

CHAPTER IV: FORGET THE ASPIRIN, IS THERE A PSYCHIATRIST IN THE HOUSE?

"Are we early?"

"Not at all," Shera replied. "Barret's here already. Come on in."

Even as she spoke, Barret and Cid walked in the room from the other direction.

"Cloud, Tifa," Barret said, "You made it."

He came over and hugged Tifa, then slapped Cloud roughly on the shoulder.

"How are you doing?" He looked at Tifa. "You scared me half to death last night. I never heard you sound like that before."

Tifa flushed and did not respond. She prided herself on staying in control. She was embarrassed that she had gone to pieces like that, no matter what the reason.

Cid crushed out a cigarette in a nearby ashtray.

"Hey," he said. "I've made some modifications on the Slipstream. C'mon and take a look."

Tifa looked at him wryly.

"The proud pappa," she muttered.

Shera laughed.

"I just hope he's as enthusiastic about the child," she replied. She looked at Cid. "They hardly got here, give them a chance to sit down and relax."

"They can sit down in the plane," Cid retorted.

"You guys go on," Tifa suggested. "I'll stay here and give Shera a hand with the cooking. I'm sure Cid hasn't been of much help in that regard."

"He's only good at consuming it," Shera agreed quickly.

Tifa followed Shera into the kitchen as the guys went out the back. In a few minutes they heard the engines of the Slipstream roar to life.

Shera shook her head.

"The man just loves his toys," she observed.

"Boys will be boys," Tifa commented.

"I guess I shouldn't complain," Shera said. "I knew long before now what he was like."

Tifa glanced at Shera as she took some plates out of the cabinet. It seemed just yesterday that she thought Cid was dedicated to being a bachelor. Now, not only were he and Shera married, but they were about to have a baby. She couldn't help but be envious.

"You're so lucky," she found herself saying.

Shera stopped and looked at her sympathetically.

"How are things between you and Cloud?" she asked.

Tifa turned away and looked out the window. This was not something she was comfortable discussing.

"You shouldn't be shy about it," Shera stated, looking at Tifa knowingly. "Everyone knows how you feel about him."

Tifa turned red and looked at Shera with a mixture of embarrassment and surprise.

"Everyone?" she questioned.

"All right, maybe not everyone," Shera conceded. "Let me ask you this, have you said anything to him?"

Tifa turned away again, redder than ever.

"Can we talk about something else?" she said halfheartedly.

Shera came over and put her hand on Tifa's shoulder.

"Sometimes guys need a kick in the pants to get them going," she said. "I had to leave Cid to get him to realize that he really did love me."

"I couldn't do that," Tifa said quietly.

"I'm not saying you should," Shera replied. "But you should tell him how you feel."

Tifa was silent for a few moments. Then she slowly shook her head.

"I don't even know how he feels about me," she said slowly. "Not really. I don't know what he would think if I said anything. I'm afraid he might think, that he might...I don't know," she ended lamely.

"Afraid?" Shera said. "Tifa, you are one of the bravest people I've ever met. You and the others fought against Shinra and went head to head with Sephiroth. This should be easy."

They were interrupted by the doorbell.

"Just think about it, okay," Shera said. "For all you know he could feel the same way about you. But you'll never find out unless you say something."

Tifa nodded.

"I will," she replied hesitantly. "But not now. After we go to Cosmo Canyon. After his problems are taken care of. I'll tell him then."

Shera looked at her skeptically.

"Don't wait too long," she advised. "It would be a shame for you to lose him because you were afraid to tell him how you felt."

She walked out of the room to answer the door.

Tifa turned back to look at the pots on the kitchen counter.

"I will tell him," she repeated softly.

~*~

The guys came back in a short time later, Cloud and Barret laughing at some joke Cid had told. They sat down in the living room as the house began to slowly fill up with guests. Most of them were neighbors and friends from Rocket Town, including Shera's sister. But late in the afternoon, when dinner was just about to be served, Aeris arrived.

Cid, Barret, Cloud and Tifa were all sitting together talking quietly when she came in. She immediately went over to them.

Cloud moved over to make room for her between himself and Cid.

"Hi Aeris," he said. "Where are Red and Reeve?"

"They decided to stay and continue the search," she replied. She sat down and told them what had happened the last couple of days. When she was done Cid looked at her thoughtfully.

"I can't blame him for wanting to stay," he said. "I'm a little surprised at Reeve though. After what you told us I thought he would jump at the chance to get out of there."

"He's trying very hard," Aeris responded diplomatically. "And I felt better leaving knowing that Red wouldn't be alone. I don't think Dannako would hesitate to shoot him if he came across him by himself."

"Maybe we should come back with you and take care of this guy," Barret muttered.

"Well, I don't think that's necessary quite yet," Aeris replied. "Red can take care of himself. Besides, I'm hoping we can get through this without any trouble."

Barret looked doubtful but said nothing.

"So how have you been?" she asked, turning to look at Cloud.

He shrugged and proceeded to tell her what had happened while she was gone.

Tifa got up and walked toward the kitchen. She looked back for a moment, but no one seemed to notice her departure. She felt a pang of jealousy. Aeris had Cloud's rapt attention. She always seemed to be able to do that, and without even trying. Sometimes it seemed Tifa had to work all day just to get Cloud to say hello.

She shook her head and turned away.

I'm not going to let this bother me, she thought firmly as she walked into the kitchen.

Aeris looked at Cloud thoughtfully after he had finished his story.

"I didn't know it was that bad," she said. Like everyone else she assumed Cloud's headache had been nothing serious the day she had left with Red and Reeve. But now that she realized how bad it had been she thought maybe she should have stayed with him as well.

She looked up and saw Tifa walk by in the kitchen.

No, she thought with a sigh, looking back at Cloud. He was in good hands. Tifa would watch over him, just like she always had. She was a girl who knew exactly what she wanted out of life, and pursued it doggedly. Sometimes Aeris wished she could share that perspective.

Aeris looked back at Cloud. She wondered for a moment just what it was that she wanted out of life, and was surprised to realize that she had no answer to that.

Shera walked out of the kitchen.

"What say we open the presents?" Cid suggested.

She looked around the room for a moment.

"Okay. I guess most everyone's here," she replied.

They cleared a space in the middle of the room. Tifa stood by the kitchen door and watched them open their gifts. There was something in the oven that she needed to keep an eye on. One of the disadvantages of owning a bar and restaurant was that your cooking skills were always in demand. But she really didn't mind.

Cid and Shera had only opened a few presents when Tifa saw Cloud suddenly close his eyes and bring his hand to his head.

She made her way around to him just as he got up. Aeris was looking at him with concern.

"Are you okay?" Tifa asked.

"Yeah," Cloud responded, but she could see he was in pain. "It's the headache again. I think I'll go lie down for a while."

Tifa nodded. Cloud walked off slowly, headed for the back bedroom. Tifa saw Cid looking at her with a puzzled expression, but she just shrugged.

Tifa walked back to the kitchen. She hoped Cloud's headache wouldn't be too bad. Perhaps they should have gone straight to Cosmo Canyon.

Cid and Shera finished opening the presents. Cid put them away in the nursery while Shera came back into the kitchen. A few minutes later she came out again to announce that dinner was ready.

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They were just finishing dinner when Vincent showed up.

Cid got up to get his friend a seat.

"Didn't think you were going to make it," he commented.

Vincent looked around the room. It was full of people.

"With this crowd, it doesn't look like you would have missed me," he commented.

"Yeah," Cid agreed, looking around. "I think Shera's invited everyone she's ever met. She even invited the Turks, though I think it's unlikely they'll show up. Except maybe Elena. Have you seen her lately?"

Vincent shrugged. Cid was about to question him further when Shera called him over.

"Here you go," Vincent said, handing Cid a gift before he could walk away.

"Thanks," Cid replied. He walked over to Shera.

"Could you help move some of these chairs into the other room?" she asked.

"Sure," he replied. "Here's a gift from Vincent," he continued, handing her the package. "Let's hope it's not another toy airplane."

"If it is, it's your fault," she told him, taking the gift and heading for the nursery.

"Yeah, I suppose it is," Cid said with a grin.

He started to pick up one of the chairs. Suddenly there was a piercing scream from Shera. Everyone in the house looked up in surprise. Cid dropped the chair with a curse, then ran into the nursery, his heart suddenly pounding. The others were right behind him.

Shera was standing in the middle of the room. She looked unhurt, and for a moment Cid did not know why she had screamed like that. But then he saw that she was staring at something on the floor.

He looked down to see that all the stuffed animals that they had gotten as presents were lined up in a row on the floor, their heads neatly severed.

For a moment everyone just stood there in shocked silence.

Cid turned and looked until he saw Cloud standing at the back of the group. He took a step toward him.

"What the HELL kind of sick little joke is this?" he shouted angrily.

Cloud looked at him, his face pale, his mouth moving wordlessly for a moment.

"I didn't...I don't remember," he said.

"Have you totally lost your mind?" Cid continued.

"It's not his fault!" Tifa said, immediately coming to Cloud's defense. "I don't know what's wrong, but he didn't mean it. He..."

She stopped when she felt someone's hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Cloud shaking his head.

"No," he said slowly, his face still pale. "Cid is right. Whatever is happening to me, I can't control it. I don't know what I'll do. I'm a danger to you all."

Tifa looked at him, and the anguish in his eyes tore at her.

"It's not safe to be near me," he said slowly.

Then he turned and ran from the house.

~*~

"We've lost them," Reno said in disgust.

"This wouldn't have happened if we'd have turned north when I said," Yuffie commented.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Reno said harshly. "That was obviously a false trail. An amateur could see it."

"An amateur wouldn't have been stupid enough to go the way we have," she retorted.

Reno pulled out his nightstick.

"I'm really starting to get sick of your know it all attitude," he said sharply.

Yuffie pulled out her shuriken.

"Anytime you want to go at it," she challenged.

Rude looked at Elena and rolled his eyes skyward.

"Here we go again," he muttered.

"If you two want to kill each other that's fine," Elena said. "But could you at least wait until we're done with this job?"

"At the rate you're going, you'll be retired first," Yuffie said.

"It would be a lot simpler to track them if I wasn't distracted by your constant whining," Reno said. Actually he had been afraid something like this might happen. The Swordsman covered his trail much better than Bennis had. But that was to be expected from someone who had been in SOLDIER.

"It doesn't matter who's fault it is," Rude said. "We've lost them. The question is, what to we do about it?"

"We need to go back to where we last saw the trail and start over," Yuffie said immediately.

Reno looked up at the sky.

"It's getting dark. By the time we get back there it'll be too late to see anything. We might as well call it a night. We can pick up the trail again tomorrow."

"They could be miles away by then," Yuffie protested.

"There's no sense blundering around in the dark," Reno replied bluntly. "We'll be wasting our time, and it'll just tire us out. They're not going to go much further tonight anyway. We won't fall far behind."

"Rocket Town isn't far away. Why don't we stop by Cid's for the baby shower?" Elena suggested.

Reno looked at her.

"Gee, that sounds like fun."

"You don't have to go if you don't want to. But Rocket Town does have a bar," she reminded him, "and comfortable beds. I'm getting tired of that lumpy sleeping bag."

Reno stood there in thought for a minute. "I suppose," he said finally. "It has been kind of a dry trip so far."

He turned and started off. Rude and Elena followed.

"Hey," Yuffie called out. "Don't I get a say in this?"

"No!" they all said, and kept right on walking.

Cloud found himself looking up at Cid's rocket. He didn't know how he ended up here, nor much cared. All he knew was he had to get away from everyone. Get away before someone got hurt.

He remembered lying down, his head pounding. Eventually he had drifted off to sleep. Only to be awakened by Shera's scream. He hadn't done it, he couldn't remember doing anything at all. He desperately wanted to believe that it had been someone else.

But he knew deep down inside that it couldn't have been.

No one else was crazy enough to do something like that.

It was happening again, just like before. But this time Hojo was dead, Sephiroth was gone as well. The influence materia was safely stored away in Cosmo Canyon.

Was this latest nightmare a creation of his own mind?

Was this an inevitable side effect of what they had done to him? Hojo had called him the failed experiment, while he had thought Sephiroth a success. But Sephiroth had gone insane. Maybe instead of a failed experiment it was just taking longer for him. Was he doomed to suffer the same fate? Had Sephiroth been right in his dream, were they one in the same?

"Cloud."

Even the mysterious voices had come back to haunt him. No matter how much he wanted to deny it, he had to face the very real possibility that he was losing his mind.

He felt grief and anguish welling up inside him, almost overwhelming him.

"Cloud," he heard again, and suddenly he realized that the voice was not coming from inside his head. Someone was

standing behind him.

He shuddered but did not turn around.

"Go away," he said.

He felt someone come up beside him and sit down.

"Cloud please."

"Just go away!" he repeated. "I almost killed you once. I don't know if I could stop myself if it happened again."

He turned to glance at her. He could see she was looking at him, but her features were shrouded in the darkness around them.

"You wouldn't hurt me," she replied firmly.

"But I don't know that," he blurted out. "I don't know what I'll do. It's too dangerous. I've got to go on alone!"

He got up and started to walk away. Tifa got up and hurried after him.

"I know it's difficult, but you can fight it," she said when she caught up with him. "You proved that the other day. You didn't strike me with your sword. You couldn't. You fought back against it and you won."

"But I don't know if I'll have the strength to fight it again," he replied.

She grabbed hold of his arm and forced him to look at her.

"But maybe we do together."

Her face was illuminated now in the light from a nearby streetlamp, her dark brown eyes looking at him pleadingly.

He turned away.

"It's just too dangerous," he said, pulling his arm away and continuing down the street.

She was after him again immediately.

"I won't leave you," she said adamantly. "You can walk away all you want, but I'll follow. You can get up in the middle of the night and run away, but I'll find you. You can lock me up in a prison, but I'll escape and I'll come after you again. I'll follow you to the ends of the earth, and further. I won't abandon you! I can't. Because I...I..."

He turned and looked at her suddenly. She stood there, a few feet behind him in the dark. He could see her struggling for words, but she did not speak, just looked at him with an odd expression.

Finally he smiled faintly and stepped toward her.

"Okay," he relented. "I guess I should have know better than to try to walk away from you. We'll fight this thing together."

It took a moment for what he had said to sink in. Then she suddenly smiled. She came over to him.

"Thank you," she said.

He just looked at her for a moment. In spite of the danger in front of them, he suddenly felt better than he had all evening.

"Don't thank me," he answered. "This isn't going to be fun. I could go off the deep end at any moment. There's no guarantee we will find out anything at Cosmo Canyon. Who knows how long it will take to find a cure, if there is one. We'll have to stay away from all our friends, so you better get used to the isolation."

"It doesn't matter," she said immediately. She looked at him and her smile suddenly widened. "Besides, I've got a feeling it'll be a long time before we get invited to any parties again."

~*~

Barret opened the door. He seemed surprised to see them.

"Are we too late?" Elena asked.

Barret shrugged.

"C'mon in," he said.

The Turks walked in to see Cid and Shera sitting together in the living room. Vincent stood off to one side. There was no one else there.

Elena found her eyes straying to Vincent, in spite of the fact that she didn't want them to. He just looked at her, his face expressionless.

She turned away.

"Looks like we missed it," Rude observed.

"You can say that again," Cid commented.

"What do you mean?" Reno questioned.

Cid explained what had happened earlier. When he had finished they all looked at him in surprise.

"So the psycho finally lost it, eh?" Reno said, shaking his head. "I knew something like this was going to happen sooner or later."

Barret gave him a look but held his tongue.

"I'm afraid I lost it a little myself," Cid continued. "I feel kind of bad about it now. It really wasn't his fault. I was just worried about Shera. I didn't know what that kind of shock would do to her."

Shera smiled at him.

"But she's fine," he finished. "Now Cloud's run off, and Tifa with him. We went looking for them a little while ago, but couldn't find any sign of either of them. I hope he's okay."

"I always knew he'd come to a bad end," Reno stated. "Maybe he'll do us all a favor and take a flying leap onto that sword of his."

Barret leaped up, no longer able to contain himself.

"You're pushing your luck, fool," he said, bringing up his gun arm.

Reno had his nightstick out in an instant.

Rude shoved his hand into his suit, but had only pulled his gun part way out when he found himself staring down the barrel of Vincent's pistol.

"Stop it!" Elena cried out. "We're supposed to be here to celebrate the fact that Cid and Shera are going to have a child and you want to start a war in their house? What the hell is the matter with you people?"

They all stood there for a moment, then slowly lowered their weapons.

"Sorry," Barret muttered, though still obviously fuming.

Cid sat back in his chair and lit up a cigarette.

"This has turned out to be one hell of a day," he commented.

"We're sorry too," Elena said, looking pointedly at Reno. "We've got gifts. Yuffie's with us too. She should be here any minute. She was still looking for a gift in town when we left her."

"Actually, I thought I saw her go into the materia store," Rude said. "So it may be a while before she shows up."

Vincent turned and walked into the kitchen. Reno, who had just sat down, got up immediately and followed him.

He walked in as Vincent was pulling a beer out of the fridge. "I need to talk to you."

Vincent just looked at him without saying anything.

"What's the story with you and Elena?"

Vincent stood up slowly, still not saying anything, but just staring. His red eyes, gleaming with absolutely no hint of humanity. Suddenly Reno became very uncomfortable. The feeling of menace was almost palpable.

"It's none of your business," Vincent said finally.

"Yes it is," Reno replied. In spite of how he felt he would not back down.

"I don't know what you did to her, but she's been wandering around in a daze ever since the Gold Saucer. She can't eat, she can't sleep, she can't think. All she does is walk around mumbling and pining for you. She's useless!"

Reno thought he detected a glimmer of something in Vincent's eyes at this, but he could not say what it might mean.

"Look fang boy," Reno continued, refusing to be intimidated. "The truth is I don't give a rat's ass how you feel about her. But I need her functional. She's a Turk, and she's got a job to do, but she doesn't seem to be able to separate her work from her personal life. I don't give a shit what you tell her, but you've got to straighten her out. You can't just leave her hanging like this!"

For a long time Vincent just stared at him, his face completely expressionless. Reno began to get impatient. Was he listening at all?

Suddenly Vincent leaped forward. His left arm came up, and Reno found his neck encased in claws of cold steel.

Vincent said nothing for a minute, just looked at him with eyes that seemed to bore right through him.

Reno began to turn a lovely shade of blue.

"You know something, as much as I hate to admit it, you're right," Vincent said finally. "I do need to talk to her. But one thing you should know first."

He leaned closer until his face was right in front of Reno's. His red eyes staring straight at him.

"The name is Vincent, and I would appreciate it if you would refer to me as such in the future. Am I making myself clear?"

Reno nodded.

Vincent let him go and he stood there for a minute, gasping for breath.

"Good," Vincent said. "And to make sure you remember, I'll be coming with you."

"What?" Reno managed to gasp out.

"You heard me," he replied. "It's a promise I made to Elena, and I intend to keep it."

He turned and walked out of the room.

Reno stood there for a moment, still collecting himself. Finally he took a deep breath and shook his head.

"First Yuffie and now him," he muttered. "What the hell is this, Reno's traveling circus?"

~*~

"There's someone coming."

Altim looked up. They were hidden in some bushes just off the road north of Rocket Town. The thieves camp was to the east of them, just over a small hill. The Swordsman has sent him along with three others to watch the road, on the off chance that an easy mark would come by. But they had seen no one, and in fact had just been about to give up and head back to camp.

Altim saw a single figure walking down the road in the darkness. They stood there, motionless as the individual slowly approached. It wasn't until the person was nearly opposite them on the road that he realized it was a woman.

Aeris walked slowly down the road, lost in thought. She was terribly worried about Cloud, and had almost followed him as he fled from Cid's. But Tifa had beaten her to it, and she didn't think it would have been helpful for them both to go. It was probably better this way. Tifa would know the right thing to say, if any of them did.

Besides, she felt it was important that she got back to help Red and Reeve. She had a feeling they were going to need her assistance.

She looked up as four men materialized out of the darkness in front of her.

She stopped and looked at them, her rod held loosely in her hands.

"Well, well, what have we here?" one of them said.

Altim stood slightly behind the others, not sure of what to do. The moon had risen a short time ago and cast a bright glow around them. He looked at the woman. She was young, and beautiful.

"What's a girl like you doing wandering around all alone in the dark?" the man who had spoken before asked.

"I'm headed north for Icicle Inn," she replied. She seemed completely unaware that she was in any danger. She held a long rod in her hands, but Altim doubted it would be much protection.

"It's dangerous for a woman to be wandering around in the dark," the man continued. "There are a lot of thieves around here. They'd do some very unpleasant things to a pretty young thing like you."

His eyes glinted at her in the dark.

"Perhaps we should escort you."

"I can take care of myself, thank you," she said.

She went to walk forward but he blocked her path.

"I'm afraid it's not that easy," he said.

His dagger suddenly appeared in his hand.

"This is a toll road."

She looked at him for a moment, and her grip tightened on the Princess Guard.

"What's the toll?" she asked.

"For a girl like you?" he said with a smile. "I'll give you one guess."

Aeris just looked at them, and Altim still could see no hint of fear in her eyes.

Suddenly her rod swung, and the man's dagger went flying from his hand. Quickly she shifted her weight and drove the end of the rod into his stomach. He let out a sharp exclamation and went down.

The other two men sprang at Aeris, their knives drawn. Altim stood there for a moment, not drawing his weapon. He was surprised by the fierceness of her attack and the expert way she used her weapon. He couldn't help but admire the way she handled herself.

Still, she was attacking his comrades, no matter that she had good reason. She hadn't really seemed to notice him behind the others. He slipped around behind her as she held them off, then he suddenly dodged in and took her legs out from under her.

She fell the the ground, her rod dropping beside her. Instantly the two men were on top of her.

The man she had knocked down with her rod had gotten up again. Now he immediately came over, furious.

"She's mine," he said, pushing the others aside. He stood over her and slapped her hard across the face.

Aeris cried out and fell back.

"Hey!" Altim protested, not really sure why. He never really thought too deeply about the morals of what he was doing, but he did not sign up with this group to go around abusing innocent women.

They ignored him. The man stepped away from Aeris and picked up the dagger she had knocked away. He came back and grabbed her savagely.

"I'll teach you to make a fool out of me!" he said grimly.

"Leave her alone!" Altim shouted, and suddenly found his dagger poised in his hand.

The man looked at him suddenly. He pushed Aeris down and turned to face Altim, his own dagger glinting in the moonlight.

"What's the matter with you, little man? Suddenly turned into a gentleman? You better learn your place fast if you expect to live very long."

"What the hell is going on here?"

They all looked up, everyone's anger instantly disappearing. The Swordsman stood in the dark, looking at them with glowing blue eyes.

"I could hear you all the way back at camp."

"We were shaking down this girl and the little snot didn't like our methods."

"They were going to kill her," Altim said.

"Fighting over a woman?" the Swordsman said with a snort. "I should have know. Well, let's take a look at this 'prize'."

He walked over to Aeris, who still lay on the ground. She had been rubbing her cheek, but had stopped when she heard the Swordsman speak.

It was dark, but the moon illuminated her enough that he could make out her features. For the longest time they stood there motionless, looking at each other. The long light brown hair, braided in the back. The soft lips and delicate nose. And finally, the large emerald green eyes. There could be no doubt about it.

"Zack," she said, and suddenly the world seemed to go very still around them.

It was the girl of his dreams.