

CHAPTER IV: ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY

They reached Icicle Inn early that evening. After they had settled in they all gathered around the fireplace in the lobby to discuss their strategy for the next morning's search.

"Godo told me that Yuffie was searching in the great glacier area when she disappeared," Cloud said. "But he doesn't know exactly where she was. It's a big area to search, so we'll have to split up into teams. Reno, you take Rude and Elena and search the western portion of the glacier. Barret, you take Tifa and Red and search the eastern. I'll take Aeris and Cait and search the central area."

Reno looked at him thoughtfully but said nothing. Elena and Tifa both seemed to want to say something, but neither one spoke. Cid looked at him.

"What about Vincent and I?" he asked.

"You take the Slipstream and do an aerial reconnaissance. You may see something from the air that we would miss on the ground."

Cid nodded.

"We'll all work our way north through the glacier and meet at Mr. Holozoff's cabin when we've completed our search. If we don't find anything, we'll tackle the Gaea cliffs the next day. Any questions?"

He looked at each of them in turn, but no one spoke.

"All right," he said. "Then I suggest we all relax for a while. Just remember that we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. Make sure you get plenty of rest."

"Thanks, Dad," Elena couldn't help but say.

Cloud looked at her for a moment, but then smiled.

"Okay, I guess I kind of deserved that."

The party split up. The Turks walked over to the bar and sat down. Reno ordered them all drinks. Elena sat beside him, glaring at him angrily.

"It's bad enough we have to work with them," she spit out, "but do we have to take orders from Cloud as well. Who's the boss here, anyway?"

Reno sighed and turned to look at her.

"We are not taking orders from Cloud," he said patiently. "But it would be foolish to quarrel over every move we make. That would just slow us down, and the sooner we finish this mission the sooner we get paid and get rid of them. Besides, what he said made sense."

The waiter came over and placed their drinks in front of them. Elena picked hers up and quickly drained it. She banged it back down on the counter and glared at Reno.

"I know a lot of unpleasant things about you," she said accusingly, "but I never realized before that you were such a wuss!"

She got up and stalked away.

Reno raised an eyebrow and turned to look at Rude, who seemed completely undisturbed by the entire conversation.

"She seems a bit upset," he observed.

"Umm."

Reno looked at Rude for a moment.

"You didn't know we were going to be working with Cloud," he said finally. "How come you didn't look surprised when we met them?"

Rude took a leisurely swig from his glass, then set it down.

"Nothing surprises me," he answered with a shrug.

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Elena headed for an empty table in a dark corner of the bar as far away from the others as she could find and sat down.

Damn Reno, she thought. Why did he always have to be so smug? He should have warned them ahead of time who they would be working with. They were Turks, weren't they supposed to stick together?

She took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down.

The worst part of it was, he was right, she was letting her emotions get in the way. But she couldn't help it. The pay was good, yes, but it wasn't everything. Reno had known people who died in the reactor blasts too, didn't he feel anything for them? She didn't think she could ever be that cold blooded.

"Looks like you're having a difficult time with this."

She jumped up and turned to see a dark figure sitting at a table right beside hers.

Anger blazed in her eyes, and for a moment Vincent thought she was going to shout at him, but then it passed, and she sat back down again slowly.

"Please don't scare me like that," she said wearily. She really didn't feel like taking to anyone right now, but of all the people in Cloud's party, Vincent was the one she disliked the least. After all, he hadn't had anything to do with blowing up the reactors in Midgar, and he had once been a Turk.

"Sorry," he said. "I do seem to have that effect on people."

Elena looked over to where Reno and Rude were sitting at the bar, but they had their backs to her now.

"Sometimes it's hard being a Turk," she said. "I never realized how difficult it would be."

"Nothing of value is ever obtained easily," Vincent replied.

"Oh, please," she responded, shaking her head. "The last thing I need to hear is some philosophical nonsense."

She looked at him with a tinge of anger, but he returned her look unflinchingly with his piercing gaze. She quickly turned away.

"Very well, I'll be blunt," he said. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. So you lost a few friends in a reactor explosion, you think that gives you a monopoly on pain and suffering? You don't know the half of it. I've seen things happen to people I loved that would make your hair stand on end. In fact I'd say it's a safe bet to say that everyone in our entire party has suffered more than you have, and none of them are whining about it. You want me to be straightforward with you, well then here it is in a nutshell. Life sucks. Get used to it."

Elena's mouth fell open, and for a long time she just stared at him. Then she closed her mouth and a small smile appeared on her lips. Finally, someone who spoke his mind and didn't sugarcoat it.

"Much as I hate to quote Cloud," she said, "but I guess I deserved that."

She stood up.

"What are you drinking?" she asked. "In the spirit of newfound cooperation between our two parties, it's on me."

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Barret sat at the far end of the bar, as far from Reno and Rude as he could get, and stared gloomily at the wall while cradling his drink in his hands. He couldn't believe they were actually cooperating with the Turks.

He felt someone come up beside him and turned to see Tifa slide into the bar stool next to him. The bartender came over and looked at her.

"Whatever he's having," she said despondently, indicating Barret's drink.

He looked at her, and from the look on her face it was obvious she was no more happy with the situation than he.

The bartender returned with her drink. She gulped down half of it and then put it down, staring gloomily in the direction of

Reno and Rude.

But she was looking past Reno and Rude. Cloud, Aeris and Red were sitting together near the fireplace, talking quietly. She couldn't help but notice how close together Cloud and Aeris were sitting.

She took another gulp from her drink.

I'm being a jerk, she thought. It was foolish to be jealous, but she just couldn't help it. She loved Aeris like a sister, and was truly happy to have her back, but it was making things difficult.

"I don't see how they expect us to get along with the Turks," Barret grumbled beside her.

"Umm," she said distractedly. She knew Cloud cared for Aeris, but she didn't really know whether he looked on her as just a friend or something more. She certainly would never have asked Cloud so blunt a question, and she hadn't asked Aeris.

She shook her head. The real reason why she hadn't asked Aeris is that she was afraid of what Aeris might answer. They hadn't seemed that close since Aeris resurrection, but maybe she had just missed it. Why had he chosen her to go with him on the search tomorrow?

"In spite of what Cloud might think," Barret continued. "I don't trust them. I'm sure they'd turn on us and Godo in a minute if they saw any profit in it. How do we know what they would do if someone else offered them more gil than Godo is paying them?"

Tifa turned to look at Barret and sighed.

"Barret, I love you and all, but sometimes the company of someone is all the comfort a person needs. So do me a favor and just shut up!"

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"I never thought we'd end up working with the Turks," Cloud said.

Red, who was lying on the floor in front of the fire, turned his head to look at him.

"I've a feeling that is going to be the main topic of conversation for some time to come," he said.

Cloud turned to look at Aeris. Of all of them, she seemed the least disturbed about the situation.

"They've been hounding you for most of your life, Aeris," he said. "It doesn't bother you?"

She shook her head.

"It's like you said earlier," she replied. "That was a long time ago and things have changed. There is no more Shinra. The Turks don't have any reason to be after me any more."

Cloud shrugged. Not only had the Turks been persecuting her, they also had a hand in the death of both of her parents. Aeris had as much reason, if not more, than any of them to hate the Turks.

"You're more forgiving than I," he said softly. He wasn't about to forget their battles with the Turks, but he was willing to work with them if necessary.

"I think forgiveness would be too much to ask from any of us," Red stated. "I think what we should be shooting for here is tolerance, and even that may be difficult for some of us," he continued, glancing over at the bar. "It won't do any of us, or the mission, any good if we start fighting among ourselves. You don't think Barret will do anything foolish, do you?"

Cloud followed Red's gaze. He could see Barret and Tifa at the bar, both silently looking at their glasses.

"No," he replied. "Barret can be a hot head, but he won't jeopardize the mission. Besides, Tifa knows how to keep him in line."

He looked over at Aeris once again and saw that she was staring off into space with a far away look in her eye.

"Aeris?"

She did not answer. Her mouth moved as if she were talking to someone, but no words came out. He realized she was communing with the planet, and he sat back and left her alone. He often had to remind himself that Aeris was no ordinary

girl, but the last of an ancient race. Even after all this time he still couldn't get used to some of the things she did, and frankly, this talking to the planet thing kind of freaked him out a little.

Red looked at Aeris and understood as well. They waited in an uncomfortable silence for a while, until Aeris finally turned to look at them.

"The planet feels danger," she said.

"What sort of danger?" Cloud asked.

"I can't say," she replied. She looked at them in silence for a moment, as if searching for the right words.

"It's hard to explain. It's like, if you are alone in a dark house, and you feel like something is in the closet. There's no real reason to believe anything is there. It's just a feeling. So you walk over and look in the closet, and it's empty, but you still feel like something is there, or something should be there. I can feel the sense of danger, but nothing is wrong."

She looked at him to see if he understood, but his furrowed brow told her that he didn't.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm afraid I just can't put it into words."

She stood up.

"I'm going up to my room."

Without another word she walked away. Cloud watched her disappear up the stair. He looked at Red, but neither one spoke for a long time.

"I'm worried about her," he said finally.

"How so?" Red questioned.

"There's no doubt in my mind that we're going to run into trouble somewhere along the line," Cloud continued. "Maybe as early as tomorrow when we start our search. It's going to be difficult for us without the use of our materia, but for Aeris in particular. I know she's a wiz with magic but her hand to hand skills are the weakest among us. I'm afraid she might get hurt."

Red looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then nodded.

"Is that why you made sure she goes with you tomorrow, to keep an eye on her?"

"Yes," Cloud replied. "To tell you the truth I'd feel safer if she didn't come at all, but I know she wouldn't go along with that."

"I think you might be underestimating her," Red said. "But if you really feel that way, maybe you should send her with Cid in the Slipstream. She should be safe enough there."

"I thought about that too," Cloud answered. "But if she's going at all, I think it would be better if she's someplace I can keep an eye on her."

Red shrugged.

"If that's the way you feel. But I wouldn't worry about her too much. She's been through a lot, more than any of us, and she's come out of it all right. She just may surprise you."

"I suppose," Cloud replied, sitting back on the couch. "I guess we'll find out soon enough."