

Chapter Twenty: Tears of the Planet

“That’s why... It’s all right. I don’t care what the Captain says. I’ll live my life for him.” — *Shera*

Tifa Lockhart felt her heart racing almost to the point of exploding out of her chest. Her blood ran cold at the horrendous site before her. Out on the sea, an entire armada of Junon vessels soared across the dark, icy water on a direct course with Rocket Town.

At her side, Reno of the Turks shoved his hands into his pockets and scowled. He had finally escaped service to the soulless corporation, only to be soon rewarded for his treachery by what would surely be a painful execution. The red haired mercenary pursed his lips in thought as Tifa struggled to find the words to respond to the approaching danger.

Also on the beach with them, Cait Sith’s inert form stood in the exact same position it had taken the day before, before the Highwind and her crew were smote from the sky and sent plummeting into the unforgiving water below.

Cid, Vincent and Barret were currently engaged in a rescue attempt for the sake of the crew. They had taken an Underwater Breathe materia and walked into the ocean like someone taking a stroll through a quiet park. Yuffie Kisaragi, their resident ninja/thief, had disappeared after the grievous incident with Red XIII, one which left the beast at death’s door. Cloud Strife, the unlikely leader of the group, had left for Nibelheim under uncertain circumstances. None of them knew his exact reason for leaving, and that scared Tifa more than the impending doom approaching from the sea. Had the strain of recent events finally begun to take their toll on the young warrior? Had he begun to relapse to the mentally unstable state his nemesis Sephiroth had once brought him to? Tifa hoped it was something else, but she feared more than anything that her instincts were correct.

“Well,” Reno finally broke the dead silence, “What the hell are we going to do now? I say we haul ass outta here. Let the hothead pilot deal with Heidegger.”

Tifa turned to the mean-spirited man, “Reno, shut up! If you want to run, go! I’m not leaving them!” Reno’s eyebrows raised in disbelief. It was hard for someone like him to comprehend self-sacrifice.

“Whatever,” he shrugged, “I got nowhere better to be. Let’s both die in front of Heidegger’s gunboats.” His voice was thick with sarcasm.

“I’ve got to call Cid!” Tifa instantly held up her PHS phone and frantically dialed Cid’s number. The phone gargled and sputtered electric static. “Oh no! There’s no signal...”

“[SKKRRZZTT* sorry,...SSKDZZDT*... my bad.]”

An electric, hollow voice crackled from within the tiny mechanical cat that had laid dormant up until now, “[SSKKKDDTT*.... what’d I miss?]” Cait Sith’s body remained motionless, but his eyes began to flicker, showing faint signs of ‘life’.

“Reeve!” Tifa jumped at the sudden awakening of her lifeless comrade. “Are you alright?!”

“[...Well....]”

A constant rush of water sprayed the completely soaked mayor of Nibelheim inside a darkened space. Reeve firmly grasped a pipe that ran over his head and struggled to keep himself above the rapidly rising water level. He tinkered with the makeshift headpiece he wore that controlled his Cait Sith robot. The Highwind’s bridge was tilted sideways, as the massive airship rested on her side at the bottom of the ocean.

"I'll live!" Reeve called over the overwhelming rumble of the water streams flowing all around the bridge. "We got wounded down here, Tifa!" His voice was raspy and strained. Several other crew members likewise struggled to keep themselves from drowning in other spots on the bridge.

"Cid's on his way!" Tifa hollered into the face of the barely conscious cat. "I tried calling him but something's interfering!" "That's Cait," Reeve called over the noises around him, "The EM signal I use to control him screws up other electronics!" "Just hold on, Reeve, Cid and the others are almost there!"

"[SKKRTT*.... hope they get here SCHGTFXXToon,]" the small automaton garbled, "[Shera's..... SSKKRRDT ...*]"

"Reeve?" Tifa frantically shook the small cat, "Reeve? Can you hear me?!" Nothing. Cait Sith was as lifeless as he been earlier. "What about Shera?!"

"Tifa," Reno placed a hand on her shoulder, "We've got to get out of here."

Tifa's tear-filled eyes slowly lifted from her inanimate friend and stopped upon the approaching vessels on the sea. They were not as distant as they were earlier, their shapes could be seen clearly without the aid of binoculars.

Cid Highwind clenched his teeth and frowned at the task at hand. He and his two fellow rescuers, Barret Wallace and Vincent Valentine, stood within their giant bubble of air just outside the maintenance hatch to the sunken airship's bridge. He slammed his fist against the automated panel that was supposed to open the door, but it was as inactive as everything else on his ravaged vessel. The Highwind lay on the bottom of the ocean on her side, like an ancient ghost ship, lifeless and barren. The iron hatch that stayed their progress showed no signs of complying with the foul-mouthed pilot.

"Dammit!" he snapped, "I was gonna just activate the boosters and take the whole ship up, but she's as dead as a #%&\$in' nit! Looks like we do this the hard way!"

"Vince," Barret stood to the right of Cid, and dug his fingers into the narrow metal seam in the door, "Grab th'other side, we might be able to rip the bastard open." Their silent comrade gently pushed his fingers and the sharp talons of his gauntlet into the seam and made ready. Cid retrieved his massive Venus Gospel spear from the strap on his back, and stuck the point into the aforementioned seam.

"One," the Captain began, "Two, ...Three!"

With an ear-splitting squeal, the metal access screeched open while the three adventures wheezed and groaned under the strain of their efforts. A rush of water poured into the already partially-immersed bridge. The trio pushed the iron door as far open as it would go and clamored inside against the tide of water rushing past their bubble, and the hatch instantly slammed shut. Cid frantically swept his gaze over the airship's control center at the survivors that littered the bridge. He saw Reeve, holding a pipe for dear life while torrents of water rushed in past his head. He saw three other crewmen likewise hanging from various parts of the ship, two of them held other, unconscious people above the rising water level. One of those people, was Shera.

"Shera!" Cid pushed through the unsteady current toward the lifeless form on the other side of the bridge. When he broke through the air bubble, he dove into the current and frantically swam over her. He broke the surface next to the OPs crewman that was laboring to keep her still face above water. Cid clasped his hands on her delicate shoulders and tried to wake her. Nothing. Her face was pale, her lips – blue.

"No..." Cid's voice was small at first, "NO! Shera wake up!!" He gently pressed two fingers against her neck and choked. There was no pulse.

Jenova had descended to this Planet many years ago for one purpose. To take control. Of everything. There was to be no exception. It had come to the Ancients that dwelled here as a friend. A bearer of glad tidings. Then it spread its cancer. One by one, the disease that was Jenova spread through the populous until the Ancients were able to stop it. They sealed it in the northern crater for eternity, never expecting it to be reborn. But it was.

The alien first took the form of a female, and possessed a scientist named Lucrecia in order to bring about the genesis of a new harbinger of destruction. Her offspring was dubbed 'Sephiroth', and through him she once again brought the world to the brink of a new apocalypse. But this time her efforts were diverted by an unlikely band of heroes - AVALANCHE. That too, was supposed be the end of Jenova.

Unfortunately, the alien had infected a Turk, a member of the Shinra corporation's secret police, and incubated to its latest form. Jenova was even able to assert control of one of the Weapons to do her bidding - and even now it spread havoc across the Planet.

Now, Jenova altered its appearance to match that of Reno the Turk, and infiltrated the new Junon empire at its very core, Junon Base. The false Turk casually strolled down the hallway to the records room. Once it had used the brute force of Meteor to endanger the Planet - now it would use something far more perilous: information.

The red-haired man entered the high-security archive system and ran his finger across a row of filing cabinets. He stopped when his finger touched on one particular label: 'Bughenhagen'. With an evil grin, Reno pulled open the drawer and began leafing through the files.

"Reno!" A voice from behind him caused the fake Turk to turn in surprise. Elena stood in the doorway with her hand on her blue-suited hips with an annoyed look on her face. "Heidegger wants us on the front line when he engages Avalanche. The old buzzard ain't taking any chances this time. He took the whole armada out after them." She walked into the room and examined what her fellow mercenary had been doing. "'Planet Life'? What the hell are you reading that for? This ain't no time to go hippy!"

"Yes," Reno finally spoke through clenched teeth, "I'll be right along." He grudgingly returned the file to the drawer and followed a puzzled Elena out of the room. Jenova got what it came for.

Tifa watched in hopelessness as the military vessels drew ever closer. Cait Sith had not responded to her continued attempts to communicate with it, and Reno was gone. The red-haired mercenary had taken his leave of the area after an exasperated plea for her to accompany him. But the cold assassin had no intention of throwing his life away for something as meaningless as friendship. There was no honor in a foolish death was the last thing he had expressed before abruptly vanishing.

So here she stood. One woman against the tempest of war.

"[...SSXZKT*tifa....]" Cait Sith's hollow, mechanical voice erupted from the small, furry cat's head. Slowly, the iron moogles on which he rested came to life, stretching out its massive arms like someone waking from a long nap.

"Reeve!" Tifa turned to the automaton, "You did it! What were you about to say about Shera?!"

"[She's ..]"

Without warning, a large shell whistled through the air and struck the earth with a mighty explosion just outside Rocket Town. Heidegger had begun his attack.

"[No time for that, we gotta get SSXKKZRT*ou out of here!]"

Tifa narrowed her eyes at the approaching forces and was about to argue when something caught her eye. "Hey, what's that in the water?"

"NO!! Shera don't do this to me!!" Cid's voice was hoarse and strained as he yelled into the lifeless face of his mechanic. But she meant more than that - more than he could ever hope to express to her. But now she was gone. Gone before he could even begin to really cherish what they had. His thoughts drifted to the night in the Nibelheim Inn when he lay awake thinking about how much she meant to him. But he never even tried to let her know. Now, it seemed, it was far too late.

Cid shook her body violently, with no effect. The water level had risen to their chest, and the Underwater Breathe materia's spell had run out. The roar of rushing water was the only accompaniment to the anguished cries of a desperate man. Reeve climbed across the pipe he held to keep from drowning and approached Cid. The old pilot rocked her lifeless body back and forth to somehow console her spirit.

"Cid."

Vincent gently placed a hand on Cid's soaked shoulder as he waded up to him. "There is something we might try."

Cid turned his head to face the mysterious man, the dim light catching the frazzled moisture and wear in his demeanor. He opened his mouth to ask Vincent what he had meant, but no sound came out. Vincent simply reached into the water and fumbled through his cloak for something. When it seemed like he was successful, he lifted his hand out of the water and held up something to the pilot. The 'Phoenix' summon materia.

Cid's face lit up, but Vincent shook his head, "This was used very recently, it may not have the power yet to bring her back." Cid coughed above the icy waters, "That's a chance I'm willing to take! Do it!"

Vincent held the tiny red bauble over Shera's head and uttered the spell. The orb began to glow.

Cid's heart soared at the faint light that began to emerge. But his spirit was crushed when it quickly faded away.

"No..." the pilot's voice was distant.

"I am sorry, my friend." Even in his emotionless state, Vincent seemed saddened by this cruel turn of events. Barret made his way through the rising water to his friends. He opened his mouth to try to say something that might comfort the devastated pilot, but he didn't get his chance.

"NO!" Cid roared, "You listen to me, Planet!!" Cid raised his head to the heavens, as if he were bargaining with the great beyond itself. "This is Cid Highwind!! I saved your ass a year ago, and now I'm callin' in the favor!!"

"Cid..." Reeve reached out to him, but was pushed away.

"Do you hear me?!! YOU OWE ME!!" Cid was beside himself. Vincent wondered if this might permanently unhinge him. The crazed look in Cid's eyes made Barret very worried. "ANSWER ME!!" the pilot demanded.

Nothing.

Barret waded over to the two crew members on the other side of the bridge to help them. Reeve and the crewman beside Cid both began to make their way toward the exit. Cid simply stayed where he was, holding Shera. His eyes were shut tight as he buried his head into her cold, wet shoulder, choking back hushed sobs. Vincent remained, watching in silence, unable to offer up anything that would console his friend.

It was then that the tiny red orb began to glow.

A golden droplet formed on one of the pipes above them and dripped into the water, which began to bubble and glow red, steam formed on its surface and rose through the ship. A beam of light burst from the darkened liquid and grew, and was joined by more beams, surrounding the first in a circle pattern. Suddenly, a great golden bird broke through the icy water in an incredible eruption. The legendary Phoenix spread its massive wings and called to the heavens. Waves of light beamed from the great fowl and washed over everything within the chamber, including Cid and Shera. And then it was over. The light, the Phoenix, the steam, all of it vanished in an instant, as if nothing had happened.

Cid continued to hold Shera's lifeless body; with his head buried and lost in his own world of grief, he had missed the whole thing. A hand gently began to stroke the top of his drenched hair. Cid's eyes slowly opened and grew wide. He slowly lifted his head and saw her, staring into his face with those angelic green eyes. A weak smile formed on her lips as she gently patted his head.

"Shera!" Cid staggered back, "Oh my God oh my God!" He pulled her close to him, almost hugging the new life out of the semi-conscious mechanic.

"Cid," Vincent gently placed his claw on the pilot's trembling shoulder, "We must escape this place." Cid slowly lifted his head and turned to him, nodding slowly. Vincent helped Cid carry Shera through the neck-deep water toward the access hatch.

"Tifa's still up there on the beach," Reeve stood near the closed hatch as water continued to rush in. "But I lost contact again after Heidegger started bombing the coastline. I don't know where she is now..."

Barret held his gun-arm above the rising water level, "We could use the Underwater Breathe materia, but there's more than three of us."

"Reeve," Cid finally spoke up from the back of the group, "What happened to the rest of the crew?" Reeve stared into the frazzled pilot's eyes for a few seconds and lowered his head.

A sudden thunderous boom echoed from just outside the ship. Barret reached out his hand and grabbed the side of the hatch to stop from falling over into the water. Reeve and the four crewmen stumbled into the water before regaining their balance. The trembling caused by the disturbance faded, and all was still again.

"What the hell was that?" Barret spoke in an angry tone.

Reeve grabbed on to a pipe above his head and pulled himself up to a tiny porthole that faced the direction of the hatch. He peered outside for a few moments and his blood ran cold. "There's something out there. Something big."

"Junon Base just ahead, Mr. Shinra," the pilot called back to the passenger bay in one of the Junon Inc. helicopters.

Rufus Shinra simply nodded and returned to his reading. He sat back in the cushy seat and stared down at the reports in front of him. So far he had successfully 're-claimed' Costa Del Sol, Gongaga, Nibelheim and the Icicle Inn. He only had to use his new Junon-1 weapons satellite at Costa Del Sol to ensure the cooperation of the other towns. Word spread quickly that Rufus would not be refused. It was like he had always said. It is easier to control the world with fear, than to do so with money.

His father and his antiquated ways were relics of the past. A new age would be brought upon the world. An age where Rufus was supreme. There was nothing that could stand in his way this time. Nothing.

"Sir, we have a problem!"

Rufus darted his eyes up from the paper and saw the pilot with his head turned back again. Although this time, it was clear that he was making more than a routine ETA announcement. "What is it?"

"Something just came up on radar, sir," the pilot turned back and tapped a finger on the computer screen next to the control stick, "Something big." Rufus unbuckled his seat belt and leaned forward to get a look at the radar screen. "It's behind us," the pilot continued, "Seems to be heading for the base."

"It's coming right for us," Rufus barked, "Evasive maneuvers! Now!!"

The pilot pulled the stick to the side as hard as he could, and the advanced vessel instantly responded. But it was too late. The Onyx Weapon tore through the clouds above them and struck the side of the helicopter as if it were a flea in the path of a charging bull. The massive giant plummeted toward the military base on a direct course.

Rufus' helicopter spiraled through the air like a fly with one wing while her pilot struggled to get it under control. The craft shakily eased to a steady path, and Rufus looked out of the windshield at the events below. The cocky industrialist grinned when he saw the familiar blue glow that began to form around the barrel of the gigantic Junon cannon. However, the smile faded and the color drained from his face when he realized he could see directly down the barrel.

The weapon fired in a deafening explosion, and the blast raced toward the flying monster. Without hesitation, the Onyx Weapon altered its course and narrowly avoided the blast. The beast struck the base head on, shattering the entire front of the structure and causing the huge cannon to bend under the strain!

The helicopter pilot pressed forward on the stick to avoid the blast. As the vessel rocked forward, the giant projectile of steel and energy struck the helicopter blades. The craft corkscrewed into the ocean, leaving a trail of smoke and flame behind it.

The sound of rushing water was the only noise that disturbed the deadly silence on the darkened bridge of the Highwind. Everyone in the sunken vessel waited in silence. They waited for whatever that was outside the ship to forget about them and be on its way. But they couldn't wait too long, for their air supply was running dangerously low.

"Reeve," Cid called up to the mayor of Nibelheim, who had still clung to the pipe above them and watched the object outside the Highwind. "That thing gone yet?"

"No..." Reeve peered nervously at the large shadow.

"I hear a faint engine," Vincent's voice was collected and calm despite the surrounding peril. "Whatever is out there is artificial."

"It's a submarine!" Reeve yelled as he saw several floodlights beam to life and direct themselves at the fallen ship. He clenched his eyes shut and ducked away from the glass pane when an intense light passed over the port hole. The bright light stopped moving when it fell up the port hole and adjacent access hatch. It seemed whoever it was had found what they were looking for.

"Jeezus, what now?" Barret spat.

Silence. Reeve returned to the opening and narrowed his gaze at the blinding illumination pouring in, trying to see something outside that would explain what was happening. And once again, they waited. But this time they didn't have long to wait.

Almost as in answer to Barret's angry query, something very unexpected occurred. There was a knock at the door.

"Who the hell?" Cid snarled in amazement.

"Barret," Reeve spoke slowly, not taking his eyes off the port hole, "You better open the door. It's Cloud."

"What?!" Cid snapped.

"He's brought his submarine, and an extra Underwater Breathe by the looks of it," answered Reeve.

"That magnificent bastard," grinned the old pilot.

Barret and Vincent moved to opposite sides of the hatch as before and pulled with all their might. The doors parted, and a blinding light filled the darkened bridge. Cid squinted at the familiar silhouette that stood in the doorway encased in a familiar bubble of air. He could see the pointed spike at the top of his head, and the massive outline of the Ultima Sword strapped to his back.

"Anybody need a lift?" Cloud called in with an aloof tone.

"Awright," Cid carried Shera over to the safety of the air bubble and passed her weakened form to Cloud. "Let's get outta here before your head floats to the surface." Cloud simply grinned as Reeve stepped into the ball of oxygen for the first trip.

"Jerry," Cid called over to one of the crewmen that held onto the unconscious mechanic from Rocket Town, "Get that useless sack into the other bubble with Barret! The rest of us are gonna swim for it!"

Cloud was careful to keep his air bubble wedged tightly in the doorway until everyone was ready. When they were, they made their way to the awaiting sub.

Once on board, Cid made sure Shera was resting comfortably in the cargo hold - as comfortable as one could get on a cold steel floor - and made his way to the bridge with the others. Barret, Vincent, Tifa and Cloud crammed into the small chamber to discuss their next action.

"I can't believe you went back for this old bucket," said Barret. "Why didn't you tell us what you were doin'?"

"I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up," Cloud said with a shrug, "I'm surprised there's still enough fuel in it to keep it running. It's not like I can pull up to Junon and say 'fill 'er up, Heidegger'!"

"We'll pat each other's backs later," Cid broke in, "If I'm not mistaken, those Junon ships'll be here any second." Tifa and Cloud turned back to the windshield and saw the lights from the approaching submarines, and the bottoms of the hulls of the nearby warships.

"Let's clear out, people!" Cloud announced as he took his seat at the helm. The tiny red submarine turned away from the approaching fleet and departed into the murky waters ahead.

Cid pressed his face against a small window on the side of the craft and laid his eyes upon his precious airship one last time.

"Colonel!" a young cadet called up from the operations room on Heidegger's flagship. "We're detecting another vessel just ahead. It looks like a class two submarine."

Heidegger stood up from his chair and walked over to the young soldier's station. He peered into the radar screen at the tiny blip moving away from them. "It is the stolen Shinra sub," he finally said. "That is where we will find them, the so-called Avalanche." The portly commander walked back to his chair and sat, taking up a microphone mounted nearby. "Attention fleet," he bellowed into the mouthpiece, "This is Heidegger. Alter course in pursuit of the rouge sub and fire at will!"

Almost as a single unit, the countless vessels moved in pursuit of the tiny submarine. As soon as the lead ships began to overtake it, they fired.

"Cloud!" Tifa turned back from a view screen inside the targeted vessel. "I've got a weapons lock on us! Looks like Heidegger's pissed!"

"Cid," Cloud turned to the opposite side of the bridge, "Do we got any torpedoes left?"

Cid stood up from his seat and pounded his fist on a control panel mounted above him. "Negative!" he barked. "We're a sittin' duck!"

Cloud turned forward, a look of defeat beginning to form on his face. "All hands!" he shouted, "Brace for impact!"

A thunderous boom erupted just outside the sub, and she began to take on water.

Author's Notes: Well that's all for this one, hope you enjoyed it!

I should clear up the part about the materia here: the summon spells in 'Crisis' are far more limited than they are in the game. In my story, you can't just cast one spell after another without doing any damage to yourself and the materia. Also, once you summon a certain creature, you have to wait awhile until the 'magic returns' to its red materia orb, even if the person casting the spell just took an elixir.

There's also a near-death and a total-death difference that I believe is shared in the game. Think about it: Why didn't Cloud just use a phoenix down when Aeris was killed by Sephiroth? She was obviously beyond the point where she could be brought back. (And while we're on the subject, what the hell was Cloud standing on when he dropped her into the lake, since she seemed to sink for miles?! But I digress.)

I figure there are five chapters or less of story to go, so hang on!