

Chapter 29

Raven's eyes squinted open just barely, a bright light from above blinding her. The world around her seemed foreign, unfamiliar. It was then that she realized she was viewing the room upside down. She struggled to right herself, but found her hands tied overhead and her feet similarly bound. The rope had been looped around a hook that was rudely embedded in the wall. "Hey, what is this!?" she cried in protest.

THONK!

A toy-sized sucker dart shot from across the room stuck squarely in the center of her exposed forehead. The assault was followed up with high-pitched laughter. Her bleary gaze focused on the form of Reeve's obnoxious animatronic cat and mog duo who was now brandishing a toy dart gun. "Why you little--!"

Without warning, a second shot was fired, smacking her directly in the right eye. "Oww!"

The dart flopped helplessly to the ground but left Raven with a stinging sensation that now angered her beyond belief. "You little shit!" she roared, "Just you wait til I get down from here.."

"Ah ah ah" the kitty warned.

Raven shot a cold glare to the annoying robot and saw another object in the right hand of the mog. It was a remote control identical to the one that controlled the explosive collar C.J. had been fitted with. She felt the tightness of the device around her neck. /The little psychopath!!/

She struggled against the bindings, feeling her hands loosen slightly against the restraints. She glanced overhead and noticed that the poorly wrapped ropes had begun to untie themselves. The ground all around her was littered with several spent rubber darts and she silently wondered how long she had been out. /Come on, come on!/ she cursed internally.

The mog bounced up and down comically and Cait spoke "Aww, you're right. We /are/ out of ammo!" The mog began to hop towards Raven's suspended form, presumably to recollect some of the darts.

/COME ON!/ she growled.

Her left hand wriggled free followed by her right. In a fury, she heaved her torso up towards her shoeless feet and pulled the ropes from her ankles.

"Uh-oh," Cait stammered.

In one swift move, Raven flipped off the hook and karate kicked the robotic cat from the top of the mog. The kitty sailed into the plate glass window across the room. An audible 'oof!' echoed against the glass as he slid down to the floor in a crumpled heap. The mog was still coming for her and Raven had to think fast. She quickly darted back to the wall and leaped up, grabbing the hook she had just freed herself from. With a few grunts, she wrenched the thing free from the drywall and turned in one fluid motion, stabbing the business end into the 'skull' of the mog.

Worried she might not have pierced the mythrill armor beneath, her fears were soon eased by a sputtering sound from within. The mog raised its arms to grab her like before, but stopped midair and hung there, frozen. She opened her eyes, spying the white hulking mass before her, cautiously choosing her next move. /Did I get him?/

The sound of an internal motor whirring to a standstill reached her ears and only then did she release the deathgrip on the hook. She reached for the remote detonator but found it impossible to remove from the mog's grasp. She wasn't even sure what code would free her. She stood upright, glanced to the seemingly 'dead' kitty across the room and stumbled back.

Heaving a heavy sigh of relief, she only relished her victory for a moment before scanning the floor for her misplaced guns..and her shoes.

Finding both sets of items scattered, she quickly retrieved them and made tracks for the hallway. Glancing both ways, the area seemed to be completely deserted. "Oh screw this.." she snapped.

She needed to get as far away as possible from the building to remove the collar safely. And in this moment, she wasn't even sure who was left that was worth hanging around for. Heidegger was dead, Stuart was not answering his phone, Scarlet and Vail had gone off to godknowswhere. And she sure as fuck wasn't hanging around to meet a similar fate as her other two comrades. /RUN/

She started down the hallway towards the elevator and once inside, she pressed the button for the parking garage. She needed something fast to get her away from the building as quickly as possible. Something that would get her out of range.. She spied a Shinra Turbo GX and climbed into the driver's seat. She flipped the visor and the keys fell deftly into her lap. Doing the math in her head, she needed to be over one thousand feet away..then it would be safe.. Just before she arrived at Stu's.

She fingered an object sitting low on her neck, a black metal ring with a latch on it. Revving the engine and putting the car into gear, she jettisoned from the garage entrance. The Turbo exploded onto a somewhat empty highway. She weaved around other cars going twice the speed they were. Luckily, she knew about the safety release button hidden on the inside of the collar. It was too bad that Archer didn't. But if removed too soon, it would detonate immediately. She took an off ramp towards Stuart's neighborhood, deciding it was now or never.

Her fingers fumbled against the inside of the collar as Cait Sith regained consciousness on the floor of the office.

He eyed the giant mog, now a deactivated statue with its arms stuck in the air. The remote was still tight in its grip. "Another one ruined.." he sighed, lamenting the mog.

Stumbling to his feet, he marched over to his companion and climbed back onto its back. From there, he saw the full extent of the damage. "Look what she did to my boy!" Cait wailed.

Without so much as a second thought, he reached over and pried the remote from the mog's fist. "Don't worry, fella. She's not going anywhere.."

* * *

Just as Raven's hand removed and tossed the collar from the moving vehicle, the light on the inside turned from green to red. Her eyes widened and she instinctively ducked as it detonated midair and took out a yield sign. Several cars behind her skid to a halt but she pushed the gas peddle into oblivion to get away. Her heart pounded in her ears with the close call. One more second and she'd have been driving a convertible. Gripping the wheel firmly with both hands, she whipped down the desolate boulevard in search of Stuart's apartment.

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Reeve jerked awake at once when the hand grabbed him. "I didn't touch her!" he half muttered, half shouted incoherently.

Craning his neck to the side, he saw Yuffie standing at the bar next to him. A confused expression donned her usually chill features. Slowly looking around, Reeve saw that he still occupied the bar in Starlight Square but C.J. was gone now. The only proof she had ever been there was the platter full of wing bones. Reeve tasted his own mouth noting the hints of left over spices and stale beer. He looked down and noticed he'd left behind a hot-wing flavored drool puddle from where he'd passed out. "What time is it? Where's C.J.?" he asked Yuffie.

"She left with Elena. I heard the words 'haircut' and 'new clothes'. They left about twenty minutes ago."

Yuffie finished her drink and set the glass back on the counter. Across the bar, Rude and Reno sat in deep conversation. It was anyone's guess what they were talking about. Reeve ruffled his hair a bit and finished his warm beer. "I better head to

bed. Doctor said I needed to rest and I think I may have pushed the limit tonight," Reeve sighed as he stood up and moved away from the bar.

The Wutaiian ninja eyed him suspiciously. Before he could make his escape, she asked "What were you dreaming about?"

Reeve was caught off guard by the intrusive question and snapped his head to her suddenly with a pang of guilt in his gaze. "Oh I, um.. I can't remember," he lied.

Yuffie narrowed her gaze but said nothing. Reeve backed away from the bar and bid her a good night. He actually remembered the dream quite clearly and felt like the lowest of the low for having it at all. /It's wrong,/ he said to himself as he took the pathway back to the hotel. /She's a little girl, no matter what she looks like now, she's still a little girl./

He entered the haunted lobby and checked in at the desk. Getting the key to his room, Reeve quickly climbed the stairs to the second floor and sought out his quarters. He passed several and behind one of the doors, he heard the distinct sound of arguing. It sounded like a couple, and when he stopped momentarily to listen. /That sounds like Tifa..? Is she crying?/

He stood only a moment longer before finally bringing himself to knock on the door. "Everything okay in there?" he asked, "It's Reeve."

Tifa's voice silenced at once and after a few seconds she opened the door. "Oh Reeve. It's.. um.. it's fine." She forced a weak smile and wiped her tear stained cheeks with a shaking hand.

Reeve glanced around her to spy Cloud sitting on the bed. He was staring at the wall to the left of the door. He hadn't even turned his head to see who had disturbed them. /Something's off./

"Doesn't seem fine. Is he alright? Are you?" Reeve asked with concern.

Tifa glanced over her shoulder slightly and whispered "I honestly don't know.."

She looked back to Reeve, her eyes brimming with worry. "Where's Zack?" Reeve finally asked, not seeing the boy anywhere in the hotel room.

Tifa's lower lip quivered then and she inhaled sharply to keep from having an outburst. "I'm not sure.." she whimpered as she leaned against the cracked door.

Reeve looked her directly in the eyes and said "I'll go find him. Stay with Cloud. I'm going to send Reno and Rude up here to keep an eye on things."

He glanced back to Cloud who had been sitting statue still this entire time. The distraught woman nodded and closed her eyes. She shut the door back into place and Reeve pulled out his PHS. After a few fruitless rings, Reno finally answered. "Reno, are you and Rude still up in Starlight Square? Good. I need you to come back to the hotel. Something's not right with Cloud. I'm headed out to find Zack. Right, thanks."

He snapped the PHS shut, all thoughts of sleep vanishing from his mind. He turned back down the hall, leaving the hotel in search of Zack.

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"Ooo! What about this one?"

C.J. Turned to Elena who was holding up a rainbow Gold Saucer t-shirt that had the words 'G-Bike!' emblemized on the front. She liked rainbows, and she liked G-Bike; Elena may have found a winner. But when C.J. checked the size chart next to the display, she sighed loudly. "Only available in youth sizes.." she said in defeat.

Elena frowned and tried to refold the shirt as best she could. She never could get it just right and eventually settled for rolling it up and setting it down. "I'm sorry C.J. I should have checked the sizes before getting your hopes up," she apologized.

C.J. turned to walked back towards the 'adult side' of the store. "It's not your fault they don't have cute or cool things in my size.. Why do adults have to wear such boring clothes!?"

As she walked away, Elena scooped up a nearby coffee mug with the same design on it and plunked it into C.J.'s hands. "It's not a total loss," she grinned.

C.J.'s spirits lifted just a bit and she smiled. They had accomplished quite a bit during their shopping excursion. This was the last gift shop, C.J. having picked out a few select clothing items. And her new haircut gave her a mature and polished look. Elena just hoped her parents wouldn't kill her for allowing the stylist to add hot pink dye to her under cut. They approached the counter and C.J. used her money to pay for the mug and a also a cute moogles pin she had snatched from a display near the counter. "\$17.60 please," the cashier said pleasantly.

Elena eyed the amount of gil in C.J.'s wallet and thought /Holy moly!/ to herself.

The items paid for, the pair finally decided to head back to the hotel for the night. C.J. thanked Elena for taking her out. She couldn't wait to show everyone the new haircut too. Elena just smiled nervously but told the young lady she was welcome just the same. They had just reached the doors to the hotel when Reeve came racing across the lobby towards them. "Elena, I need your help. We need to find Zack," he instructed.

It was then he took noticed that the person next to Elena was none other than C.J. sporting a new haircut and attire. His heart leapt at the sight of her but he forced the forbidden thoughts from his mind in an instant. "What's going on?" Elena asked.

He explained the interaction he had just had with Tifa and that Reno and Rude were coming to sit with them. He had told Tifa he'd find Zack, but with the sheer size of the Gold Sauce, he wasn't sure where to even begin the search. "He's in Battle Square," C.J. stated matter-of-factly.

Reeve stopped and stared at her when she said such. "He is?"

She nodded, her new haircut bobbing with the motion. Reeve glanced to Elena who handed her purchases to C.J. "I'm going with Reeve. Can you take these to your room, hun?" She and Reeve then went back outside, leaving C.J. standing in the lobby with a handful of bags. Not able to help himself, Reeve popped his head back into the room momentarily and said "I really like your new haircut, by the way."

And he was gone again, leaving C.J. blushing profusely. /Wait? Why am I standing here?/ she thought, /I want to know what's going on too!/

She ducked over to the counter and asked the concierge to have the bags taken to her room, number 305. "Of course, madam," the creepy man cooed.

He snapped his fingers and called "Hecubus!"

An equally creepy bellhop emerged from behind the counter as if on a lift. "Yes.. master..?"

"Please take the lady's bags to room 305."

"Of course, master.." he oozed eerily.

C.J. knew that it was all part of the act, but it still gave her the willies. Once relieved of her baggage, she darted from the lobby and made her way to Battle Square. Something told her she wouldn't want to miss it.

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Raven's vehicle braked a sharp right into Stuart's driveway. She all but leapt from the car and took his front steps two at a time to reach the stoop. She banged her fist on the door and shouted "Stuart! Are you in there?!"

She poked her head around the building and saw that his car was indeed parked in the carport, but the house was dark. It was only just hitting dusk. Surely he hadn't gone to bed already? She banged once more then tried peering in through the window nearest the door. Inside the house was dark. No lights emitted from any of the rooms, not even the flickering of the television. That was really strange seeing as Stuart was an avid watcher of sitcoms and it was prime time. She turned to leave, but decided against it. "Fuck it."

She removed her jacket and wrapped it around her fist to form a tight ball. The sound of glass shattering echoed throughout the silent house, but there was still no movement inside. She punched out the glass shards from the pane closest to the door knob then reached it sans jacket and unlocked the door. She turned the knob from the outside, letting the door swing open with an eerie creak. She stood in the open doorway for a moment before calling out "Stuart?"

The silence was oppressive. Her voice was the only sound. Slowly, she crept over the threshold and surveyed the the rooms from her spot. The kitchen was to her immediate right, the living room ahead and a hallway leading to the bathroom and two bedrooms on her left. She closed the door behind herself and began to silently stalk through the house, kitchen first as it was connected to the living room via a modest dining room. It was in the dining room when she stumbled over something in the dark and fell to her knees. "Oof, what the hell?"

She turned to face the obstacle and to her horror saw Stuart's lifeless face staring back at her. A bullet hole caked with dried blood adorned his forehead and she gasped in sudden anguish. "Oh, Stuart..!"

/No no no no NO!!/

She spun around still on her knees to check his vitals, but knew from the state of the wound and the vacant stare in his no longer glowing eyes that he was gone. "Why did you.. Why?"

She spied the glock laying several feet away from where he had dropped it. "WHY!?" she began to sob.

Unable to compose herself after everything that had happened, Raven finally gave in to the emotions and sobbed at the sight of her dead friend. Kane, and then Archer.. but fuck him.. And now Stu. It was all too much. She finally allowed herself to reach out and gently pull his eyes closed. She noted that his skin was surprisingly warm to the touch; too warm for someone who had been dead for seemingly hours. She pulled her hand back and held it firmly against her mouth as she screamed a silent oath into her clenched fist.

"It can't end this way.. it just can't.."

Suddenly, a groan emitted from Stuart's mouth and Raven jumped away from him in terror. /What the FUCK!?!/

Stuart's brow knit then and he winced, his eyes fluttering back open slowly. "..Ra—Raven?"

Raven gasped as the corpse muttered her name and she reeled back to clamor to her feet. She was about to flee when his arm twitched and he reached out to her. "W-wait..? I'm not .. not dead," he whispered hoarsely.

Raven used every ounce of willpower to stop herself from racing out of the apartment and screaming about a zombie uprising. Instead she slowly leaned back down to the young man, brushing her hair behind her ear. "Stuart, oh my god. How..? How in the hell are you still alive?!"

He winced a bit at the shrillness of her voice and managed a weak smile. "Must be the Jenova cells.."

At that word, the skin on his forehead suddenly protruded forward. Raven jumped back once more in revulsion, half expecting a worm or some other insect to wriggle out of his wound. Instead, she watched in awe as a small, black metal nugget slowly pushed forth from the torn flesh and clattered onto the tile floor.

It was the bullet.

She stared at the spent round in utter disbelief and by the time she looked back to Stuart, the wound had already begun to knit itself back together. "What the actual fuck..?" Raven asked quietly.

She could hardly believe what she had just witnessed. Stu slowly pushed himself into a sitting position and looked around in a daze. He looked behind where he had been sitting when he had decided to take his own life, but found not a single drop of blood on the wall where there definitely should have been some. Raven watched him suspiciously and nearly jumped when he addressed her. "Raven. I saw the lifestream.. only for a moment though.."

Raven's eyes darted back and forth, still trying to piece the scene together. He resumed his speech "He saved me.."

"Who?"

Stuart held his head and closed his eyes as if trying to remember. "I don't know.. A man, he looked so familiar.. And he showed me something.. Why he saved me."

He moved to stand and Raven rose with him to help keep him steady. "What are you saying? That you should be dead right now if not for this man you saw?" she remarked indignantly.

Stuart looked to her eyes and nodded. She was put to ease to see the familiar mako glow within his irises. "We have to go to the Forgotten City. It's there. He needs it."

Raven gripped Stu's arm and shook her head. "What's there?"

Without wavering one bit, Stuart started towards the front door. "The only thing that can stop all of this."

He pulled free from her grip and made it to the entry way before turning back. "The Holy Materia," he stated as if she already knew the answer.

Raven still wasn't sure what exactly to make of the entire ordeal, but she sure as fuck wasn't about to stay here where Stuart tried to blow his brains out. She dashed after him, pushing him towards the Shinra Turbo at the edge of the driveway. "We'll need a chopper. Can't exactly take this thing across the ocean," she instructed.

Stuart nodded and took the passenger seat. He buckled in and Raven fired up the engine. The vehicle roared to life then purred gently as she pulled the car back onto the main road. She drove back to Shinra headquarters intent on helping Stuart fulfill his mystery mission from the great beyond despite the many questions she had.

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Tifa had taken a small break from arguing with Cloud that everything was indeed not alright and had gone to the bathroom to wash her tear-stained face. The cool washcloth felt like an oasis against her flushed cheeks and forehead. She heard the main room's door open and close. /Rude and Reno must be here../

She sighed, folding the Halloween themed cloth over the edge of the sink and pat her face dry on a full length towel that was on a rack near the closed door. "I'm in here!" she called out, trying her best to sound normal.

There was no answer. Strange. Did they not hear her? She pulled the bathroom door opened and peered around the room. Not only were Reno and Rude not present, but Cloud was no longer sitting on the edge of the bed. "Cloud?" Tifa asked aloud.

Fear suddenly gripped her heart and she staggered into the room and towards the door. She gripped the handle and looked both ways to no avail. There was no sign of Cloud or anyone. "CLOUD!" she cried out. "Shit!"

She spun around and grabbed her gloves off the nightstand, slipping them on as she left the room and raced down the hallway. Already, a few of the other hotel patrons began to stick their heads out of their room and look for the source of

the shout. A few of them grumbled about the disturbance but Tifa paid them no mind as she descended to the lobby. As she reached the main doors, Rude and Reno were filing into the hotel. "Tifa," Rude said in surprise. He saw the fear in her eyes and noticed she was alone. "Where's Cloud?"

She shook her head violently, her brown ponytail barely hanging together. "I don't know. We were in the room, then I heard the door open and he was gone. I went to the bathroom to wash my face."

More tears began to well up in her bright, rust-colored eyes. Reno taped his nightstick against his shoulder. In agitation "Shit.. no good," he grimaced.

Rude placed a firm hand on Tifa's shoulder and gave her a reassuring squeeze. "We'll find him. Come on, he couldn't have gotten far."

Together, the trio slipped back out of the hotel and made their way to the main hub. On the way, they met Yuffie who was just leaving Starlight Square herself. "I thought you guys were heading back to the hotel?" she questioned, obviously confused by Tifa's presence after what the ex-Turks had told her when they left.

"Cloud's missing," Tifa interjected.

Yuffie looked bowled over. "Again!?" she spat.

Tifa looked annoyed by this point and began to frantically look around the hub. /Which way? Which tunnel had Cloud chosen?/

She came up empty handed with the amount of choices that presented themselves and just froze. Fear invaded her mind. What if Cloud and Zack disappeared again? What if she never saw them again? It was then that she remembered what Cloud had mentioned. A sword in Battle Square. Zack was intent on taking it home.

While Reno and Rude argued with Yuffie about who would search where, Tifa started towards the tube. She looked back and shouted "Guys! Battle Square, now!"

Yuffie snapped her head in Tifa's direction and trotted to her side instantly. Reno and Rude followed suit and soon the three of them were on their way. Zack seemed to be at the center of this, and at the very least he seemed to know a lot more about what was going on. Was he also controlling Cloud? What would Tifa find when they arrived? She only hoped that she wouldn't be too late.

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Author's Notes: Okay, obviously, I am not Sailor Solathei. So who the hell am I then? Let's just say, I am a fan of her work. And her fanfic, "Children of Jenova", was one of the very first FF7 fanfics that I ever read. Well sadly, to my knowledge, she never finished it. This story has been in cliffhanger status for over twenty years. Cue me working on a project with a new internet friend for "I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields", another very famous FF7 fanfic. He and I got to talking about several other favorite fics, many of which are not completed, which kind of got my mind churning. I really wanted to see an ending for this story in particular.

So here I am. Having freshly read the twenty-eight chapters proceeding. Do I know how Sailor Solathei wanted to finish her story? Not a freakin' clue. Am I going to do my best to put myself in her shoes and give this story the ending it deserves? You betcha! And if the real Sailor Solathei would please stand up, I would beg her forgiveness for thinking I could ever give it the ending that she was working towards. But I hope she would give me a simple golf-clap for trying.

-Angela Rose

Nibelheim: The Shinra Mansion

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