

Chapter 12

There was absolutely nothing left of Cait Sith III that could be salvaged. While the moogles were still more or less in one piece, it wouldn't function without the cat. Reeve was understandably depressed about the whole thing. The Cait Sith robots were, he figured, the closest thing he'd ever have to children, at least for now. While Shera tried her best to cheer Junior up with large quantities of cream soda, Reeve sat in his office trying to force himself to get some work done.

And it was damned hard to do that when all he could think about was getting the new Cait Sith up and running as soon as he could.

"The hell with it," he said at length, flinging a sheaf of paperwork in the general direction of his "out" box and rubbing his forehead. Reno and Rude looked up at him.

"You shouldn't be here anyway." Rude picked up a few leaves of paper that had sailed onto the floor and put them where they were supposed to go. "Go home and get some rest. This place can take care of itself for a night or two."

"I know." Reeve sighed, stood, and gazed out the window. "I just feel like I should be doing something."

"You've done plenty," Reno replied. "I talked to your secretary a while ago. She said you've been spending the night on this damn sofa for the last six days, and you would have last night too if we hadn't showed up." Reeve started to protest, but Reno cut him off. "Working yourself to death isn't going to help anyone. Shit, at least go home and order a pizza or something, okay? Or does the thought of eating still make you wanna hurl?"

Reeve snickered. "I'm fine now, thank you very much." His stomach growled audibly, almost on cue. "I guess it won't hurt anything..."

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There was something about Nibelheim that Cloud hadn't liked ever since the day Sephiroth had gone insane; something intangible, like a bad smell so faint it was only noticeable on a subliminal level but causing the stomach to turn all the same. The whole town wore a mask, it seemed...a veneer of normality covering something malformed and misshapen. Nibelheim had spawned more than its fair share of nightmares. Sephiroth's nightmares. Vincent's nightmares. Cloud's nightmares. And gnawing away at Cloud's mind was the fear that the town had given birth to yet another nightmare, this time his own son's. And strangely enough, the words that came out of Cid's mouth upon their arrival summed up his feelings to a T.

"I hate this goddamn place," Cid muttered, shaking his head.

Cloud nodded and swallowed dryly. "You can say that again."

"So where do we look first?" Tifa was watching the summit of Mt. Nibel intently, as was Vincent. "The reactor or the mansion?"

"We'll split up." Cid lit up a cigarette. "Tifa, you know those mountains better than any of us, so I think you should take some folks up there and have a look-see at that reactor. The rest of us'll check out the mansion."

"Fine with me." Tifa nodded. "We might have company up there..."

"I'll go with you," Elena volunteered. "I'm in the mood to pound on some Shinras." This drew a nervous chuckle from the lot of them.

"Me too," Barret said. "They got some explainin' to do about all this business."

Yuffie looked at the mountain...tall, steep, creepy. Then she looked at the mansion...not as tall or steep, but much creepier. This was going to be a difficult decision. "Oh, hell. I'm going to the reactor. When I want to see a haunted house, I'll go to the one at the Gold Saucer."

"Hey, at least this one's free," Cid quipped.

"Stuff it," Yuffie shot back. "I had nightmares about those Ying and Yang freaks for a month after we picked Vincent up. At least on the mountain there'll be enough light to see what the hell is coming at me."

"Okay, okay." Cid held up a hand to shut the ninja girl up, snickering under his breath. "You guys be careful. We don't know what's up there. Call if you find anything weird." And with that he started heading for the Shinra mansion, trailed by Cloud, Red XIII, and Vincent.

As he walked toward the imposing structure, Cloud became aware of something, some force, some presence tugging at him, and he stopped in his tracks. "He's in there. I can feel him."

"Who?" Vincent asked, eyeing him warily. Something was wrong. Very wrong. He received no answer to his question; Cloud simply stood rooted to the spot he occupied, staring at the door of the mansion. By now, Cid and Red XIII had realized that something was up and they too stopped and watched Cloud carefully.

"Calling me..." Cloud shook his head violently, trying in vain to clear it. "In there."

"Shit, not again..." Cid groaned. He grabbed Cloud by the shoulders and shook him gently. "Hey! Cloud! You in there? C'mon, Cloud, don't go wiggin' out on us now..."

Cloud blinked. "In there...?" He shook his head again. "Yeah...me and Zack...they kept us in the basem--the basement...?"

With no warning, Cloud squirmed free of Cid's grasp and took off at a full sprint for the doors of the mansion.

"Goddammit!" Cid spat, and he and Vincent turned and gave chase. Red XIII, having the benefit of two extra legs, was able to get into the mansion much faster, but by then Cloud had already vanished, presumably to the upper floor and toward the entry to the basement.

The mansion was untenanted by monsters now; Vincent had taken care of the creatures that had once filled the mansion proper during his stay there. Whether the subterranean levels were likewise unoccupied was unknown, however. Truth be told, the silence of the upper levels was making Cid nervous. He thought he would almost prefer one of those mutated Ghro-whatsies swinging at him to this uneasy silence.

Almost.

They reached the stone door that led to the mansion's underground level just in time to see Cloud's spikey blonde head descending the spiral staircase to the basement. Red XIII wrinkled his nose and looked around nervously. Vincent did likewise.

"I smell blood," Red muttered, scanning the floor. "There."

Cid followed the beast's gaze and at length he saw a sword abandoned on the floor. Other than its large size and the drying blood that stained its steel, there was nothing particularly unusual about it. "Shit. Let's go."

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Each step Cloud took toward the library was an act of sheer will. It was as if he were watching himself take that walk from some far-off place, as if on a movie screen. With each step, he heard the crunching sounds of gravel and a few unfortunate insects shifting under his feet; under it he heard his heart pounding and air passing in and out of his lungs, and under that...the voice. -His- voice.

/Made in my image.../

The door to the library stood open; the tenuous glow of a single lamp illuminated its opening.

/My servant...my puppet.../

A faint cry of "Cloud!" from above wafted into his ears, but did not register.

/Come to me./

As Cloud stepped numbly into the library, a new voice came to him. It was the voice of a grown man, but Cloud recognized it as his son's immediately. "D--Dad..."

"Zack..." Cloud's gaze fell upon a figure curled in a ball beside a stack of mildewed books. He wore ill-fitting SOLDIER armor stained with blood; one shaking hand likewise sullied clutched at his spiky white hair and pulled absently at it. He looked up at Cloud with eyes that glowed the same color as the blood that dried on his hands and his armor.

"Tell me, Dad...tell me the truth..." Zack swallowed audibly.

Cloud drew a shaky breath and knelt down next to his son. "About what?" He touched Zack's shoulder, and Zack shrank away as if Cloud's touch had burned him.

"Meteor."

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"Oh, God." Tifa's hand unconsciously went to her mouth as she stared at the bodies of the two dead SOLDIERS that lay outside the Nibel reactor. One had been neatly run through with a sword; the other had not been dispatched quite as neatly. Yuffie was turning a distinct shade of green at the sight.

"Maybe I shoulda gone with the mansion," she said in a very small voice.

"Get a grip," Elena snapped, not sounding half as tough as she'd hoped to. "Whoever did this is obviously not in his right mind." She looked up at the door of the reactor, which was slightly ajar, and shuddered. "We going in?"

Tifa nodded. "We've got to get to the bottom of this." With that, she ascended the stairs that led to the reactor and stepped inside, followed by Elena, Yuffie, and Barret.

Barret took a look around, then pointed his gun-arm toward the pod room. "You guys hear somethin'?"

"Now that you mention it..." Elena frowned. "Someone's snoring in there." She reached under her jacket and withdrew her pistol, and then she slipped past Barret and Tifa and into the pod room. "Oh, shit."

"What?" Tifa followed, stopping dead in her tracks as Elena pointed her weapon at the source of the snores. There was a fairly young woman lying on her back, her head pillowed on a folded lab coat. Her sleeves were pulled up, and clearly visible on her right arm was the Roman numeral XIX. Next to her lay the Masamune. Without a word, Tifa dashed across the room and hauled the woman off the floor, using the bun on top of her head as a handle. "Where the fuck is my son?" she growled into Vail's face.

Vail grimaced and hissed in pain as Tifa held her up by the hair. "Take your hands off me, girl..."

"You're lucky she ain't already tore your goddamn head off, Vail," Barret spat, aiming his gun-arm at Vail. "You better start talkin'. Where's the boy?"

"Boy..." Vail laughed softly. "Oh, if you could just see how he's grown..."

In reply, Tifa simply slammed Vail face-first into the nearest wall, busting her lip wide open. "I don't see anything funny about this, you sick bitch. Now I'm going to ask you again. Where. Is. My. Son?" Tifa punctuated each word of that last interrogative by further introducing Vail's face to the wall.

"Who knows?" Vail shrugged, reaching up and wiping her bloody lip with the back of her hand. "He was pretty mad when he broke out. Killed those two SOLDIERS. Did a good job of it too. Don't know where he went after that. Now let go of my hair before I start getting angry with you, girl."

"Tifa, just waste her already!" Yuffie spat. "She's not gonna talk anyway."

Vail narrowed her eyes at Tifa, who still gripped her hair tightly. "I'm not going to ask you again."

"For once, I have to agree with Yuffie." Elena scowled. "I think we'd be doing the world a favor."

"No." Tifa shook her head. "Not until she tells me what she did to Zack."

"I just accelerated a process that had already begun." Vail smiled thinly. "The Jenova cells in his body were already awakening. I just gave them a little push."

Yuffie glared at her. "I'd like to give this cross a little push up your--"

"Supposing I DID know where he was, and supposing I WOULD help you, which I think you know I won't, it's already too late."

"What the hell are you talking about? Too late?" Tifa shook Vail like a rag doll. "What's happening to him?"

Vail let out a raspy laugh. "I think you know exactly what's happening."

Infuriated, Tifa screamed and threw Vail down onto the floor hard and kicked her in the ribs as hard as she could. Vail coughed once and spat blood onto the floor, and she shot a chilling glare at Tifa.

"You really shouldn't have done that." Vail stood up on rubbery legs...and began to change.

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"Goddammit, Cloud--" Cid, Vincent, and Red XIII sprinted down the corridor that led to the Shinra mansion library. "The hell you think you're doin'..." He skidded to a halt in the doorway of the library; Red XIII almost collided with his legs as he did. "Oh my God."

Neither Cloud nor Zack took notice of the new arrivals in the room. "Zack..." Cloud croaked as the fully-grown Zack's blood-colored eyes drilled into him.

"He showed me things, Dad," Zack said. "Things you didn't tell me about. I have to know."

Cloud bowed his head and shivered. "Sure."

A heavy silence blanketed the room, and after what seemed like a small eternity Zack spoke once more.

"Did you give the Black Materia to Sephiroth?"

"How do you know about--" Cid began, but Vincent cut him off.

Again, Cloud took no notice. He sighed heavily, unable to meet Zack's burning gaze any longer. "Yeah...yeah, I did."

Zack gave a short choked cry. "Then he was right...so what about Aeris? Is there something you just sort of forgot to tell me about that too?"

"No!" Cloud shook his head. "I told you what happened--"

"I SAW what happened!" Zack roared, rearing up from his hiding place like a cobra, and Cloud staggered back. "I saw it! YOU KILLED HER! He showed me!"

"Who showed you, Zack?" Red XIII edged forward, and Zack finally took notice of him. "Who?"

Zack stood up unsteadily, still clutching at his head. "It doesn't matter. Doesn't..." He stumbled, caught himself, and shook his head. "Get out of my way."

Cloud desperately reached out for Zack's arm, catching it in both of his hands. "Zack, for God's sake, listen to me--"

"Don't touch me!" Zack snatched his arm away from Cloud and shoved him hard, sending him sprawling onto the stone floor. With that, he shut his eyes and tightened his fists; and as Cloud had seen Sephiroth do before, he rose into the air and vanished in a blinding flash.

Cloud slowly dragged himself to a sitting position; Cid let out a shaky sigh and leaned heavily on his spear. "Goddamn," he finally said. "Sephiroth...he's in Zack. The son of a bitch is in Zack."

The only words spoken in reply came from Cloud.

"I'm sorry." Cloud dropped his forehead onto his knees. "Zack...I'm so sorry..."

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"Oh my God, what the HELL'S wrong with her!?" Elena screeched as Vail changed. "What the hell's going on!?"

"Jenova," Tifa replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Vail--or the thing that had been Vail--now towered over the group. Her skin was the color of a rotting apple, and what had been arms just moments before were now long segmented tentacles that terminated in a pair of three-fingered clawed hands. Two more pairs of the tentacle-arms sprouted from her torso, and her legs fused together into a long serpentine tail. Another three-fingered hand appeared on the end of this tail. The tail whipped around with lightning speed, and the hand on the end of it tangled itself in Tifa's hair and lifted her off the ground.

"How dare you barge in here screaming at me about your precious son after what you did seven years ago?" the Vail creature hissed. "I felt every blow, every slash, every wound you and your friends inflicted on my brother." The tail whipped again and the hand released its grip, sending Tifa flying and crashing against an empty pod. "And believe me, I intend to return every single one of them to you."

"Say what!?" Barret stammered. "Brother?"

"I think she's talking about Sephiroth," Yuffie replied as Tifa picked herself up slowly. "Yeah, that'd explain a lot about the bitch."

The Vail creature turned its glowing green eyes on Yuffie and glared at her for a second before lashing out at her with one of its clawed hands. "Watch your tone, little girl." Yuffie barely leapt out of the way in time, the creature's talons still raked across her thigh and slashed into her flesh. She cried out in pain and fear as she hit the ground, landing painfully on the fresh wounds, and a red haze obscured her vision. She staggered to her feet as the creature lashed out at her again; this time she was ready for it. She let out a yell and swung the Conformer in a wide arc, neatly severing the taloned hand from the tentacle as it passed. The hand dropped to the floor and clenched once, then lay still.

"Oh, gross..." Yuffie groaned as the Vail creature opened its mouth and screamed in pain. "You okay, Tifa?"

Tifa charged at the creature, throwing her shoulder into its midsection and knocking it down. She threw herself onto it, raining punches down onto its head.

"I guess that means 'yes,'" Yuffie muttered.

"Goddammit, Tifa, get off the bitch so I can get a clear shot in," Barret grumbled. Elena steadied her shaking hands and aimed carefully.

"Tifa, get out of the way," she said through gritted teeth as she too waited for an opening.

Tifa didn't seem to hear Barret or Elena. She continued to bash the Vail-thing with her fists, cursing up a blue streak as she did (even Cid would have paled at some of the epithets she hurled at the thing), and it wailed as she clobbered it. In desperation, it reared up like a snake, spilling Tifa onto the floor...and giving Barret and Elena the opening they were waiting for. Both opened fire; the racket of Barret's gun-arm and the sharp crack of Elena's pistol reverberated through the pod room as they pumped round after round into the creature's head and body. At last it keeled over, an insectile buzz issuing forth from its mouth as the life left its body.

Elena ejected the empty magazine from her still-smoking pistol and replaced it with a full one. "Is it dead?"

"Bitch better be dead," Barret replied, prodding one of the creature's tentacles with the toe of his boot. It did not move, and he let out a sigh of relief. "Everyone okay?"

"Oh, just great.," Yuffie hissed, searching through her pockets for a Restore Materia and coming up empty. "If someone's not too terribly busy, I'm bleeding here."

Tifa nodded and cast a heavy Cure spell over Yuffie's bleeding leg, completely erasing the damage. Just as she was putting the Materia away, the PHS phone chirped in her pocket. She flipped it open and turned it on. "Hello?"

"Tifa, it's Cid." Cid's voice was flat and dry, and Tifa knew that tone well. It meant that something bad had happened. "You better get down here right away. I think Cloud needs you."

"Cid, what happened?" Tifa sat down hard on the floor. "Did you find Zack?"

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. "Yeah, we found him. Tifa--" Cid paused uneasily. "Tifa, he's Sephiroth. He...shit, Tifa, I'm sorry..."

Tifa hung up silently, hot tears forming in her eyes, and Barret sat down beside her.

"What happened?" he asked softly. "Tifa, what'd Cid say?"

Tifa shook her head. "We've got to get to the mansion," she managed to croak before she broke down.

"Okay." Barret put an arm around her and helped her up. "Let's get out of here."

Tifa nodded and sniffled, and Barret guided her out of the reactor. Yuffie and Elena followed silently.

The Masamune remained where Vail had dropped it. A few minutes after Tifa's group left the reactor, the giant sword began to shimmer...and then it vanished in a white flash.

Author's Notes: Ding dong, the bitch is dead! Vail finally got what was coming to her. I think this is probably going to be the second darkest chapter of the whole thing...poor Cloud...yes, Ying and Yang did freak me out. I wish I knew what the hell the designers were smoking when they dreamed up that pair of spastic freaks; actually, Ghiofelgo (you spell it) kinda gave me the creeps too...damn, I usually have more to say than this...but I guess this one kinda speaks for itself.