

CHAPTER III: MEN (and a WOMAN) IN BLUE

The wind swirled around Tifa as she stepped out of the helicopter, followed closely by Cloud and Aeris. They saw Red sitting a short distance away.

"Hi, Red," Tifa said, running over to the red beast.

"It's good to see you all again," Red replied. "Come on, Godo is waiting for you."

He led them quickly through the streets of Wutai until they came to Godo's residence. Godo was waiting inside.

"You're here," he said, seemingly quite pleased to see them. "Come, sit down. I know you must be tired from your trip and probably would like to get some rest, but what I have to tell you is very urgent."

"We're not tired," Cloud said quickly.

They sat down while Godo stood in front of them. His face was drawn and he looked worn. Aeris thought she had never seen him so obviously worried.

"The trouble started about a month and a half ago," he said. He suddenly produced a small orb and walked over to let them look at it.

Cloud examined it closely. It was a materia orb, all right, but something was wrong. All materia glowed faintly with Mako energy, but this orb appeared dead. It was a dull grey with no hint of color or life.

"What happened to it?" Cloud asked, looking up at Godo.

"We don't know," Godo replied. "But I can tell you that all the materia in Wutai is like this. Something is sucking all the energy out of our materia, and it's not just happening in Wutai. It happened at Icicle Inn about two weeks before it hit here. In fact, all the northern regions seem to have been affected, and it's spreading."

Tifa looked at him curiously.

"Like some kind of disease?" she suggested.

"Possibly," Godo replied. "We really don't know. But I don't think so. I suspect a single entity is behind this. It seems that someone, or something, is gathering all the Mako energy on the planet, or at least a good portion of it. To what purpose, I have no clue, but I think we urgently need to find out."

Cloud nodded in agreement. Whatever was causing this, he had a distinct feeling that no good would come of it.

"Aeris," he said, turning toward her. "Have you ever heard of anything like this?"

"I'm not sure," Aeris replied slowly. "I seem to remember a story about some kind of materia that could draw its power from all other materia. But I think it was some kind of legend, or children's story. I don't think it was real. It was a long time ago, and I'm not really sure..."

She stood in thought as her voice faded into silence.

"The only thing that seems certain is that the source of the drain, whatever it is, is somewhere in the north," Godo said. "So that's where I sent Yuffie, but now she has disappeared."

"Where was she when you last heard from her?" Cloud asked.

"At Icicle Inn," Godo replied. "They were exploring some area north of there, but I don't know the exact location. That's another reason why I think this materia drain is being caused by some directed intelligence, and not just some strange natural phenomena. I believe she must have found out something, or run afoul of whoever, or whatever, is causing this. I fear she could be in serious trouble."

"Then the sooner we're on our way, the better," Cloud stated.

"I agree," Godo replied. "But even with my daughters life at stake I know it would be foolish of you to rush off unprepared. The others should be arriving some time tomorrow, if all goes well. You can safely wait at least until then, I should think."

"You've been in touch with everyone else?" Tifa asked.

Godo nodded.

"Yes. Red has already spoken with Vincent, who is on his way to get Cid. The others are gathering at the Gold Saucer. I can

send Shake to pick them up tomorrow. Until then, rest and renew yourselves. You have the hospitality of my house, and don't hesitate to ask if you should need anything. I will have some food prepared, and then I suggest you get some rest. You may have a long and hard road in front of you."

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The first thing she noticed was the smell of smoke in the air. She was not concerned. The smell of burning leaves, or of a late autumn cookout, was not uncommon this time of year. But as she neared Nibelheim and the smoke began to swirl thickly about her, she realized that something was very wrong.

She had been up in the hills around Nibelheim most of the day, exploring new trails in the mountains. If she was going to be a guide she needed to know the area like the back of her hand. She was tired, but that didn't stop her from breaking into a run when she saw the flickering of flames through the trees ahead of her.

She came out of the trees and stopped in shock. Nibelheim was in flames. The whole town seemed to be caught in a huge inferno. She could see figures running through the fire, and she heard the screams of the dying.

"Papa..." she mouthed, though no words came out. The fear choked off her voice, and for a moment it was almost overpowering. But in spite of it she found herself rushing recklessly toward the inferno, the fear overcome by a more pressing need. What had become of her father?

She turned the corner that led onto the main street, coughing as the smoke enveloped her. Now the flames were all around her and if she had stopped to notice she would have felt the intense heat. She did stop, but not because of the heat. Across the road stood her home, or what was left of it, engulfed in flames.

Tifa stared helplessly, tears streaming down her cheeks. Then she heard cries off to her left. She turned. The flames rose high overhead, but through them she could make out a dark figure striding slowly down the street, his deliberate pace in sharp contrast to all the other panicked individuals she had seen. As two people ran by him, a sword flashed in the flickering light and they fell to the ground and lay still.

Suddenly her fear was gone, overwhelmed by anger that welled up inside her. Sephiroth! She knew somehow that he was responsible for all this. With sudden determination she started toward him, but a wall of flame rose up between them and forced her back. She shouted his name, but he did not hear over the roar of the flames. Now he was walking away from her, toward the old Shinra Mansion.

She ran down the street until at the end of the block she found a way past the flames. Quickly she made her way back, but when she got to the mansion Sephiroth was gone. She looked around, the mansion was in flames along with the rest of the town. He had not gone in there. The only other way he could have gone was down the trail to Mt. Nibel, toward the Mako reactor. She ran down the trail.

The flames faded away behind her, but the fire still burning in her heart raged on. She reached the Mako reactor just in time to see Sephiroth cutting down yet another person standing in front of it. She called his name again, and this time he hesitated for a moment and seemed to glance in her direction, but then he turned and entered the reactor.

She ran on. The man Sephiroth had struck was lying by the reactor entrance. As she ran past him he moaned softly and turned his face into the light.

Tifa stopped as if she had run into a wall. She knelt down and lifted her father's head. He opened his eyes and looked at her, and the trace of a smile formed on his lips at the sight of her. His mouth moved as he tried to speak, but no words came out. Then his head sank back in her arms.

"Papa," she said softly as the tears ran down her soot stained face. For a moment more she cradled her father's lifeless figure in her arms, head bowed. Then she felt the anger washing over her once again. She placed her father's head carefully back down on the cold earth. Then she lifted up her fists to the sky.

"Sephiroth, SOLDIER, Mako reactors, Shinra, everything. I hate them all!"

She turned to face the entrance to the reactor. A sword gleamed on the ground nearby. She picked it up, and, abandoning all caution, ran inside.

Sephiroth stood at the top of a long stairway, facing away from her. She ran blindly up the steps, sword held high, with no

thought of caution or stealth. Her rage consumed her, and her one thought was to strike out at the person that had destroyed everything she held dear.

Sephiroth turned as she came clattering up the steps. He easily sidestepped her clumsy swing. He reached out and grabbed her arm with a vice like grip, twisting it and slipping the sword out of her hands. He pushed her away and swung the sword up. She raised her hands in a useless attempt to fend off the blow, and then the sword came down savagely.

Tifa woke up and stared at the ceiling above her for a few seconds, a shiver running down her back. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since that night in Nibelheim, yet she still remembered it as if it were yesterday.

She glanced over at the window to see the early morning light streaming in. There was a sound coming from outside. A dull roar, and that must have been what woke her. Curious, she got up out of bed and went over to the window. The sound grew as she did, and now it was almost uncomfortably loud. As she walked she felt the house vibrating slightly. She looked out the window to see some sort of large aircraft descending above the houses not far away.

She walked over to the dresser and slipped off her nightgown. She paused for a moment to look in the mirror above the dresser. Slowly her hand traced the scar that ran from her left shoulder to just below her right breast. Most of the scars Sephiroth had left behind were not so obvious.

Hastily she threw on her clothes and ran out to see what was going on.

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"So what do you think of the Slipstream?" Cid asked.

The others were gathered around him in a large open field at the edge of Wutai. A sleek black jet rested in the field in front of them.

"It's very...loud," Aeris said. Even in idle, she could barely be heard above the rumble of the engines.

"Very impressive," Cloud said, and he meant it. He didn't share Cid's love of all things mechanical, but he had to admit the jet was a good looking piece of equipment. "You built this while working on the rocket too? Where do you find the time?"

"I like to keep busy," Cid said curtly.

"Very nice," Red commented, "but I'm surprised you didn't use the parts for your rocket."

"Believe me, it was tempting," Cid replied wryly. "But I was commissioned to build it by the Governor at Fort Condor. They paid for all the parts and equipment."

"So it's not really yours," Tifa said.

"Oh, it's mine all right," Cid replied quickly. "In return for building it and giving them the plans I got to keep the prototype. I did consider taking it apart to use on the rocket, but when it came down to it I just couldn't. I guess I just miss the my old airship more than I thought."

"I was kind of surprised when you told us you had dismantled the Highwind," Cloud agreed.

Cid shrugged.

"It appears you no longer need the use of the helicopter," Godo observed, speaking for the first time.

"No," Cloud agreed. "I've got a feeling we'll get where we are going a lot faster in this thing."

He turned to Cid.

"We've got to pick up the others in the Gold Saucer. So how would you like to take us for a little ride."

"Just hop right in," Cid replied with a grin.

It took them a few minutes to get their things together, but in a short time they were in the air, winging their way toward the Gold Saucer. Cid couldn't help showing off a little by putting the plane through some high speed turns and rolls. The others endured it with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Tifa sat clutching the arms of her chair with white knuckles as they flew upside down just above the treetops, but she gritted her teeth and said nothing. Cloud, on the other hand, seemed to be having a great time, and kept encouraging Cid to do more wild maneuvers. Tifa was sorely tempted to tell him to shut

up, but held her tongue. Red was looking out the windows nervously, his tail twitching furiously. Vincent seemed to be the only one completely undisturbed. Aeris looked calm as well, but then she looked at Cid.

"Can this thing fly in a straight line?" she asked.

Cid looked back at them and grinned.

"Yeah, but what fun would that be?" he replied.

In spite of his response he righted the plane and leveled off, although it seemed to Tifa they were still dangerously low. She tried to relax the rest of the way, but she did not feel really comfortable until they had finally landed and she stepped off the plane at the Gold Saucer.

"So where are we supposed to meet the others?" Aeris asked.

"In the lobby of the Ghost Hotel," Cloud replied. "C'mon."

He led them swiftly through the entrance. Even though Tifa had been here many times, she was still fascinated by the glitter and carnival atmosphere of the huge amusement park.

They reached the hotel and entered the lobby. They immediately spotted Barret pacing back and forth in front of the reception desk. Cait sat in a chair nearby, a deck of cards laid out on a small coffee table in front of him.

"Barret," Cloud called.

Both Barret and Cait looked up at his call. Cait gathered his cards and they both walked over.

"It's about time you guys got here," Barret said with a smile. "I was starting to wear a hole in the carpet."

He pulled both Tifa and Aeris to him and crushed them in a bear hug.

"How are my two favorite ladies?"

"We were fine until now," Tifa gasped.

"How's Marlene?" Aeris questioned when he relented and let them go.

"Good," Barret replied. "She had her first day of school last week. Can you believe it?"

"How did she take it?" Aeris asked.

"She did fine," Barret replied. "I was the one who was a mess. She's growin' up so fast! I've finally gotten to see a little more of her and I just want to spend every minute..."

He stopped, looking at something behind them. The others turned to see three people standing in the lobby entrance. The Turks!

"How touching," Reno said with a mocking look on his face.

Cloud's hand immediately went to his sword.

"What are you three doing here?" he questioned sharply.

"Relax," Reno replied casually. "We're not here to fight. In fact, we're here to help. Godo hired us to give you a hand finding Yuffie."

Everyone except Rude looked at him in surprise.

"What?" Barret exclaimed angrily.

"We're working with them?" Elena said, the shock plain on her face.

"No way," Tifa found herself saying.

"We don't need your help," Cid said grimly.

"Apparently Godo disagrees," Reno replied, unfazed. "I guess he's so concerned about his daughter that he thought you could use all the help he could get you. I don't really know, and to tell you the truth I don't really care. I'm not too pleased with the situation myself, but Godo's gil is just as good as anyone else's, and he's paying us a lot of it."

"You didn't tell us we'd be working with them," Elena cut in angrily, obviously as much in the dark as Cloud and his friends

had been. "There's no way I'm going to do it!"

Reno looked at her dryly.

"Elena, snap out of it," he said rather harshly. "You're a Turk, don't forget that. It's unprofessional to let your emotions interfere with a job. I'm surprised at you."

Elena gave Reno a look of pure hatred. She opened her mouth as if to protest again, but then shut it and turned away angrily.

"Well, I'm sure as hell not working with them!" Barret spit out angrily. "Not after what they did to Sector 7. Not after they murdered Jessie, Biggs and Wedge!"

Elena turned back toward them.

"And how many people do you think died when you blew up the reactors in Sectors one and five?" she questioned caustically. "I knew a lot of those people. Some of them were close friends."

Barret glared at her, but said nothing.

"All right, everyone just calm down," Cloud said. He was surprised as everyone else with this turn of events. Could this be some kind of trick? If so, he could not see the purpose behind it. It would be easy enough to contact Godo and verify Reno's claim. It was kind of shocking to think that Godo would hire the Turks, but who knows what a man would do when his only daughter was missing? If Godo felt desperate enough, he might just do it.

"We all did a lot of things we regret back in Midgar," he said. "We all lost people who we were close to. But that was war, and in war you often do things that you may not be so proud of later on. But the important thing to remember is that it's over now. There is no more Shinra, there is no more reason to continue that particular fight. We have a new mission now, to find out what is happening to the materia and to find Yuffie, and much as it may displease me to work with the Turks, I'm willing to do it if Godo thinks it's the best way to find his daughter."

He looked at each of the others in turn, his gaze lingering on Barret, who grumbled but said nothing. Tifa could sympathize. Of everyone here, she and Barret had been closest to those who had died when Sector 7 was destroyed. It was a bitter pill to swallow to have to work with the one who had caused it now, but if Cloud thought it best, she wasn't about to protest.

"So it's agreed," Aeris stated, looking at the Turks, "We all work together?"

Rude nodded. Reno looked at Elena, who glared back at him but gave a curt nod.

Reno looked at Cloud.

"All right then," Cloud said. "Now that that's settled. Godo said that Icicle Inn was the last place Yuffie contacted him from, so I guess it would be best to start our search there. C'mon, let's head back to the Slipstream."

He turned and walked out, the others falling in line behind. As he walked Red came up beside him.

"So what do you make of this, Red," Cloud asked softly. "Do you think Godo has lost faith in us?"

Red shrugged.

"I don't think so," he replied. "I think like most fathers his daughter means everything to him, and he'll do anything he can to get her back. I guess he figures the more people he has looking, the more likely it is someone will find her."

"But why pick the Turks, of all people?"

"Their morals may be in question," Red replied, "but they do seem to have a certain code, and a reputation to uphold. As long as he pays them, I think they will do everything in their power to get the job done. Their questionable morals may even come in handy in certain circumstances. They may be able to obtain information that we could not."

Cloud shook his head. What a strange twist of events, he thought. Whatever else might happen, he didn't think he would get a bigger surprise than to find out that they would be working side by side with the Turks! Little did he know how wrong he was.