

CHAPTER IV: BARRET'S BODYGUARD

Barret leaned back in his chair and stretched his arms over his head. Though it was nearly dark, he could still see the pattering of the light rain against his window of his office. It had been raining all day, off and on.

He lowered his arms and stared at the stack of papers on his desk. He couldn't believe how busy things had been lately. Seemed like every day for the past month he'd been working until dusk, and there seemed to be no end in sight. Sometimes he wondered why the hell he had ever taken this job in the first place. Being Mayor wasn't all it was cracked up to be. If you did a good job everyone ignored you and if you screwed up the citizens never let you hear the end of it.

He stood up and stretched again. Well, he wasn't going to worry about it any longer, at least for today. The good thing was, by working so late, he didn't have any work to bring home with him this time.

He left the office and walked through the reception area, deserted now. His secretary at least had enough sense to go home at a decent hour. He switched off the light and started down the hall. The building was always pleasantly quiet this time of the evening. Most of the offices were dark, though he saw one down at the end of the hall with the lights still on. At least he wasn't the only one stuck here late at night, small comfort that might be.

Barret reached the main entrance and stepped out into the rapidly falling darkness. Immediately he was hit with a blast of chill air. The rain that blew in his face was icy cold, and he pulled his recently acquired trench coat closer about him. A tall oak stood on either side of the entrance to the building, guarding it like silent sentries. Barret looked up and saw a handful of leaves still clinging tenaciously to the branches, defying the wind and the inevitable coming of winter.

He braced himself and strolled out into the cold rain. It was only a short walk to his modest home on the north side of Corel, but it obviously wasn't going to be pleasant. What a miserable day.

He hadn't walked more than a few paces when a sudden movement behind him made him spin around. A small figure had appeared seemingly out of nowhere to dash up beside him. He recognized her immediately.

"Yuffie!" he exclaimed. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Yuffie tossed the water from her hair with a shake of her head.

"Just happened to be in the area," she replied. "Thought I'd stop by and say hello."

He stood there for a moment looking at her.

"I'll bet," he replied finally. "No, really, what are you after? We already gave you all of our materia."

"Why do I have to want something?" he retorted, looking hurt. "I come all the way here in the cold and rain to visit my friend and all I get is accusations? Whatever happened to 'Why hello, Yuffie, how nice of you to come see me, especially in this terrible weather'?"

"Yuffie, I don't have time for this," Barret grumbled, started forward again.

She scampered after him.

"Hey, c'mon," she insisted. "I'm serious...and..."

He glanced back and looked at her darkly.

"And what?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"And...I need a favor."

Barret gave her a knowing look.

"What sort of favor?" he asked, with no doubt in his mind he would not like the answer.

"I'm gonna be here for a few days," she said slowly. "And I need a place to stay."

Barret pulled up short.

"You want to stay at my place?" he exclaimed. "No way! There's plenty of Inns in Corel."

"Well, I'm a little short of cash right now," she replied immediately. "C'mon. I won't cause any trouble."

"You won't cause any trouble?" he repeated. "That's like an oxymoron. You *are* trouble!"

"Who you calling a moron?"

"Not a chance, Yuffie. Why don't you just go back to Wutai."

"I can't," she snapped.

"Why not?"

She hesitated once more.

"I...I kind of got in trouble with Godo again. Nothing he won't get over, but I need to give him a couple of days to cool off. C'mon, Barret, as a fellow member of Avalanche, you've got to help me."

Barret snorted.

"Who made that rule?" he questioned.

"C'mon, Barret," she pleaded, trying and succeeding fairly well at looking pitiful. "I've got no place else to go."

"Yuffie, I..." he began, then stopped, seeing the look she was giving him. His mouth opened and closed a few times. "Stop that!" he said finally.

Yuffie just pressed closer to him.

"C'mon," she intoned.

He turned away, but she quickly came up beside him and leaned forward until she could see his face again.

"Just for a few days..." she cajoled.

"I said stop that!" he shouted, whirling his arms in the air. "That's not fair, giving me that puppy dog look!"

She ignored his outburst.

"Puleeeeeez?"

He stood there for a moment as the veins bulged in his forehead.

"Arrggghh! All right! All right! I give up. You can stay. But just for a few days. God, I must be completely losing my mind."

Yuffie's face immediately brightened into a smile.

"Thank you Barret," she said politely.

He just mumbled something unintelligible and started walking again. He had enough troubles. The last thing he needed was to have Yuffie wandering around, and in his own house, no less! What else could go wrong?

Just then the rain started to come down harder.

"Hey, don't you have some kind of transportation?" Yuffie commented, almost running to keep up with Barret's rapid pace. "You're the Mayor, right? Don't you even get a car?"

Barret lowered his head to prevent the rain from getting in his eyes.

"I like to walk," was all he said.

"I do too," she replied. "But in this? Don't you think you're taking this walking thing a little too seriously?"

He glanced over at her, but did not slow down.

"What, are you going to melt?" he questioned. "I said you could stay at my place, I didn't say I was interested in conversation."

Yuffie returned his sour look.

"Sheesh, just asking," she said defensively. "And it's dissolve."

"What?"

"The rain," she replied. "It's water. It doesn't make things melt, heat makes things melt. Water makes things dissolve. It always pissed me off when Dorothy throws that bucket of water on the wicked witch and she runs around screaming that she's melting. She's not melting, she's dissolving."

Barret stared at her.

"Yuffie, what the *hell* are you talking about!"

Yuffie shrugged.

"Oh, nothing."

Barret shook his head. This was one chick he would never be able to figure out.

They turned a corner. It was very dark now. With the sky obscured by clouds the light had long since vanished, even though it was early evening and the sun had set no more than a half hour ago. Ahead of them only the pools of light cast from the streetlights above provided any relief from the darkness.

Not surprisingly there were few people on the streets. Barret could see a couple walking rapidly down the opposite side of the street, both of them trying to squeeze beneath the comfort of one small umbrella. He could see a few others in the distance as well, far ahead of them. There was a narrow alley nearby on the right, and for a moment he thought he saw another figure. He only got a glimpse before the person disappeared from sight, but he thought he recognized the man.

Yuffie apparently had seen the same thing, for she suddenly stepped forward, pulling out her shuriken.

"Was that Rude I just saw?" she exclaimed.

Barret stopped again, looking at her oddly.

"I think it might have been," he replied slowly.

"What's he doing here?" she questioned sharply.

Barret did not reply at first, but stood there looking at Yuffie. She seemed extremely agitated.

"How should I know?" he replied. "I'm not a tyrant you know. Anybody who wants to can come into Corel. We let you in, didn't we?"

Yuffie ignored the comment, still standing tensely with weapon in hand. He looked up again but saw no sign of anyone.

"Let's walk on the other side of the street," Yuffie said, starting to cross without waiting for a reply.

Barret followed her. Yuffie had always been strange, but he had to admit this was even more bizarre than usual for her.

"Yuffie, what are you up to?" he questioned as they reached the other side of the street.

"I don't know what you mean," she replied innocently.

Barret decided not to pursue it. He knew it would be useless. She obviously had some scheme in mind, but he knew there was no way he was going to drag it out of her until she was ready to tell him. He would just have to keep a constant eye on her. As if he didn't have enough to do already.

They walked though a pool of radiance cast by one of the streetlamps above them. Yuffie still had her shuriken out, and kept glancing across the street where they had glimpsed the mysterious figure, but she saw no one. Barret looked around and saw that the streets were now deserted.

They were almost upon another intersection when a figure suddenly darted around the corner in front of them. Yuffie was walking along the edge of the street, with Barret on the inside. He caught a glimpse of long silver hair and realized the person was going to run right into him. Too late he tried to sidestep, and a moment later they collided. Barret swayed a moment from the impact, but the other person staggered back as if hitting a brick wall and fell to the ground in the road, landing with a loud splash in a puddle that had been building up by a storm drain.

Barret and Yuffie both looked down at the young girl in front of them. She was wearing a long dark colored dress of some thinly made material and wore no coat. She lay there for a moment in stunned surprise.

"Are you all right?" Barret questioned, just as surprised himself. What the hell was this girl doing running around in the rain on a night like this?

She looked around for a moment, shaking her head, as if confused. Then she struggled to her feet, backing away from them in obvious fear.

"No, get away from me," she cried. "Leave me alone!"

Her head darted from side to side as she backed away from them. Then she suddenly turned and ran across the road to the right.

Barret turned and looked at Yuffie.

"What the hell..." he muttered. The girl had looked to be no more than sixteen or seventeen. She was running around in this cold rain with only a thin dress on, and she was scared.

Barret took off, not looking to see if Yuffie was following, but a moment later he heard her footsteps splashing in the street behind him. Whoever this girl was, it was obvious that something was very wrong. He was going to find out what was going on.

He had a hard time keeping her in sight. Though he had started off after her almost immediately, she was a surprising distance in front of them. He could see her now only intermittently, flitting in and out of the streetlights ahead. Then she suddenly vanished around a corner.

It took Barret and Yuffie just a few moments to reach the corner, but when they came around it they saw no sign of the girl.

"Damn," Barret exclaimed, looking around helplessly. "Where the hell did she go?"

Yuffie did not answer, but stood in the rain, turning back and forth, but the street was deserted. Then they both spun around together as they heard a muffled cry.

"There!" Barret exclaimed, pointing to a narrow alley between two buildings to their left. "C'mon."

He dashed over the the alley, Yuffie right behind him. There was a streetlight nearby, but it cast no light into the alley itself, which loomed like a dark pit in front of them.

Barret was about to enter when Yuffie ran up in front of him.

"I'll go in first," she said quickly, then disappeared into the darkness before he could protest.

With a curse he followed her in. He found himself immediately plunged into darkness, but it was not quite as black as it had appeared. Once out of the glare of the streetlight he realized he had been wrong. A faint light from the street trickled in here. Enough to see two dark figures at the end of the alley hunched over something between them.

"Hey!" Yuffie shouted, running forward. The two figures paused for just a second, then dashed off in the opposite direction. Yuffie's shuriken flew, to clang against concrete as the two figures disappeared around a corner at the far end of the alley. She ran forward and stopped where the figures had been standing.

Barret ran up and could see the girl on her knees on the ground, her head in her hands. He stooped down beside her and looked at her. Even in the dark he could make out a dark bruise on her forehead.

He reached out his hand but she suddenly looked up and jerked back away from him, fear filling her face. She tried to scramble to her feet, but stumbled and fell back down to her knees.

"No," he said more sharply than he had meant to. "No," he said again, more softly this time. "We're not going to hurt you."

She looked at him, panic in her eyes, but then she brought her hand up to her head again. She swayed and then fell forward, and would have landed in the street again had not Barret intercepted her.

He cradled her in his arms and stood up, looking at her. Her silver hair was plastered to her unconscious face and hung in long strands down her back. Her dress was soaked.

"We've got to get her inside," Barret muttered.

Yuffie did not say anything, but nodded.

"My house isn't far away," he continued. "C'mon, and keep your eyes open."

Yuffie did not need to be told. They walked rapidly back down the alley and into the street again. Yuffie took the lead, keeping her eyes open for any sign of pursuit, but the streets were totally deserted. They made it to Barret's house without incident.

Yuffie pulled open the door and Barret carried the young girl inside. Marlene came running into the room.

"Daddy!" she exclaimed, but then stopped when she saw the burden he was carrying.

"C'mon, let's take her upstairs," Barret said to Yuffie. He walked up the staircase, Yuffie and Marlene following, and turned into the first room at the top. He walked in and gently placed the girl down on a bed.

"You'll have to get her out of those clothes," Barret said to Yuffie. "In fact, we're all soaking wet. I'm afraid I don't have anything for you both to wear except maybe some robes."

"I've got clothes for myself in my backpack," Yuffie replied.

Barret cast one more glance at the girl.

"All right," he said. "I'm going to go change myself. Let me know if she wakes up."

Yuffie nodded and Barret turned toward Marlene.

"C'mon, honey," he said. "Get one of my robes for her from the closet in my room, then come downstairs. Your Dad's got a little story to tell you."

They both left the room. Yuffie walked over and started to strip off the girl's wet clothing. It wasn't a difficult task, the girl was easy for even Yuffie to lift. A few minutes later Marlene came in and handed Yuffie one of Barret's robes, then headed downstairs. Yuffie slipped the robe on the girl who suddenly cried out softly. Yuffie stopped and looked at her, but her eyes remained closed. Yuffie pulled the blankets over her and stepped back.

"Much better," she muttered approvingly.

She opened up her backpack and pulled out some of her own clothes, then slipped out of her own wet things. She was just starting to put her dry clothes on when the girl moaned again.

Yuffie looked at her. The girl's head turned to the side, and she moaned softly one more time. Then her eyes opened.

She looked around for a moment, obviously confused. Then the fear filled her eyes again. She sat up in the bed, staring at Yuffie.

"Who are you?" she blurted out.

"Friends," Yuffie replied. She said nothing more and they just looked at one another as Yuffie finished dressing. The girl had long silver hair that fell nearly to her waist. It was wet and matted now but Yuffie thought it would be quite attractive dried and combed. The girl was staring at her with large blue eyes. She was actually quite pretty.

"How did I get here?" the girl questioned.

"We carried you," Yuffie replied. "Who were those men?"

The girl finally seemed to be calming down.

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

"You don't know?" Yuffie repeated. "Why were they following you?"

"I don't know," the girl said again.

Yuffie stood there in silence, looking the girl over. The answers she had given were far from satisfying, but she was probably still scared and confused from all that had happened. Perhaps it would be better to just let her rest now.

"You're safe here," Yuffie stated. "You're in the house of Barret Wallace, the Mayor of Corel. Whoever was after you cannot get you here. Why don't you get some rest. We can talk about it tomorrow if you like."

The girl slowly eased herself down onto the bed again.

"Yes, I would like that," she said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Yuffie replied, walking to the door. "If you need anything give a holler."

"Okay, I will."

Yuffie stood in the entrance now. She looked back.

"By the way, my name is Yuffie."

The girl had her eyes closed again, as if suddenly exhausted. Yuffie turned to leave, thinking that she would not get a response. But just as the door was about to close she heard the girl reply softly.

"Amanda," she said. "My name is Amanda."

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Tifa followed the others as they made their way into Cosmo Canyon, looking around slowly. She could see a large party working on reconstructing the gates at the front of the canyon that had been destroyed by Jenova's Disciples. Looking up ahead she could see the stairway leading up into the canyon proper, and beyond that, almost obscured by the rocky ledges that ran on either side, the domed roof of Bugenhagen's observatory.

They made their way up the steps, and found Red waiting for them at the top.

"Greetings, my friends," the flame red beast stated.

"Hi Red," Cloud replied. "It's good to see you again."

He looked around.

"Looks like you're well on your way to restoring the damage done to the canyon."

Red nodded.

"We have gotten a good start, but I'm afraid it will take months to remove the scars left by Jenova and his minions," he stated seriously. "And some of them will never fully heal. Fortunately they left the libraries relatively intact. If they would have destroyed them, the loss would have been irreplaceable."

"That's good to hear," Ellengio stated. "And speaking of the library, we may have another book to add to your collection."

He quickly filled Red in on the events that had taken place on the southern island.

"Most intriguing," Red commented when he had finished. "I'm quite anxious to take a look at this find. Come, let's go up to the observatory where we can study this new tome in comfort."

Cloud cast Cid a knowing glance.

"I'm kind of thirsty," he commented. "I'm gonna go over to the Inn and grab something to drink."

"Yeah, I could go for that myself," Cid agreed. "All that running around in the jungle really builds up a man's thirst."

"I'll go with you too," Aeris said.

"And me," Tifa piped in.

Red looked at them.

"I can have refreshments brought up to the observatory," he suggested.

"Oh, no, don't trouble yourself," Cloud said quickly. "You two go on ahead. We'll be fine."

Red nodded slowly.

"Suit yourself."

He and Ellengio strode off, heading at a rapid pace for the observatory. Cid let out a sigh.

"Good thinking, Cloud," he stated. "The last thing I need is to be cooped up in that observatory for hours listening to those two brainiacs discuss the finer points of ancient languages."

"You got that right," Cloud agreed.

"You two are so mean," Aeris said.

Cid turned toward her.

"I notice you jumped pretty quickly at the chance to escape," he commented wryly.

Aeris gave him an innocent look but did not reply.

"C'mon," Tifa interjected. "I really am thirsty. Let's go get those drinks."

They walked into the Inn, ordered drinks and sat down at a table. Cid pushed his chair back and stretched his legs out in front of him.

"So how long do you think those two are going to be up there?" he questioned.

Cloud shrugged.

"Years?" he suggested.

Cid grinned.

"Well, I got to be back at Rocket Town tomorrow morning. We're going to test fire the engines on the rocket, and that's something I can't miss."

Aeris looked up in interest.

"Does that mean it's almost done?" he said, a hint of surprise in her voice.

Cid nodded.

"Should be ready to launch in a couple of weeks," he stated. "I'm surprised myself considering how little time I've had to spend on it. But I've really got a great crew working on it. Those guys have done a bang up job for me. I'm actually very proud of them. Just don't tell them I said so."

"Does this mean you'll be shooting off into space again soon?" Tifa questioned.

Cid gave her a wink.

"It means we'll *all* be shooting into space. You guys made such a good crew last time I went up, I wouldn't think of leaving you behind."

Cloud and Tifa looked at Cid doubtfully. After their last adventure into space, neither one of them was anxious to return.

"Well, I don't know about that," Cloud said dubiously.

"It sounds like a lot of fun," Aeris spoke up, much to the other's surprise.

"That's the spirit," Cid cut in. He looked at Cloud and Tifa. "What? Have you two become stuck in the mud all of a sudden? Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I think we've already had enough adventure to last several lifetimes," Tifa observed.

Cid waved his hand in dismissal.

"You'll change your mind when the time comes," he said with certainty. "I know you both too well. You're not gonna want to miss out on this."

"Maybe," Cloud said slowly. Tifa said nothing, but Aeris noticed that she suddenly went very pale.

"Excuse me," Tifa said, getting up and walking away. Cid was going on about the details of the rocket, a subject he obviously relished. Cloud was sipping his drink. Neither one of them seemed to notice Tifa's departure.

Aeris got up without a word. Tifa was just disappearing up the stairs. Aeris followed and when she got to the top she saw Tifa stumble and lean against the wall to support herself.

"Tifa!"

Tifa spun around, a startled expression crossing her face. Immediately she stood up, though she swayed unsteadily.

"What's wrong?" Aeris questioned.

"Nothing," Tifa replied, a little too quickly. "I've just got a little headache."

She took a deep breath and stood up straight, trying to make it seem as if it were nothing. But Aeris saw right through her. She could tell her friend was in pain.

"Little headache?" she said doubtfully.

"Really, I'm fine," Tifa said, still trying to make light of it.

"I'm afraid that's not going to work with me," Aeris said firmly, coming over and taking hold of her. "Let's get you to a bed."

"That's exactly what I had in mind," Tifa replied.

Some of the rooms at the Inn were reserved by Red for dignitaries from other cities, and Red had told his friends in Avalanche they could use them whenever they came to Cosmo Canyon. Aeris helped Tifa into one of them and eased her down onto the bed.

"Thank you," Tifa said. She brought her hands up to her head and groaned, no longer trying to put up a brave front.

"Try to relax, I'll get you some aspirin," Aeris said kindly.

She left the room. Tifa lay down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, her head pounding so badly she could barely think. She had never had headaches like this before. Aeris returned a moment later, handing Tifa the aspirin and a glass of water. Tifa gulped down the aspirin thankfully.

"This isn't the first time, is it?" Aeris asked with sudden insight.

Tifa shook her head.

"How long?" Aeris asked.

"About a week," Tifa replied, not even questioning how Aeris had figured out it.

"And you've kept it from everyone all this time?"

"I didn't want Cloud to worry," Tifa replied.

Aeris sat down on the bed beside her.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?"

Tifa took a deep breath.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "If I thought it would help...I would have told him. But I don't think there's anything anyone can do."

Aeris gave her a sympathetic look.

"What makes you say that?"

Tifa closed her eyes for a moment as a wave of pain washed over her. She opened them again, and Aeris could see she was struggling to hold back tears. Aeris took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"I hope this aspirin starts working soon," Tifa said with some difficulty. With a visible effort she took control of herself.

"It's the Mako," she said expressionlessly. "The Mako infusion. I'm sure of it. Cloud told me it had never been done to a woman. No one knows what kind of effect it's going to have. How can they treat something like that?"

"So what, you were going to just take it until your head exploded?" Aeris said with a smile, but the attempt at levity fell flat.

Tifa shook her head. "I don't know what to do," she said softly.

"You shouldn't have kept this to yourself," Aeris scolded her. "Even if it can't be cured, and there's no saying it can't, I'm sure we can do something to make you feel better. I'll have to talk to Ellengio."

Tifa grabbed hold of Aeris arm.

"Don't tell Cloud," she said.

Aeris folded her arms across her chest.

"He really should know," she replied.

"Please," Tifa said pleadingly. "He's got enough things to worry about. He doesn't need one more thing, especially since there's nothing he can do about it."

Aeris did not reply, obviously hesitant to agree. She felt this was something that Cloud would want to know, something that he had a right to know. But she looked down in Tifa's eyes, and she knew she could not refuse.

"All right," she gave in. "I won't tell him. But you've got to promise me that you'll let me know anytime you get another headache. The last thing we need is for your head to explode. I'd miss a good friend, and it would be a real pain to clean up afterwards."

Tifa managed a feeble smile at that.

Aeris stood up.

"I'm going back down to the others. We've been gone a while, and it's possible they might have actually noticed by now. You get some rest, I'll make up some excuse for you."

Tifa nodded.

"Thank you." she said.

Aeris patted her hand one more time. "Get some rest," she repeated and walked out of the room.

Aeris walked slowly back down the stairs, deeply troubled. Tifa's assessment of the situation could very well be correct. If it was the Mako that was causing the headaches, and it was quite likely that was true, then maybe there was nothing they could do about it. And even more disturbing, what other, perhaps more serious troubles could the infusion cause. The headaches were bad enough, but what if it caused something worse, something perhaps even life threatening? They had done the Mako infusion to save her life, but could it be that they had just postponed things, that they had just given her a little more time and the infusion would eventually kill her just as surely as the explosion would have without it?

And Cloud had been the one to give the order for the Mako infusion. How would he feel if that order turned out to be a death sentence?

Perhaps Tifa was right to keep this from him.

Abruptly she shook her head, realizing she was overreacting. There was no evidence that what Tifa was suffering from was any more than what it seemed, just a bad headache. Perhaps she just needed an adjustment period and the headaches would fade. It could turn out to be nothing at all.

Even so, she felt a knot beginning to form in the pit of her stomach.

She had reached the bottom of the stairs and started over toward Cloud and Cid, who still seemed to be engrossed in discussion.

The ringing of her PHS made her jump. She pulled it out.

Cloud and Cid both turned to look at her. She listened to the PHS for some minutes, then nodded her head and said something they couldn't hear. She hung up and walked over to them.

"We've got to get back to Ifalna," she said in a worried tone.

"What's wrong?" Cloud asked.

"That was Elmyra. Zack and Reeve have had some kind of fight."

"What?" Cloud said in surprise.

"Zack and Reeve got into an argument, and Cait attacked Zack," she said.

"Cait?" Cloud said, more confused than ever. "I thought Reeve wasn't using Cait anymore."

"Apparently Reeve programmed him to function independently," Aeris replied. "That's part of the problem, something must have gone wrong. Zack did something to Reeve and Cait attacked him."

"Did something, like what?" Cid questioned.

"I don't know!" Aeris replied, visibly upset. "But Cait attacked Zack, and Zack damaged him and ran off."

"Ran off?" Cloud said. "Ran off where? "

"No one knows," Aeris replied. "He dropped his sword and took off. No one has seen him since. He's disappeared. I've got to get back there. This whole thing has turned into such a mess!"