

CHAPTER VI: THOSE ANNOYING BATS

They reached Rocket Town the next day. Like Wutai, it had grown, but not nearly as much. As they walked down the street they saw perhaps a dozen new houses. As they passed between two of them Cait stopped and pointed to the north.

"Hey, look at that."

They saw the top of a rocket poking out of the treetops.

"He must be building a new one," Tifa said. "Let's go take a look."

They turned and hurried north. As they came out of the trees they saw the new rocket in front of them. It looked quite similar to the old one, but was obviously still under construction and a long way from completion. There were still gaping holes in the hull, and they could see a dozen technicians working on the interior.

The launch pad was covered with pipes, electrical lines and construction equipment. They worked their way through the maze until they saw Cid talking to two other men at the base of the rocket.

"Cid!" Cloud called.

He turned and waved. They walked over to him.

"So, how do you like it?" he said as they approached, waving his hand at the ship. "It's going to be a beauty! Twice as powerful as the old one. If all goes well we should be done with her sometime next year. You guys up for another trip into space?"

"I'm not sure we're quite ready for that," Cloud replied. "Looks like you've been working hard. I guess one trip into space wasn't enough for you."

"Ha!" Cid spat out. "That was nothing. That just gave me a taste and now I'm anxious for more. Who knows, with this baby, we might even be able to reach another planet!"

"Where did you get the funding?" Red asked.

"Well, we're still a little tight there," Cid admitted. "But I got a lot of investors once they saw that the first rocket actually worked. Plus, we're cutting expenses as much as possible. I've even used a lot of parts from the Highwind."

"You took apart the Highwind?" Barret said in surprise.

"Yeah, we needed the parts. Anyway, who needs an airship when you can have a spaceship. Besides, I've still got the Tiny Bronco."

"But the Tiny Bronco can't fly," Cait said.

"It can now," Cid replied.

"Sounds like you've been keeping busy," Red observed.

"Things couldn't be better, actually," Cid said. "So what have you guys been up to. I hardly expected to see you all back here together. Are we having some sort of reunion?"

"Kind of," Cloud replied. He explained the situation.

Cid nodded when Cloud had finished.

"I see. Well, it's kind of busy here but I'm sure I can find the time to give you a hand. It shouldn't take too long. How about if we leave tomorrow morning?"

"That would be fine," Cloud agreed.

"Okay, then why don't you guys head over to my place. No sense in staying at the Inn. Just tell Shera to break out some extra cots. I'll be back as soon as I can finish up here, but it'll probably not be till late."

Just then a man came running up, he seemed very agitated and was shouting Cid's name. Cid called and waved him over.

"What's all this about?" he demanded.

"Captain, you've got to come quick," he shouted as soon as he saw them. "The Turks have got Shera!"

"Why the hell didn't she have the sense to duck out of here when she saw them coming?" Cid said angrily. They were all standing in the living room of his house.

"I'm sure she would have if she had the opportunity," Tifa said.

"Don't count on it," Cid replied. "She never did have much sense. I've half a mind to just let them have her."

"You can't be serious," Tifa cried.

"No, I suppose not," he replied grudgingly. "But we know it's not her they want. What do you think they'll do if we don't show up?"

The Turks had left a message to meet them at the foot of the nearby mountains if they ever wanted to see Shera again.

"It's the Crystal Materia they want," Cloud said. "And they obviously have either a trade or a trap in mind. Shera is just a means to an end to them, but that doesn't mean they would just let her go if we don't fall for it. They can be ruthless if they have to. Remember, it was Reno who set off the bomb that destroyed the Sector 7 slums."

"We haven't forgotten," Barret said grimly.

"So what are we going to do then?" Cid asked.

They all looked at Cloud.

"We'll have to go see what they have to say, at least," he said after a minute. "But not all of us. Cid and Red, you two come with me. The rest of you stay here. This way, if it's a trap, they won't get all of us, and you'll have an opportunity to try to get us out of it if we have problems."

He walked over to Tifa, who did not look pleased with the plan, and took out the Crystal Materia.

"Here," he said. "You better hold on to this. If we do fall into a trap we have to be sure this doesn't fall into their hands."

She hesitantly reached out and took the materia from him. He turned and motioned for Cid and Red to follow him.

"Cloud," Tifa said as he walked toward the door.

He turned to look at her, and for a moment he thought she was going to protest.

"Be careful," she said finally.

"Later," he replied and led the others out the door.

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They headed south out of town. The mountains loomed in front of them, and it wasn't long before they were walking up a steep path that wound into the foothills. They came around a narrow turn and saw the Turks standing idly on the path in front of them.

Cloud drew his weapon as the Turks turned to face them.

"I told you they'd show up," Reno muttered to Elena.

"Where's Shera?" Cloud asked grimly.

"Give us the Crystal Materia and we'll let her go," Reno suggested.

"I'm afraid my answer is the same as it was last time you asked," Cloud replied immediately. "Not likely."

Reno smiled.

"Where's the rest of your little party," he asked. "Sneaking around behind us?"

"We leave the sneaking to you Turks," Cloud answered. "They're not here. We don't need their help to take on the likes of you."

"Very arrogant of you," Reno replied. "Still, I think you may come to regret that. Shera is in a cave just down the path behind us. She's there for the taking if you can get past us. On the other hand, when we defeat you, the Crystal Materia

will be ours."

"Apparently I'm not the only one who suffers from a touch of arrogance," Cloud replied. "Shall we have at it then?"

Cid and Red came up beside Cloud. This time Reno and Rude closed in immediately to battle Cloud and Cid, while Elena and Red stayed in the back and started out casting defensive spells. Reno knew Cloud's fighting skills well, and did not stand toe to toe with him, but instead dodged quickly in and back out, never giving Cloud a clear target. Most of the time Cloud's sword, fast as it was, cut only air. Even when he did get a hit, it was softened by the magical barriers, and Rude was quick to cast cure spells whenever one of his partners was injured. Still, Reno was spending so much time dodging Cloud's blows that he had little time to try to cause any damage himself.

The others seemed pretty evenly matched as well. Cid and Rude were trading blows to Cloud's left, but neither one seemed to be getting the better of the other. Occasionally Red or Elena would attack one of the others, or the whole group, with a materia spell, but each time the other would counter with a defensive spell or a cure.

They fought for some time, neither team seeming to get the upper hand. After a while they all were beginning to tire, with neither side seeming to gain an advantage. Cloud was just beginning to think that maybe he should have brought some of the others, when, as if by mutual consent, the Turks suddenly broke off the attack and turned and fled up the path.

Cloud hesitated for a moment, surprised by the suddenness of the retreat. Then he was after them. Not even looking to see if the others were following, he ran up the path and around the turn the Turks had just disappeared beyond.

Cid was right behind him. Red trailed a little behind.

"That seemed awfully easy," he commented, but the others did not appear to hear.

They came around the turn. There was no sign of the Turks, but a cave mouth loomed on the left ahead.

"That must be the cave," Cloud said. "C'mon."

He ran for the cave, the others following not far behind. About twenty yards in front of the cave mouth the ground suddenly opened up below them and they plunged down into darkness.

Cloud hit the water with a splash. The others almost landing on top of him. He came up to the surface immediately.

Not more water, he thought.

He looked around. They had fallen into a pool of dark water in what appeared to be some sort of deep shaft. There was a rotting wooden platform to their left, and beyond it a tunnel that led into the darkness. He looked up to see a square of light perhaps thirty feet above them.

Reno, Rude and Elena stepped out from behind some nearby rocks and walked over to the mine entrance they had so cleverly concealed. They looked in to see Cloud and the others looking up at them.

"I guess I forgot to tell you to watch that first step," Reno said with a smile.

"Cowards," Cid shouted. "You knew we were going to kick your ass. And I guarantee you we will as soon as we get out of here."

Reno laughed.

"I don't think you're in any position to make threats," he replied calmly. "We'd be happy to supply you with a rope, in exchange for the Crystal Materia, of course."

"Still trying to negotiate?" Cloud answered. "We don't need your rope. We'll find a way out ourselves."

Elena looked at them skeptically.

"Not likely," she stated.

"Have it your way," Reno said. "I didn't think for a minute that you would listen to reason. That mineshaft goes on for miles, but there is no other way out. If you go into those tunnels all you'll do is get yourselves hopelessly lost. You won't get far in any case. There's some very nasty creatures down there who don't like visitors. Say hello to them for us when you see them."

Reno laughed again and they turned and walked away down the path. As soon as they were away from the mineshaft he turned to the others.

"We'll let them rot in there for awhile. It's likely that something down there will kill them all and save us the trouble. Then we can just go down and help ourselves to the Crystal Materia. In the meantime I think we might want to head back to Rocket Town. Cloud is no fool. It just might be that he left the materia with the others."

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"I'm sure they're fine," Barret said.

Tifa did not reply, but continued pacing nervously around the room. She would have felt better if she had gone with Cloud. And she would have felt much better if he hadn't given her the Crystal Materia. For some reason just knowing that she had it filled her with foreboding. She wished he had given it to someone else. She had almost asked Barret to take it a several times, but had changed her mind each time.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. They all looked at each other.

No one had any suggestions as to who it might be.

Barret shrugged and walked over to the door. Cait and Yuffie went to either side as Barret opened it.

"Well, I'll be damned," Barret said, suddenly breaking into a grin. "This really is turning out to be just like old times."

He stepped out of the way as Vincent Valentine walked in.

"Vincent," Cait and Tifa both said in surprise.

Vincent looked at them all grimly as he came in.

"It is good to see you all again," he said. "But I am afraid this is more than a social visit. It appears we both need each other."

"What do you mean?" Barret asked. They walked over and all sat down around a table in the living room.

"Cloud is walking into a trap. The Turks are going to lure him into an abandoned mine, then either finish him off or let the creatures in the mine do it. Then they'll take the Crystal Materia for themselves."

Tifa shook her head. .

"They can't get the materia from him."

"Why not?" Vincent asked.

"Because he doesn't have it," Tifa replied.

"I see," Vincent said. "Then he'll have nothing to negotiate with. In any case, if he ends up in the mine he'll never get out by himself. The mine is a huge maze. There are ways out, but you have to know the way. I can get him out, but it's too dangerous to go by myself. I also know where they're holding Shera. If you come with me, I think we can get them all back safely."

Barret was looking at Vincent with a strange expression on his face.

"That's all well and good," he said, "but how do you know all this?"

Vincent returned his gaze evenly.

"I know because I know who hired the Turks. I know because it's someone I'm very close to, or was. I know because it's..."

He paused, and for a moment Barret thought he saw a great sadness in Vincent's eyes.

"Lucrecia," he said finally. "Lucrecia hired them."

Yuffie looked at him with both puzzlement and shock on her face.

"But why would Lucrecia hire the Turks to fight us?" she asked.

"She didn't hire them to fight you," Vincent replied. "She hired them to get the Crystal Materia."

"But why?" Tifa asked.

Again he did not respond at first. At last he spoke the words as if it pained him to say them.

"You want to use the materia to bring back Aeris. But if it works it can bring back any of the Ancients, or maybe even her son."

The others looked at him in shocked silence.

"Sephiroth?" Yuffie exclaimed finally. "She wants to bring back Sephiroth?"

Vincent nodded.

"I'm afraid she's not thinking clearly," he said sadly. "In fact, it may be that she is not in her right mind at all. She doesn't seem to realize that Sephiroth nearly destroyed the planet, and was only out for his own gain and would have killed her along with all the rest of us. She's obsessed with the idea of bringing him back. She told me of her plans, she told me all about it. That's how I know so much, you see. But she turned against me when I opposed the idea. She called me a traitor, said I didn't really care about her at all. I wanted her to stop, I begged and pleaded with her to stop, but I couldn't get through to her. She's even attacked you, my friends, to get what she wants. I can't just stand by and watch her do it, I have to try to stop her, no matter how I may feel about it."

He ended lamely. The others looked at him sympathetically. All except Tifa, who was thinking about the Crystal Materia. She had never thought about the possibility that it could be used to bring back anyone but Aeris. It seemed to her now that obtaining it had been a foolish and dangerous thing to do, and their innocent quest to save her could turn into something dark and deadly, not just for them but for everyone on the planet. It would have been better if they had never found the materia, or if they just destroyed it. They would not be able to use it then, but no one else would either. She took it out and held it in her hand. It might be better for them all if she just smashed it right now.

She knew she couldn't do that. Whatever might happen, she couldn't destroy their last hope of resurrecting Aeris. At least not without Cloud's consent. She would just have to make sure the materia didn't fall into the wrong hands, but now the burden felt twice as heavy.

"So what can we do?" Barret asked.

"Come with me into the mines. I know them well. We can rescue both Shera and Cloud that way, but it is too dangerous to try by myself. It will still be dangerous, but we may be able to make it together. In any case, we should leave right away. The others are in grave danger."

"Good," Barret agreed. "But I don't think we should all go. Cloud wanted the Crystal Materia to remain here, and I don't see any reason to change that. Yuffie, you come with Vincent and me."

He turned to Tifa.

"You and Cait stay here. This way the materia is safe and someone is here to tell Cloud where we went, on the chance that he escaped the trap and comes back."

"I don't want to stay," Tifa protested.

"Don't argue with me," Barret retorted. "You know as well as I do that the materia has to be protected now more than ever. We just can't chance it."

Tifa sighed but said nothing. She did not like this latest development one bit, however.

"Okay, lets get going," Barret said.

They got up and started out the door.

"Take good care of things while we're gone," Barret said to Cait.

"Don't worry," Cait replied. "We'll make sure nothing happens to the materia."

Tifa said nothing, but just watched them walk out the door, more worried than ever.

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"Well, it looks like we're not getting back out that way," Cloud said, looking up.

They were standing on the wooden platform next to the water. Red looked down the tunnel which was the only other way out. Cid sat on the edge of the platform smoking a cigarette.

"Do you think the others can find us here?" he asked.

"I suppose," Cloud replied. "But it might be hours before they get here. I don't think we have the time to waste. We've got to try to get ourselves out of this."

"So into the tunnels it is then?" Red asked.

"Into the tunnels it is," Cloud agreed.

The tunnel sloped slightly upward as they walked into it. Cloud was in the lead, his sword ready, Red behind him and Cid in the rear. Cloud didn't know whether the Turks had been bluffing about the creatures down here, but he thought it wise to be prepared for anything. It seemed unlikely that Reno would trap them down here without some sort of nasty surprise waiting.

The tunnel turned sharply and then divided in two. The right hand side plunged downward while the left seemed to remain level.

"So which way do we go?" Red said.

Cloud peered down each tunnel, listening carefully. Finally he shook his head.

"I guess we'll just have to pick one at random. We'll just keep making lefts," he decided. "This way at least we'll be able to find our way back."

He led them down the left hand passage. It was narrow and twisted, so they could not see very far ahead. They passed side tunnels half a dozen times, and each time chose the left hand passage. They went on for quite some time this way, always on guard but seeing nothing threatening. Time seemed to crawl by. Cloud wasn't sure how long they had been down here, but it seemed like hours. He was just thinking that maybe they would have been better off waiting for the others when they came around a turn and saw a flickering light ahead.

Cloud moved forward cautiously. He could see a large chamber ahead of them. It flickered with light that was obviously cast by fire. He edged up to the end of the passage and peered out. He could see fires burning brightly at either end of the chamber. In the center of the cavern stood a square wooden cage. Shera sat in one corner of the it, unmoving. At first he thought that, except for her, the room was deserted, but then a shadow flickered though the air. He looked up and saw that the ceiling was crowded with dark figures. He retreated back to the others.

"We've found Shera. But she's being guarded by giant bat like creatures."

He motioned for them to follow and led them back to the entrance so they could see for themselves, then they retreated again.

"There must be dozens of them," Cid said. "I don't think we can take them all on."

"If we can get Shera and get back into this tunnel we might be okay," Cloud said thoughtfully. "It's too narrow for them to use their numbers against us. They could only come at us one or two at a time. We could hold out a long time."

"A long time," Red agreed, "but not forever. It's not going to do us much good if we get Shera and can't find our way out. We have to find an exit first."

"We could spend hours looking for an exit," Cid countered. "And even then there's no guarantee that we'll be able to find our way back here, or that Shera will still be here when we do. I say we get her now while we have the chance and trust to luck to find the way out."

"It'll be twice as hard to search for an exit once we have alerted these creatures to our presence," Red retorted. "And it doesn't look like Shera will be going anywhere anytime soon. The prudent thing to do would be to find the exit first."

They both turned to look at Cloud.

He looked back down the passageway. It would make sense to find the exit first, but he felt pressed for time. He wondered what the Turks were up to while they were trapped down here. It seemed in hindsight that perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea to split up the group. He had a feeling they had to get out of here as soon as possible.

"We'll get her now and trust to luck," he said. "But there are too many of them to just run out there. We need some kind of diversion."

They edged back to the entrance and looked out carefully. A narrow path led down from the tunnel they were in onto the main chamber floor. Shera's cage was perhaps thirty yards away, in the middle of the room with nothing around it.

"If one of us ran out there and attracted their attention," Cloud whispered, "the others may have time to get Shera out."

"That's fine for everyone except the person who attracts their attention," Cid replied. "It won't do us any good to exchange one prisoner for another."

"If he could keep moving, he might be able to get back to the tunnel after we get Shera out," Cloud said. "It's risky, but I don't see what else we can do."

"So who's the poor fool who gets to go out there?" Cid asked.

"It's my idea," Cloud replied. "I'll go. As soon as you see them come after me, get Shera, then get back in the tunnel. I'll circle around the chamber and join you here."

"No," Red cut in. "I'll go. The job requires speed and agility more than strength. With my four legs I'm more than twice as fast as you. I'm the logical choice."

Cloud hesitated. He had not expected anyone to object, but he had to admit that Red had a point.

Finally he nodded.

"Okay," he said. "You just have to keep their attention for a minute or two. As soon as you see us get Shera, get back here as fast as possible."

"Right," Red replied. He crept up closer to the entrance and crouched down. He remained still, staring out into the chamber for a moment, only his tail twitching occasionally. Suddenly he leapt out as one of the bats flew by. He caught hold of it with his claws and they both tumbled to the floor together. Then he was up and dashing across the room. There was a flurry of activity above their heads and suddenly shadows began swooping down all around him.

Cloud waited a moment to give Red time to get far enough away from the tunnel entrance.

"Now!" he said, and ran out of the tunnel straight toward the cage, with Cid close at his heels. Shera looked up at the commotion when Red had run out, now she stood and turned toward them as she saw them coming.

Two bats swooped down out the sky, but with a flash of sword and spear they fell to the ground. Cloud and Cid ran on until they were next to the cage.

"Get back," Cloud said.

Shera stepped back and Cloud swung his sword. The wooden poles of the cage were no match for hardened steel. In seconds the poles were kindling and Shera was free.

"Now quickly, back to the tunnel," Cloud shouted.

They turned and ran back. Cloud chanced a look over to see how Red was doing. He could barely make him out in the tangle of shadows across the room, but he could see he was still on his feet. Some of the bats saw them and came back to attack, but most of them still clustered around Red. The few that got in their way were quickly dispatched. They reached the tunnel and stopped safely inside. Cid and Cloud turned to see Red fighting for his life against more than a dozen bats at the far end of the chamber. They both pulled out materia orbs.

Red scrambled along the wall, desperately trying to keep from being trapped. He knew the bats would overwhelm him if he had to stand and fight. He was quicker than they were, but their flying ability made up for that to a great extent. In spite of his speed he eventually found himself cornered.

Just then a double flash of fire and ice blasted the bats that had blocked him in to the left. Clawing ferociously at the bats nearby he broke free in that direction, then dashed back to the relative safety of the tunnel, where he paused with the others, panting.

"That wasn't as easy as I thought," he said.

"It's not over yet," Cloud replied. "Shera, are you okay?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm unhurt. Thank you."

"Save the thanks for later," Cid said. "Right now We've got to get out of here. Which way?"

"Like we said before, we have to trust to luck," Cloud replied. "Let's go."

He led them back the way they had come as fast as Red and Shera could go. At the first turn off he headed in a different direction. At each turn thereafter he picked a tunnel at random. He tried to keep track of all their twists and turns, but it was just about impossible. Every once in a while a bat, or a group of them, would block their path, or come up behind them, and each time they had to stop and fight. Soon Cloud was acutely aware that they were completely lost.

Even if they were lost, he knew the bats were keeping track of them. Though now they no longer attacked, he could hear the rustle of their wings behind them whenever they paused, and occasionally saw the red glint of their eyes. He knew the bats could not take them in the narrow tunnel, but how long would that last? They couldn't run around down here forever.

He turned into another tunnel which led down a steep set of steps. At the bottom they stopped at the entrance to a large chamber, so dimly lit that they could not see the other side. Cloud stopped them and turned to look back up the stairs. He could see dark forms coming down the steps. He hesitated for a moment, unsure. The steps were safer, but they would have to fight their way all the way back. He looked around the chamber. It appeared empty. Perhaps they could get across quickly.

"C'mon," he said, and ran out into the room. The others swiftly followed. As they neared the center of the room he saw the dark outline of another tunnel ahead of them, but before they reached it a figure stepped out of the tunnel as raised it's hands.

Instantly the cavern was filled with light as fires flared up to their left and right. They looked up to see that the ceiling above was literally crawling with bats. They halted and looked at the figure who stood in their way. In the firelight they could easily make out her features.

"Lucrecia," Cloud said.

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"Would you sit down and relax," Cait said. "You're driving me crazy. I thought Barret was bad."

"I'm sorry," Tifa replied, but she did not sit down. "I can't help but worry. It's so frustrating to be sitting here when I know the others are in danger."

"I know how you feel," Cait replied. "But there's nothing we can do about it. I'm sure they'll all be fine."

"I know," she said. "It's just that it seems like hours that they've been gone. Don't you think they should have been back already? How long do we have to sit here and wait?"

Cait shrugged.

"I don't know," he replied. "Even if they get into trouble, I'm sure one of them will be able to get back here. It could take them a long time. They weren't going on a picnic, you know. At any rate, I don't think it would help if we ran off as well."

Tifa shook her head. What Cait was saying was true, but that didn't mean she had to like it. She just wished they'd get back!

Cait was concerned as well. Even though he had confidence in his friends abilities, it had been a long time that they had been gone.

"I'm worried too," he said. "But it's not going to help. Come and sit down and have a drink. Your nerves are shot, and it'll help you relax."

Tifa didn't think it would do much good, but she was about to accept his offer when they heard footsteps outside the door.

"Finally," she said. She started over to the door but stopped when it opened to reveal Reno and Rude.

Cait jumped up out of his seat.

"Run, Tifa," he cried. "I'll hold them off!"

Tifa turned to run for the back door, only to see Elena coming from the kitchen behind them, cutting her off.

Reno stood in the doorway and folded his arms across his chest.

"You sure know how to make a person feel unwanted," he said casually.

"What do you want?" Tifa questioned fiercely.

"I think you already know that," Elena responded.

"You're not getting the Crystal Materia," Cait said angrily.

Reno looked at Rude.

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"I told you Cloud wouldn't bring it with him," he said smugly. Then he looked at Cait.

"Thank you for verifying that for us," he said. "I'm afraid that you don't have much choice. You're no match for us without your friends. Hand it over and we won't be forced to hurt you."

Tifa looked around desperately. Now that she realized what they were planning she knew she could not let the materia fall into their hands, but she also knew that they were probably right. She and Cait couldn't defeat them alone.

Still, she knew she had no choice but to defend the Crystal at all costs.

Without a word she slowly walked over to Reno, head bowed. A smile spread across his lips, but it disappeared as she suddenly launched a vicious kick at his groin. He dodged enough to take it on the hip instead, but it still knocked him off his feet. He stumbled back and fell to the floor.

"We're more than a match for the likes of you," she said defiantly.

For an instant he did not move, then he turned and slowly got up. He looked at her furiously.

"You're going to pay dearly for that," he said.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that," said a strange voice.

They all turned to see a someone standing in the doorway. He wore a black cloak and was carrying a long sword, and for a moment Tifa almost gasped in shock because she thought it was Sephiroth. But looking at his face she saw it was not. The man had short dark brown hair and darker features than Sephiroth, though the same green eyes that glowed as the mark of SOLDIER.

"Who the hell are you?" Rude questioned.

"That's not really important," Tarkin replied, looking at Reno. "What is important is that you are interfering in something you do not understand. Things you cannot understand. None of your small minds can comprehend what you are really dealing with here. You are like children playing with a deadly weapon, and it's just a matter of time before you do something that will destroy you all."

"What kind of nonsense is that?" Elena demanded.

"It is not nonsense, " Tarkin countered. "It is deadly serious. It is also unimportant. It doesn't really concern me whether you destroy yourselves or not. What does concern me is the Crystal Materia. I am afraid I cannot let you take it. In fact, I can assure you that it would be in your best interests to just walk out the door right now and never bother these people again."

"C'mon Reno," Elena said, "let's just kick his butt too..."

She stopped as Tarkin turned and looked at her sharply. Tifa could almost feel the power emanating from him. She had felt the same feeling from Sephiroth, and she shuddered inwardly. Even though he didn't look like him, the way he spoke, the way he acted and moved, all reminded her vividly of their former foe.

"I don't know who you are, but we don't need any help," she found herself saying, even though she knew it was not true.

"Be silent," he said and turned to stare at her. The look hit her like a physical blow.

He turned back to look at Reno. For a long time they just stood there, staring at each other, and Tifa could feel the power flowing between them. Finally Reno looked away.

"Maybe this isn't the right time," he said slowly. He looked at the other two.

"C'mon, let's get out of here."

Elena seemed about to protest, but Tarkin looked at her again and she said nothing. The Turks turned and walked slowly out of the room without another word.

Tifa felt totally lost. Who was this guy and where did he come from? How did he know so much about what they were doing? She wanted to thank him for helping them, but she had the distinct feeling that he hadn't done it for their benefit. In fact, she felt that she was in greater danger now than they had been when confronted by the Turks. She suddenly realized that she was slowly backing away from the man.

He turned to look at her again, and laughed coldly. Even that reminded her of Sephiroth.

"You have no need to fear me," he said softly. "At least, not yet."

He looked over at Cait for a moment, then, still chuckling, turned and strode deliberately out the door.

Tifa looked at Cait, but he said nothing. She quickly walked over to the door. She could see the man walking away. She closed the door, turned, and leaned up against it.

"Now that was really weird," she muttered.

Tarkin continued down the road, still laughing to himself. The irony of actually helping Cloud and his friends was just too much, he thought, shaking his head. Lucrecia was such a fool sending the Turks to interfere. She could have ruined everything without even realizing it. As it was she had forced him to reveal himself. He really didn't think that would matter now, but one never knew. The funny thing was that they were both working for the same goal. It wasn't enough to bring Sephiroth back, Cloud also had to pay for what he had done. But she was so shortsighted! Let them keep the materia, let them do the dirty work. She didn't see that in order for the revenge to be perfect, Cloud had to be the one to bring the materia into the lifestream. Cloud had to be the one to bring back Sephiroth!

~*~

Lucrecia looked at them darkly.

"You have slain my son," she said. She spoke evenly, neither angrily nor sadly. "But you have also obtained the means to bring him back to me. You can redeem yourselves. You can right your wrong. Give me the Crystal Materia so I can have my son back."

Cloud glanced up. There seemed to be hundreds of bats in this room. Many more than had been in the previous chamber, and they were out in the open, exposed.

"Lucrecia," he said slowly. "We didn't want to hurt your son. But don't you see what he was doing? He was going to destroy the planet. He was going to destroy all of us. We had no choice."

"He would not have done it," she answered sharply. "I know he did some things he shouldn't have. I know he had his problems. But they weren't his fault, and he could not have done all these things he was accused of. Now give me the Materia. I know you didn't mean to hurt him. I do not wish to hurt you, I do not wish to see any further death. But you must give me the Materia."

Cloud looked at the others.

"Should I tell her we don't have it?" he whispered.

"I don't think she'll be too happy to hear that," Cid observed.

"I suppose not," Red agreed, "but she's going to find out eventually."

Cloud glanced around one more time, but there was no where to run. He decided to tell her the truth.

"We don't have it," he said.

"What do you mean?" she questioned.

"We didn't bring it with us," he replied. "We thought it would be too risky. We left it with the others."

Lucrecia stared at them, and Cloud saw a look of anger pass across her face.

"I should slay you all," she said sternly. "But I will not kill you needlessly. You shall remain here as my prisoners. You shall

never see the light of day again unless the Crystal Materia is delivered into my hands."

"Lucrecia, stop this."

They all turned to see Vincent, Barret and Yuffie walk into the cavern from a tunnel off to the right. Lucrecia stared at them, anger plain on her face.

"I told you never to come back here!" she said sharply.

"I'm only here to help my friends," Vincent replied. He walked over to Cloud, seemingly unconcerned by Lucrecia's anger or the bats flew restlessly above their heads.

"Is everyone all right?" he asked.

"We're fine," Cloud replied.

"Good," he said. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

"They must give me the Crystal Materia!" Lucrecia shouted.

Vince turned and looked at her angrily.

"Leave them alone," he said. "They did nothing wrong. Sephiroth would have killed them if they hadn't killed him first. Just like he killed all those other people."

"I won't listen to you!" she cried angrily. "They must stay here. If you try to leave I will have my bats destroy you all!"

"Your bats will not attack me," Vince replied evenly. "I have just as much power over them as you. They will not harm my friends while I am here."

He motioned for them to follow and walked back over to Barret and Yuffie.

"Vincent!" Lucrecia said. "Do not defy me. Help me. You cared for me once. Those feelings can't be all gone. You couldn't help me then, but do so now. Help me get my son back!"

Vincent stopped and looked down at the floor. Slowly he shook his head.

"Give up this foolish quest before it destroys you," he finally said.

"I cannot," she replied. "It is all I have left."

"If you believe that than you are already dead," he replied. "But I don't believe that. My friends and I are leaving. The only way to stop us is to kill us. Do you wish to add more blood to your son's legacy?"

He motioned for the others to head back to the tunnel he had first emerged from.

"Please don't do this," Lucrecia said, and now there was no anger in her voice, only sadness.

They walked into the tunnel. Vincent last. He turned and looked back at her one more time. She stood unmoving in the firelight, no longer looking foreboding or evil, just very much alone.

"It doesn't have to be like this," Vincent said. "Come with us. Help us attempt to heal some of the damage Sephiroth did. In the end you might heal yourself as well."

"My wounds are too deep for that," she answered.

For a moment more he looked at her, then he turned and followed the others into the darkness.

~*~

"So this guy just walked in and scared the Turks off without any explanation?" Barret asked.

Night had fallen by the time the others returned. Now they were all gathered in Cid's living room.

"That's right," Tifa replied. "It was the strangest thing."

"And you have no idea who he was," Cloud said.

"No, I've never seen him before. Have you, Cait?" Tifa said, looking at him closely.

Cait shook his head.

"Never."

"Well if that don't beat all," Barret said. "Looks like we've got a mysterious benefactor on top of everything else."

"Whoever he was, he was not our friend," Tifa replied quickly. "I'm sure of that. There was an unmistakable feeling of coldness about him. It seemed to me he wouldn't have thought twice about slitting our throats if he thought it necessary."

"So then why did he help you?" Cid questioned.

"I don't know," Tifa said. "I don't think he did it for us. For some reason, he did not want the Crystal Materia to fall into the Turk's hands. I think he has his own plans for the Materia, but what that might be, I have no idea."

"If that were true, then why didn't he take it from you himself?" Cloud asked.

"I don't know," Tifa said emphatically. "The whole thing just doesn't make any sense to me. I had the feeling that if he had wanted the materia, he could have taken it from us. I don't know what stopped him. I don't know what his plan is, but one thing I know for sure, he doesn't have our best interests in mind."

They all fell silent, digesting this newest information. Cloud did not like this latest twist in their adventure. He had thought things were becoming clearer now that they knew who the Turks were working for, and what they wanted, but now this. What was he supposed to make of this? Who was this person? What was he after? Was he friend of foe? Tifa obviously thought he was a foe, and he had no reason to distrust her judgement. But if so what did he want, and how did he know so much about them? It disturbed him that he had no answers to these questions, but even with these new developments their mission was unchanged.

"Irregardless of whether this person is working for or against us, we still have a mission to complete," he said. "Cid, you didn't get to tie up the loose ends on the rocket today as you had planned. Can we still leave tomorrow morning, or will we have to postpone it?"

Cid shrugged.

"We can go," he said. "I was just being a mother hen. The rocket is in good hands, and they can live without me for a few days. If we take the Bronco it shouldn't take much longer than that. Tomorrow morning will be fine."

"Good," Cloud replied. "Well, I suggest we all relax for a while and then get a good night's rest. Whoever this mysterious person is, I'm sure we haven't seen the last of him. I've a feeling what he is up to will be apparent soon enough."

Cid grunted in agreement and the gathering broke up. Most of the others went off into the rooms where they were going to be sleeping. Cid turned to look at Shera, who was cleaning up in the kitchen.

"Shera, what the hell are you doing?" he asked .

She looked at him questioningly.

"Cleaning up," she responded. "Sorry I didn't have time earlier."

"You've had a tough day," he said. "Go get some rest. You can clean up tomorrow."

She put the cup she was holding down on the counter.

"Okay," she said. "Thank you, for everything."

"There's no need to thank me," he said quickly. "Now go on."

She walked out of the room. Cid watched her go, shaking his head.

"You're lucky to have her."

Cid jumped. He turned and saw Vincent sitting in a darkened corner of the room. He had thought he and Shera were alone.

"Her? What are you crazy?" he responded. "She's caused me nothing but trouble since the first day I met her."

"She is devoted to you, and it is obvious you care for her more than you let on. Don't make the mistake of taking her for granted."

"Oh please." Cid began, then "...is it really that obvious?"

Vincent nodded.

"Man, I must be losing my touch," Cid muttered.

"I envy you, my friend," Vincent said slowly.

"Oh stop it," Cid said. "My life ain't so great. And things could get better for you too. I'm sure Lucrecia will come around."

Vincent shook his head.

"I have little hope of that," he said sadly. "All I've ever wanted to do was please her, and something has always prevented it from happening. If anything the rift between us has grown, and now the gap is so wide that I am afraid no bridge can span it. She has been poisoned by life's bitterness, and the flower I once knew has grown withered and dry. Even if I were to grasp it in my hand now, it would merely turn to dust."

Cid didn't know what to say. He never considered himself what you would call a deep thinker, and Vincent's philosophical bent usually went right over his head. This was way too heavy for him. Still, it didn't take a genius to see that his friend was in a darker mood than was usual, even for him.

"I think you need to relax for a while and forget about your troubles" he said, walking into the kitchen. " And there's nothing better at helping you do that than a stiff drink."

~*~

"Barret."

He turned as he was about to enter his room and saw Tifa coming up to him.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I wonder if you can do something for me," she said.

"Name it," he replied.

She hesitated.

"It's probably nothing," she said finally. "Just kind of a feeling I got. I wouldn't want to bother the others with it. And I certainly wouldn't want to spread any unfounded rumors."

She stopped again, as if not sure how to continue.

"Just spit it out," he prompted.

She nodded.

"I want you to keep an eye on Cait."

He frowned.

"What makes you say that?" he questioned.

"Like I said, just a feeling," she replied. "He hasn't done anything to make me suspicious, not really. But he deceived us once when he was spying for Shinra. I would hardly say it's a stretch to think that he might do it again."

Barret looked at her like he thought there was more to this than she was letting on, and indeed, that was exactly what he thought. If she had suspicions about Cait, why had she waited until now to broach them to him? In spite of her statement to the contrary, he must have done something.

"Sure, I'll keep an eye on him if you want me to. I have to admit it's difficult to trust Cait after what he did in our last adventure," he said bluntly. "But in the end he helped us fight against Sephiroth and Shinra. Not to mention that he helped us find the vault at Shinra headquarters just recently. You didn't seem to harbor any suspicions then. Did something happen while we were gone?"

She hesitated again, which made him sure he was right. The only question was whether she was going to share the information with him or not.

"Like I said," she replied. "I don't want to spread any rumors. Especially since I could be reading this completely wrong. It's just that before our mystery man left, he and Cait looked at each other and I thought I saw something in the way Cait looked at him. There was something in his eyes. Something like..."

Barret looked at her impatiently.

"Like what?" he blurted out.

"Recognition," she replied slowly.

~*~

"Cloud."

Aeris voice. He heard her as clearly as if she were standing in the room right next to him, and for a moment he almost opened his eyes to look. But he didn't. He knew the voice was in his head, yet he also knew that it was not from his own mind that the voice came. He had no doubt that the voice was hers, and hers alone, even though she might not be in the room with him but someplace far away.

"Aeris," he said without speaking. "Aeris, we're coming for you."

For a long time there was no answer, and he sensed some kind of hesitation or perhaps confusion. But her voice was calm and even when she spoke again.

"It is not necessary."

Now he felt confused himself.

"Don't you understand?" he said. "We want you to come back."

He sensed amusement.

"But I haven't gone away," she replied. "I've been there with you all along, just as you have been with me. We are all part of the planet, no matter what form we take. You have no need to feel sorry for me, or for what happened."

Cloud shook his head.

"But I don't just want you to be here in spirit," he replied. "I want you here for real. I want to see you standing before me. I want to see you and touch you. I want to bring you back to this life and I think we may have found a way. Are you telling me you don't want to come back?"

"Being there in spirit is real," she replied softly but emphatically. "Your senses tell you that is not true, but your senses can be deceived. But no, I do not begrudge you your quest. I just want you to be sure of your motives. You owe me nothing. What happened was my fault, if anyone's, but I chose freely, and I accept my fate. You must decide if you are searching for me or yourself."

"I don't understand," he said.

"Let go of your anger and your guilt," she replied, "and then do as your heart tells you."

"My heart tells me to go on," he said immediately.

"But your heart is troubled," he said. "and that prevents you from seeing things clearly. You do not see the road ahead, it is dark and dangerous, and going down the wrong path will lead you swiftly to disaster. You may find that it demands sacrifices you are not prepared to make. You must be sure of yourself."

"We've been down many a dark and dangerous road before," he said.

"Indeed, but this time..."

Then there was silence.

"Aeris?"

Cloud waited, but he got no response, and suddenly he felt deeply troubled. He thought something had happened to her. Someone, or something, had abruptly cut her off, even as she had been in the middle of trying to tell him something

important. What had happened?

He called to her for some time, but there was only silence. Try as he might, he could not reestablish contact. Eventually, and inevitably, he fell into a fitful sleep.