower her voice. "I guess they figured they'd be getting some unwelcome company, and decided to clear out first. I was afraid of this."

Amanda just stood there looking around the room.

"So what do we do now?" she questioned finally.

"Well, it couldn't hurt to look around," Yuffie replied. "It's possible they overlooked some small clue that might help us learn who they were. C'mon, let's check out the rest of the place."

For the next hour the two searched through the entire warehouse, but they found nothing. All the rooms were empty. Whoever had cleaned the place out had done an excellent job. Not even a scrap of paper had been left behind.

"Well, looks like we're just wasting our time here," Yuffie remarked when they reached the last room. "I'm sure Barret will want to look the place over for himself, but he won't find anything either. Whoever these people were, looks like they've made a clean getaway."

Amanda nodded, looking around, but not seeming to be all that upset about it.

"I'm kind of glad we didn't run into them," she admitted.

Yuffie just shook her head.

"So what do we do now?" Amanda asked.

Yuffie looked at her thoughtfully.

"Well, doesn't look like we're going to find whoever it was that did this to you. So I think it's time we moved on to other things. I promised you some clothes. Let's get out of this dump and find ourselves a nice mall. It's time to go on a little shopping spree!"

Amanda nodded agreement and smiled a real smile for the first time. Yuffie quickly led them back out onto the street. They swiftly walked back the way they had come, and after a twenty minute stroll found themselves in the center of downtown Corel. It didn't take Yuffie long to find a small clothing boutique and soon she had helped Amanda pick out a dozen outfits, and had nearly as many for herself.

"Don't you think we're spending too much?" Amanda questioned as they stood on the line by the checkout counter.

Yuffie vehemently shook her head.

"Of course not," she replied. "Barret doesn't have to know how many we got, and I'm sure he doesn't know how much women's clothes cost these days. If he says anything I'll just say this was the minimum we could spend to get some decent clothes."

Amanda did not reply. The line moved ahead and the salesgirl, who looked nearly as young as Amanda, rang up their purchases. Yuffie handed her the credit card.

She looked it over for a moment.

"Which one of you is Barret Wallace?" she asked.

"Neither one, silly," Yuffie replied. "He's my dad. It's my eighteenth birthday and he said I could use the card to buy some clothes. It's the first time I've gotten to use one."

The salesgirl looked at her for a moment, then smiled.

"Okay," she said cheerfully. She finished ringing up the purchase and handed them the card back. The two girls picked up their packages and quickly left the shop.

"His daughter?" Amanda said as they walked away.

"Hey, whatever works," Yuffie replied smoothly. "Now let's go get some food!"

Amanda just shook her head and followed as Yuffie led her across the street to a large restaurant and bar. The menu was posted by the front door and Yuffie looked it over.

"This place looks good," she said with satisfaction.

"I don't know," Amanda said hesitantly, looking over the menu. "It's awfully expensive. Don't you think we could find a cheaper place?"

"Nonsense," Yuffie replied. "You got to learn how to live, girl. Barret's not gonna mind. I'm sure he goes to places like this all the time. To him, this is just a tax write off."

Yuffie walked into the restaurant, Amanda shaking her head and following more slowly. The maitre'd greeted them at the door and soon they were seated.

"This place is gorgeous," Amanda commented. looking around at the mahogany paneled walls and crystal chandeliers above them.

"Uh huh," Yuffie replied, not appearing very impressed. "It's not bad, but I've seen some places much nicer. There are half a dozen restaurants in Wutai that would put this place to sha..."

Suddenly she stopped, staring off toward the bar, her face draining of color.

"What's wrong?" Amanda asked. She looked around, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Yuffie slowly gave a quick shake of her head and stood up.

"Worse than that," she replied. "I'll be back in a minute."

She walked over to the bar behind two men in dark blue suits. One was tall and bald and the other had unkempt dark red hair.

"Reno, what are you doing here?" Yuffie exclaimed.

The two Turks turned to look at her, neither one seeming to be surprised to see her. Reno held up his glass.

"Hey pest. What one normally does in a bar," he replied. "We're partaking of alcoholic beverages."

"You know what I mean," she said sharply. "What are you doing in Corel?"

Reno leaned back against the counter and gave her a sardonic smile.

"It's as good a place to be as any," he replied. "If you must know, we're here on business. Turk business."

"What sort of business?" Yuffie demanded.

Reno's smile widened.

"I'm afraid Turk business is none of your business. And too bad for you Elena is not here to blab all about it."

Reno looked past Yuffie to see Amanda staring at them curiously.

"Hey, who's your friend?" he asked. "Perhaps the two of you would like to join us for a drink?"

"Leave her out of this," Yuffie retorted. "I don't want you around here Reno. I think you should leave. The both of you."

Reno looked at her for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"Oh you do, do you? And since when do you go around telling the Turks what to do?"

He stopped laughing and looked at her, his smile fading.

"You have no idea what you're getting yourself into, Yuffie. To tell you the truth, I think it would be best if you were the one to leave. Go back to Wutai where you belong. You're just going to get yourself in trouble here, or worse..."

Yuffie looked at him indigently.

"I know how to take care of myself," she stated.

"As you've proven oh so many times in the past," he replied.

"Reno..." she spat out, then stopped. She knew further conversation was pointless. She wasn't sure what he was up to, but she didn't like this one bit. But no matter how she felt about it, she realized there was no way she could force Reno to leave. She pushed back the anger that was welling up in her and forced herself to be calm.

"I'll be watching you," she said, then turned away and walked back to Amanda.

The other girl looked at her curiously as she sat down again. "What was that all about?"

"Nothing," she replied. "Actually, it's a long story, and I'd rather not go into it right now. It has nothing to do with you."

Amanda nodded and fell silent. Their meal arrived, but Yuffie had lost much of her appetite, and only picked at her food. Amanda kept glancing over at the two Turks, who seemed to be watching them.

"Who are they?" Amanda asked.

Yuffie sighed. She had to give Amanda some sort of explanation.

"Trouble," she replied. "That's Reno and Rude of the Turks."

"That's Reno?" Amanda said.

"You know him?"

Amanda shook her head quickly.

"No, I...I just heard the name somewhere before."

"While you were captive?" Yuffie questioned.

Amanda hesitated.

"I'm not sure," she said finally. "It was probably nothing."

Yuffie seemed to accept this and fell silent again. She looked at Amanda and saw that she too was just playing with her food.

"You ready to blow this joint?" Yuffie asked, pushing her plate away. "Suddenly the food seems to have lost it's flavor."

Amanda nodded. Yuffie called for the check. A short time later the waiter came over with it and Yuffie handed him the credit card. She glanced over and saw Reno looking at her again. He turned to Rude and said something and they both laughed. Yuffie looked for the waiter. Suddenly she couldn't wait to get out of here.

Instead of the waiter she saw the maitre'd walking over. He stopped in front of them and held up the credit card.

"This card is owned by Barret Wallace," the man said sternly.

"Yeah, he's my father," Yuffie repeated the earlier lie. "It's my eighteenth birthday and he gave it to me to use. You know, as a present. He's such a great guy."

The maitre'd looked at her skeptically.

"Indeed?" he replied. "So you're Marlene? My, you've grown quite a bit since you and your father were in here last week."

Yuffie sat there for a moment with her mouth open.

"No, no," she said suddenly. "I'm not Marlene. I'm his other daughter. My name's Amanda."

Amanda eyebrows shot up.

"He doesn't have another daughter," the maitre'd replied.

"Yes," Yuffie cut in quickly. "I was away. I was sent to be educated in Wutai. It's been years since I've been here."

The maitre'd stared at her for a moment.

"Nice try," he said finally. "Would you both step into my office, please."

Yuffie stood up and looked at him angrily.

"Are you accusing me of stealing that credit card?" she said huffily. "You've got some nerve treating me like some sort of common thief. When my father hears about this he'll have this place condemned!"

"Come along miss," the maitre'd said, reaching down and grabbing her by the arm.

"Is there a problem here, Andre?"

The maitre'd looked up to see Reno and Rude standing beside him.

"Oh, not at all sir," the maitre'd replied. "Just a minor discrepancy over payment of the bill. Nothing that need concern the Turks."

"I see," Reno replied, looking at Yuffie. "Well, as it happens these two people are old acquaintances of ours."

He reached into his pocket and took out a wad of gil.

"I'm sure this is all just a simple misunderstanding."

He glanced at the check the maitre'd was holding, then peeled off a number of bills and handed them to the man.

"This should cover it, as well as a modest stipend for yourself for all your trouble."

The maitre'd gave the gil Reno had handed him a quick once over.

"Very good," he said, a wide smile on his face. He turned to Yuffie.

"Sorry for the misunderstanding. It was a pleasure having you here with us."

"I'll bet," Yuffie replied darkly.

The maitre'd walked away quickly. Yuffie turned and looked darkly at Reno.

"Don't expect me to thank you," she stated. "I was perfectly capable of extricating myself without any help from you."

"I'm sure you were," he replied with a smile.

Yuffie turned toward Amanda.

"Let's get out of here."

She started for the door. She looked back once when they reached it. Reno was still watching her. He waved casually.

"See ya around."

Yuffie turned away and stomped quickly out of the restaurant.

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The low rumble made Shera look up. At first it was just a hint of sound, more felt than heard. But it was sound she was attuned to, a sound she was as familiar with as the wind tinkling through the chimes hanging by the front door, or the faint squeak of the rocking chair she was sitting in.

She shifted Sydney in her arms and looked out the window. The infant did not protest, having earlier fallen peacefully asleep framed in the sunlight streaming through the window Shera was now peering out.

The sky was bright above the trees, as blue as she had ever seen it. A few small cumulus clouds hung suspended like tufts of cotton candy. She stared at them, trying to catch their slow progress across the sky, but they did not seem to move at all. The window could just have well been a painting hanging from her wall, until the dark shape of an aircraft hove into view.

Shera looked down at the baby in her arms and smiled.

"Daddy's home."

She stood up. The baby moved restlessly in her arms, but did not wake up. By the time Shera walked outside the Slipstream was already on the ground.

Cid emerged from the plane as she approached, followed by Cloud, Tifa, Aeris and Reeve. The pilot walked up to her. He gave her a kiss, then looked down at Sydney. "How's my little copilot?"

"She's fine," Shera replied. "A little cranky this morning, but nothing serious. I think she just missed her daddy."

"Well, I'm back to stay, for a while at least," Cid replied. "Got to get that rocket fired up."

Shera nodded but did not reply. She wasn't happy to see Cid away but she knew he had good reasons. The rocket might keep him here now, but when it was done he'd be off to God only knew where. But, much as she would have liked him to stay home, she didn't begrudge him the opportunity. She had been up in space too, in the Shinra 26, and she had to admit there had been a certain fascination to it. If it weren't for the baby, she would probably want to go with him.

"Hi Shera," Aeris said as they girls gathered around her and the baby.

"Hi," Shera replied with a smile. "Have you all come to watch the test on the rocket?"

Cloud shook his head and explained what had happened in Ifalna.

"How terrible," Shera commented with a look of concern.

"Tifa and I went to Icicle Inn while Aeris and Reeve looked for Zack in Bone Village," Cloud continued. "Neither of us found him, but one of the dockworkers at Bone Village saw someone fitting Zack's description get on a boat bound for Costa del Sol. Since Cid was coming back to Rocket Town anyway, he gave us a lift back here."

"But we can't stay," Aeris stated. "We've got to go look for Zack."

Shera nodded as Cid opened the cargo hold and led out four chocobos.

"Are you leaving right away?" Shera questioned. "You're welcome to stay for breakfast."

"Thanks, but we already ate," Cloud replied. He glanced over at Aeris. "We're all anxious to get on the road. I'd like to find him as soon as possible."

"So you're going to go to Costa del Sol now?" Shera inquired.

Tifa shook her head.

"Cloud thinks there's no reason for him to stay there, and we all agree. He just went to Costa del Sol because that's where the boat landed. We think he's headed somewhere else."

"Where?" Shera asked.

Tifa looked at Cloud.

"Not really sure," Cloud replied slowly. "He may be just trying to get away, with no destination in mind. And if that's true we're probably just wasting our time. But it may be that he is headed somewhere specific, even if he doesn't realize it himself just yet."

"And where might that be?" Shera said.

"I think he might be going to Gongaga."

Shera nodded. Zack's hometown, although he didn't remember it. It would make sense for him to return there, hoping perhaps to find some clue from his past, something he could remember.

"Poor Zack," she said softly.

Cid had the chocobos ready, and Cloud mounted up, followed by the others. Cid stood beside Shera.

"Good luck," he said. "You know I'd come with ya, but this test is important, and I can't miss it."

"We understand," Aeris stated.

"Too bad you haven't had more lesson's flying the Slipstream," Cid continued, looking at Cloud. "You could take the plane and get there a lot quicker. But I don't think you're quite ready to solo yet."

"I'm afraid I agree," Cloud responded.

"Too bad Vincent isn't with us," Tifa said.

Cid nodded.

"Well, you know how hard he is to get a hold of."

Cloud looked at the others. They were all mounted.

"All right, looks like we're ready to go."

"Let me know if you find him," Cid said.

"We will," Cloud replied. He spurred his chocobo forward. With a wave the other followed, and they soon disappeared down the road south through Rocket Town. Cid watched until they they were gone.

"I feel bad about not going with them," he admitted.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Shera reassured him. Despite Cid's gruff exterior, he was always willing to help his friends.

Cid did not reply but turned to look to the north. They could both see the tip of the new rocket looming above the trees.

"It's time to get down to business," Cid said.

They both walked down the well trodden path from their house to the launching pad. As they approached Cid looked up to see the rocket now towering over their heads. Shera looked at Cid staring up at the rocket and couldn't help but smile. She knew how proud he was to see his life's dream in front of him.

There were dozens of workmen gathered around the rocket, working feverishly on final preparations for the test. Cid looked around for a moment, then walked up to one man standing in front of what appeared to be a table strewn with papers covered with schematics.

"How's it going, Landon?"

The man looked up and broke into a grin.

"Captain!" he exclaimed. "It's about time you showed up, if you don't mind my saying so. I was beginning to think you might miss the test."

"Like there was any chance of that," Shera commented.

Cid gave her a crooked grin, then looked at Landon more seriously. "So, what's the situation?"

"No problems," Landon replied. "We're good to go anytime you give the word."

Cid nodded in satisfaction.

"Okay, let me take a look at things inside."

Cid walked toward the ship, disappearing into a small structure at the base of the gantry. Shera stood next to Landon, looking over the papers in front of him.

"You made sure to double check the oxygen tanks?" she questioned.

"Yes," Landon replied. "I've gone over it a dozen times, and everything checks out okay."

Landon glanced at Shera with a bemused smile on his face. Cid was the driving force behind this rocket, but Shera had played a large part in its construction as well. Almost every day Cid had been here Shera had been at his side, and often when he was away she was there by herself, meticulously going over the work that went into the ship, double checking everyone and having them redo anything that she felt didn't measure up to the standards they were expecting. It had slowed things down, of course, and Landon knew that it had driven Cid batty at times, but the Captain had bit his tongue and never objected. He had learned his lesson the first time, and had come to realize that some things just couldn't be rushed.

"We're almost ready for the test," Landon stated. "C'mon, let's go inside."

There was a large newly constructed bunker about two hundred meters from the launch platform. This was the command center, and was a beehive of activity as they entered.

Landon walked up to a platform in the center of the room and stood behind two men tapping away rapidly on computer keyboards. Shera stood beside Landon, trying to take in everything that was going on while still staying out of the way. On the wall in front of them was a huge television screen. The picture on it was split in two, the left side showing the rocket sitting on the launch pad, the right showing Cid, now seated in the cockpit of the rocket, dressed in a bright orange space suit and puffing away furiously on a cigarette.

Landon leaned forward and keyed a microphone in front of him.

"All set to go, Captain?" he asked.

Cid flicked some switches rapidly and stared at the results on the gauges in front of him. He gave a grunt of satisfaction, then looked up at the monitor with a grin.

"You bet yur ass I am," he stated. "Let's give this baby some gas."

Cid studied the gauges in front of him. Everything seemed to be working flawlessly. Even though this was only a test, and the rocket would not even be lifting off the ground, he still felt butterflies in his stomach. Just the feeling of sitting in this seat, knowing the kind of power he had below him, the power to send him up among the stars, gave him a giddy feeling. This is what made it all worthwhile.

"Thirty seconds, Captain," Landon announced.

Cid kept his mind focused on the readings from the instruments, looking for any little glitch or discrepancy that could mean a potential problem. So far he saw nothing out of the ordinary, but it would have been easy for even his sharp eye to miss something in the sea of instruments in front of him. Fortunately nearly every monitor before him was duplicated in the command center, and each was even now being watched over separately by expertly trained technicians. The truth of the matter was they would have been able to complete this test with no one in the bird at all, but Cid was not about to miss out on something like this. When it came to his rocket he was very possessive, and he wasn't shy about letting everyone else know it. There was going to be no mistake in anybody's mind that this was his baby.

He could hear Landon continuing the countdown over the intercom, but he wasn't paying much attention, focusing on the instruments. Suddenly a number of the graphs in front of him shot up. There was a low rumbling sound and the entire ship shook. Cid knew they had reached the final ten seconds and the engines had been ignited.

The rumbling built up rapidly below him. Cid felt himself sitting back into his seat even as his eyes scanned the panels in front of him even more meticulously. The rumble suddenly built up into a dull roar, the vibration increasing to an almost violent shaking as the gauges in front of him measuring engine power smoothly rose until they were near the upper limits.

"Engines at full power," he heard Landon's voice, almost drowned out by the roar below him.

"Hold for five minutes," Cid stated louder than necessary. He scanned the gauges a few moments more, then allowed himself to relax a bit. If anything was going to go wrong, the stress of bringing the engines to full power was when it was most likely to happen. Now that they were past that point, the danger was lessened somewhat.

He felt the vibration throughout his whole body, and again marveled at the power held in the engines below him. He could almost feel the rocket straining against the pull of the earth, like a young stallion chaffing at the bit, anxious to be off flying, to be set free. He looked at the instruments in front of him one more time. Just a few simple switches, a mere flick of his hand, and the final restraints would be tossed off, the final barriers set aside, and both he and the rocket could reach for that which he had longed for all his life.

"Zero plus five minutes," he heard Landon state, sounding very far away. Cid sat there for a moment in silence, then his hand came forward and he pulled back on a lever. Immediately the rumble below him started to die away.

Not yet my friend, he thought as the engines flickered out below him. Not yet... but soon.

Shera was the first one to greet him when he reemerged from the rocket. A crowd from the control room was right behind her, everyone wearing ear to ear grins.

"We did it," Landon nearly shouted from behind Shera. "It went perfectly!"

Cid nodded, a grin covering his own face as well.

"How long until we can go for real?" he asked.

Landon hesitated a moment, doing some calculating in his head.

"We've got to refuel her and check the structural integrity. If everything went as well as it seems, minimum of two weeks."

Cid nodded, grabbed hold of Shera and planted a kiss on her lips.

"Congratulations," she said.

"Thanks, but you deserve this as much as I do," he replied. "I couldn't 'a done it without ya."

Shera just smiled. Cid let her go and turned to the others.

"Even though you're all a bunch of gold brickin' lazy bastards, you've done a fine job," he called out. "We've got a lot more work to do, but I think this occasion calls for a celebration. Drinks are on me down at the bar!"

All the workers cheered and followed Cid back to town. Shera came along slowly behind, the baby still in her arms. She paused for a moment to look up at the rocket that towered over her. She was happy for Cid but she couldn't help but wonder, and yes, worry, about what the future would bring. Though she wouldn't dream of stopping Cid from going up into space, she couldn't help but wonder what dangers lie in wait up there. Today had gone well, but it had only been a test. She knew it was only a matter of time before those engines roared to life again, only this time nothing would hold them back.

The baby stirred in her arms. Sydney opened her eyes and started to fuss. Shera lifted her up on her shoulder and patted her until she became quiet once more. Then she turned and slowly walked back toward the house.

"I hope your daddy knows what he's doing," she said softly.