

Hell or High Wind

Chapter 1

by Junj - satheis@ix.netcom.com

The shops were closed for the night and had been all day, but the doors were left carelessly open for anyone who wanted to take a piece of Rocket Town home as a souvenir. Trust of each other whispered through the town on a silent breeze that wafted through unlocked and open windows. No one would dare to steal from someone else on any day much less this one.

Their mayor had finally gotten himself married.

The fences were decorated with white crepe paper and cheap, fake, white flowers. Blue ribbon had been wrapped around each street lamp's post. And all the people of Rocket Town congregated in the large chunk of fenced in land behind the Highwind residence, their old woes seemingly launched off into space with the Shinra No. 26.

The night was bright and clear, the stars overhead dousing them with gentle luminescence. It was pleasantly warm, not unbearably so, with a gentle breeze shuffling the air about with the soft caress only the wind possesses. Bright golden lights were wrapped around the foliage of the trees and strung between them, like rows of fireflies hovering for the world to marvel at their beauty. Long tables were positioned on each extreme of the white, wooden fence covered in white table cloths. On them was an array of food, mouth-watering aromas filling the warm night air, drawing any weary traveler. Cakes, vegetables, fruit, pie, meats, and hot dishes were spread out elegantly on their surfaces. Most had been already dug into by the hungry party-goers, not that that made the food any less appetizing. People congregated everywhere, standing near the fence, inside the house, sitting at the tables that had been set up around the spacious backyard. Some were talking, some eating, some dancing to the soft music that emanated from within the open house. Everywhere there was a sense of contentment and peace. There couldn't have been a better night for a wedding reception.

"Damn it, Cloud! Get me some damn glasses!" Cid Highwind yelled as the cold, white froth of the champagne bubbled over the top of the bottle, spewing from the green glass neck and flowing over his hands. The cork to the bottle now lay somewhere in the crisp grass beneath their feet, having exited it with a bang a moment before.

Cloud Strife smirked as he handed Cid two crystal wineglasses, special ordered for the wedding. Cid filled them to the top with the fizzing drink, the tiny golden bubbles floating upward to breach the surface of the liquid. One he handed to Barret Wallace, who stood beside him. He took the glass in his left hand. "Cid, this better not be any of that imported stuff!" he bellowed, eyeing the glass suspiciously.

Tifa Lockhart shook her head as she graciously accepted a glass of champagne from Cloud to whom she stood next. "No way," she remarked, holding the glass delicately with long fingers. She smiled radiantly. Her face seemed to light up with beauty as she did so, her big, brown eyes twinkling in the moonlight. She wore a sheer black dress that hugged her slender form tightly, curving about her hips, running down the length of her legs, and puddling at her feet in a dark pool of shimmering cloth. Long chocolate brown hair tumbled over her shoulders and down her back, curling just a bit at the end. Pearl earrings accompanied her outfit, given to her by Cloud a month before. She wrapped an arm around his waist. "This is an expensive champagne, aged to perfection."

Yuffie Kisargi, who looked almost out of place in her fine purple dress, sniffed the champagne dubiously. "Yeah, probably in Cid's basement with the rest of his crap." She'd be almost charming, with her short hair done up and her doll-like complexion, if not for her rampant and vulgar mouth.

"You would not be saying that, Yuffie," Reeve said from where he stood beside the girl, holding his own glass in the palm of his hand, "if you knew how much this cost." Cid glanced up at him as he continued to pour champagne for all those close enough to want one, watching Reeve rub his goatee. He didn't understand him, not one bit. Reeve had offered, upon hearing of Cid's engagement, to host the wedding at the Shinra towers in Midgar. Many of Midgar's richer inhabitants would have been invited. There would have been live music and expensively catered food. Cid preferred his own radio and Shera's cooking. The cost of that would have put more than a dent into any normal person's wallet. Not Reeve, though. Even after Meteor, Shinra still controlled a lot of the money that was circulating throughout the Planet. Cid had politely turned Reeve's offer down, explaining that he wanted a small wedding filled with people he knew, not people he designated as "rich, yuppie strangers". He had wanted nothing glamorous. Reeve had eventually conceded; it was Cid's

wedding after all. But then, why was he moaning and groaning about how much the champagne had cost when he had offered just a week before to spend thousands on the whole ceremony? Cid shook his head as he handed out another glass. He never had and never would understand rich people.

"Here ya go, Vince," Cid said as he handed a glass of champagne to mysterious man that stood a little distant from the group. Cid had been more than surprised when Vincent had come to his wedding. He had been invited, of course, but he had never struck Cid as the partying type. He looked almost out of place with the long, blood red cape that adorned his shoulders and the cascade of black hair falling down upon it. If he felt the least bit uncomfortable surrounded by the well dressed friends attending the reception, he did not show it. Not that he ever showed any kind of emotion. The man was as hard as a boulder and just about as difficult to move. He never betrayed what he was thinking or feeling, his face an often indifferent and placid mask. What Cid had just called him was case in point. He hated being referred to as "Vince" as he had stated numerous times before. But did he ever get angry about it? No. Did he ever spew an insult back at the foul mouthed pilot ? Never. Cid found it slightly unnerving that he was so cold and composed. However, he knew nothing of Vincent's past, other than he had been a Turk, he had been in love, and Professor Hojo had taken all of that away. In that respect, Cid could understand his seclusion and aloofness.

Shaking his thoughts away, he poured the last two glasses of champagne, the bottle now empty. One he kept for himself. The other he handed to Shera. She stood beside him, her white gown flowing about her like silky waves of snow. Her hair he had so often seen up in a work pony tail had been curled and placed into a neat bun. Her dress was sheer and cut just below her neck, accenting parts of her Cid had never noticed before until this day. Come to think of it, there were a lot of things he had never noticed before. How milky her skin was. The way her meek smiles lit up her green eyes like fire. Her sweet floral scent. He had never seen her as a woman until she had walked down that aisle, her wedding dress train trailing behind her. Not only a woman, but a damn beautiful woman. His heart had thundered with shock and then euphoria when he had seen her. All those years of working together and never once had he noticed what a treasure he had right under his fingertips. He had made a silent vow during the ceremony while the priest had babbled. He would never treat her as he had before. He would never insult her, or curse at her, or call her slow or incompetent. She was a woman to him now, and even more than that, his wife. Never again would he be so stupid as to ignore that.

Red XIII, or better known as Nanaki, scratched his ear with his hind leg. "I don't know how you humans can drink that stuff," he muttered, shaking his head. "To me, it tastes decidedly horrible."

"A lot of things you like taste horrible to us," Yuffie declared in a pouting voice.

Red cocked his head. "Point taken."

There was a moment of silence between them. Then Cloud smiled and raised his glass. "To Cid and Shera. May you guys have a lot of happy years together. Best of luck to you both."

A chorus of "here-heres" went around as they toasted the newly weds. "Maybe Shera can straighten him out," Yuffie muttered before gulping down her drink.

"Don't pretend I didn't hear that, Yuffie," Cid grumbled as he slid an arm around Shera's shoulders. "I may be old, but I'm not that old."

Another empty moment passed. For some reason, it carried a solemn note on it, the cool breeze bringing a sense of melancholy. Tifa looked up and gave a weak smile. "Who'd have thought that all this would happen? If you had told me a year ago that I'd be standing here right now with all of you on this happy occasion, I would have called you crazy."

Barret took another sip of his champagne. For such a big man, he sure could sip strangely delicately. "I told y'all once. There weren't no stopping that train we were on. I guess it just led us here. Damned if I know why." The silence fell over them again. Maybe it was a sense of nostalgia for days gone past, when they had all been bound so tightly together in the struggle to save the Planet. Maybe it was a sense of dread for the future and all the work that still needed to be done to rebuild what Sephiroth had destroyed. The sadness blanketed them for reasons they could not fathom.

Cid couldn't stand it any longer. "Well, what the hell are y'all waiting for?! Our fiftieth anniversary! There's food! Eat, damn it!"

After that, the night continued merrily. The food was nearly gone by eleven and what was left was picked at. There had been dancing and singing. Cid knew not one dance step, but he masked it well as he waltzed with Shera, trying desperately hard not to step on her foot. She was very quiet but happy. He was happy, too. For the first time in many years, he felt complete. The beer and wine went around until Yuffie and a good deal of the guests were drunk. The children played and chased around Cid's dogs, Marlene included, until they wore themselves out. Cid was surprised it took so long; it had been a busy day with first the wedding and then the reception. Marlene finally conked out, using Red as a pillow. He was pleased that she found so much comfort in him.

The guests began to wander home as the final congratulations were given and the final hands were shaken. Many of the weary townsfolk headed back to their houses, content and pleased with the marriage, hoping that things would now finally start to calm down around Rocket Town. It was doubtful, knowing Cid, but still grand enough to be hopeful for.

Cid took a long drag of his cigarette, pulled it from his mouth with his fore and middle fingers, and blew the smoke up to the stars. That gentle drowsiness brought on by warm food, a couple of beers, a long day, and good friends began to settle over him. He didn't fight it, his muscles too relaxed for any kind of strenuous activity, his eyelids heavy. He would just let this content sleepiness control him. A couple more cigs and he'd be ready for a long night's sleep. Well, maybe not with Shera in bed with him...

"They're really beautiful, aren't they?" Cloud said from beside him. The two of them stood at the front of his house, leaning on the fence near the gate. The door behind them was wide open, letting the golden illumination of the inside lights out into the night. He took a drink of beer from the bottle in his right hand.

"The stars?" Cid asked, sticking his cigarette back between his lips and puffing on it, satisfied. "Yeah. They just kinda beckon to ya. That more than anything made me wanna go into space. Just to see where the stars are beckoning us to."

Cloud nodded, peering up at the twinkling dots in the black sky overhead. "They always remind of Tifa and that night at the well," he said softly.

Cid turned to face him, dropped his cigarette, and smoldered it with his shoe. "Can I ask ya something personal, spike?"

Cloud glanced at him out of the corner of his bright blue eyes. "Cid, everything with you is personal. And don't call me 'spike'."

Cid folded his arms over his chest and stared Cloud down, watching the younger man with disapproving eyes. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

Cloud looked away from the sky and at him. "What?"

"What are you waiting for? I can't help but notice that you and Tifa are still not married," Cid responded.

"What the hell does that mean?" Cloud answered back with a good-natured laugh in his voice that was clearly masking a little anger and a lot of shame.

Cid explained it slowly, as if he were speaking to a little child. Not that he didn't respect Cloud; far from it, in fact. It was just that Cloud was so stubborn, some times he acted like a kid. "Ask her to marry you, for crying out loud! Are you afraid she'd say 'no'? Is that it?"

Cloud turned away, silently brooding. "So now that you're married, you're an expert?"

"No. But it's plain to see how much she loves you," Cid commented. He drew another cigarette from the pack in his pocket and stuffed it between his lips. A small flame flicked to life from his lighter and setting the end of the smoke ablaze. He watched Cloud's averted eyes, observing the young man take another drink of his beer. "Don't you love her?"

The other's answer was almost immediate. "Of course I do."

"Then what the hell are you waiting for?"

Cloud sighed though his upper lip, ruffling the unruly locks of blond hair that fell over his brow. He leaned both his arms over the fence, holding his bottle with both hands. "I'm being stupid, I know. I just... After all the crap I put her through, after how I treated her... she'd be crazy to want to spend the rest of her life with me."

Cid shook his head, disdainfully surprised at his friend. "What – are you listening to yourself?" Cloud shifted uncomfortably, bowing his head and rubbing his brow. "That's bull, Cloud! She understands more than you think." Cid laid a hand on Cloud's shoulder. "She loves you for who you are, not what you were trying to be."

Cloud nodded after a few moments, a small reassuring grin that twisted the side of his mouth. "You're right, Cid," he said slowly. He turned to look at his friend, a light of relief in his eyes. Cid smiled back, his dark blue eyes filled with mirth. It was always good to be told that a female loved you, no matter how much you subconsciously denied it. No matter how much you put yourself down and called yourself unworthy, to hear that the woman you adored adored you back was a relief.

"I know I'm right, kid," Cid said, quite pleased with himself, as he gave Cloud a hearty whack on the back. The force of it almost made Cloud choke on his beer. "I'm always right."

Cloud swallowed his beer forcefully and kept the burning tears from his eyes as he tried not to choke. He gave a wheezed cough before sputtering, "Yeah, right."

"Of course I'm right," Cid said again, taking another drag off his cigarette, feeling the nicotine fade into his blood and speed his heart. It wasn't healthy, he knew, but damn worth the rush.

Cloud turned around and leaned against the fence. He looked up to the Highwind where she rose above Rocket Town impressively. The old supports and platform for the rocket had been torn down shortly after Meteor by Cid and his tech crew. After a month or so of hard work, a landing bay for the Highwind had been constructed, replacing the old source of pain for the inhabitants of Rocket Town. It consisted of nothing more than a huge asphalt landing pad, as big as Rocket Town itself, large enough in dimensions to accommodate for the enormity of the Highwind's metal bow and stern. Two sheds and a hangar of impressive stature accompanied the huge pad, filled with tools, supplies, and half completed engines and airplanes. The awe that was inspired came more from the Highwind than from anything else. It was truly an incredible sight to see the huge airship rising above them, tethered to the ground by mere cables. Lady Luck waved at them flirtatiously from her stern. Most watched her with simple awe at her majesty. Cid gazed up her bronze hide with a sense of pride he felt not for many things. The Highwind had always been the apple of his eye, his sense of worth. When all else was wrong, when all else failed, he would always have her, smiling at him.

"So what's your next project, Cid?" Cloud wondered idly, finishing off his beer.

Cid shrugged neutrally. "She needs a revamp, that's for sure. Her engines need to be stripped and refitted. That damn blast that %^\$#@ Meteor made nearly ripped her limb from limb. Piece of shit." Yes, the Highwind hadn't been worked on in a long time, not since the damn Shinra bastards had stole her, not since Cid had been forced to give her up. She needed loving hands to plunge into the grease and dirt and clean her, bringing back a shine not seen since her unveiling. She needed the skilled fingers of him and his tech crew to gently repair what was broken and smooth over those rough edges. And there were a host of other things to which needed to be attended. The Tiny Bronco still needed to be repaired. Some other planes and projects that had been left unfinished now sat in the new hangars, sagging and dejected, eating into every lazy moment Cid spent lounging around instead of working. All of that to be done.

And then there was the prospect of raising a family to think about.

Cid actually smiled at the idea despite how much he cherished his free time and freedom. Marrying Shera, just in these few hours since the ceremony, had bombarded him with a whole new set of feelings and thoughts. He had never pictured himself as a father before, never having the patience or inclination to be bogged down with kids. But now the idea had a certain appeal to it, a certain wonder, that hadn't been there during his bachelor days. Now it seemed exciting and thought-provoking. He could almost picture a little blonde-haired, green-eyed Cid Highwind, Jr. running around with a foul mouth and a love for flying-machines like his father. The things they could share. The things Cid could teach him. He only

smiled wider.

"Cloud!" Tifa's voice called straight through the house to the two men outside. Cloud looked down from the Highwind's towering form and to the house. Tifa stood there in the doorway, bright, golden light shifting past her in delicate rays, casting her front in shadows. He smiled at her. Even in darkness, she was the absolute most beautiful thing his eyes had ever been pleased to see. She stepped forward and walked to them with the grace of a swan. Those slim legs and arms held a powerful punch, though. They had all been witnesses to the strength Tifa possessed and the brute force by which she exposed it.

She fell into Cloud's embrace with a little sigh, wrapping her arms around his chest. He kissed her temple and stroked her silky hair, setting his beer bottle on a table to which they stood near. "Tired?" he asked softly.

"Mmm," she moaned softly into his shoulder. Her eyes were closed, her lips pulled into a small grin. "Yeah. Tired but happy."

He held her tightly, rocking her relaxed body gently in his arms. "Me, too," he answered back in a whisper. He gently tipped her chin up to him with his forefinger, smiling before he powerfully kissed her delicate lips with his own.

She broke the kiss and hugged him tighter. "I'm even happier now."

"I aim to please."

"Quite a party you threw here, Cid," Reeve remarked as he stepped through the door.

Cid smirked and puffed on his cigarette. "Yeah. Even for a low-cost, unextravagant, crappy get-together." He dropped the butt to the ground and smashed it with his heel. "I, for one, am glad we didn't have this thing in Midgar." He shook his head disdainfully. "Too many damn Shinra freaks." Cloud shot Cid a scolding look. Cid raised his hands in innocence. "What?"

Reeve shook his head. In some way, he sympathized with Cid. As President of Shinra, Inc., his first priority had been to restructure the company so it was more "democratic", so all the power did not reside with the chief executive officer as it had in years past. He had done away with many of the facets that had made the company so corrupt in the old days. A lot of people weren't happy with his strides towards a more fair business. They had been the rich, dishonest, immoral bureaucrats that had exploited the Mako reactors and the people of Midgar for all their worth. Doing what Reeve had done made you more enemies than friends. It was what was right, though. Deep down inside, he took all the heat and friction he had created simply because it was just that the company be run this way. After all the pain Shinra had caused the world, it was only fair.

"Has everybody left?" Cloud asked, still gingerly stroking Tifa's hair.

Reeve took a sip from the wine glass in his hand. "Most of the townspeople are gone. Yuffie is in your bathroom. Has been for the last half hour or so."

"Probably puking up her guts," Cid said. He shook his head. "Givin' out free beer probably wasn't such a good idea."

Reeve shook his head. "She'll be okay. Vincent's watching the sky. Barret is talking to Shera, trying to convince her she's made a mistake by marrying you. And Red's taking a nap."

"An exciting collection of friends I got," Cid commented with a small grin. He wouldn't have traded them for the world. Well, maybe Yuffie...

A soft beeping suddenly directed their attention to Reeve. He pulled open his suit jacket and reached into the inside pocket. After a few seconds of digging about in it, he produced his cellular phone. The ringing became more shrill and pronounced once it was free from the muffling fabric of his blue suit jacket. Reeve shrugged apologetically and opened up his phone, hit the "receive" button, and held it to his ear. "This is President Reeve." There was a short pause. The others could hear soft words emanating from the phone. "This better be good, Reno," Reeve said, an irritated note in his voice.

There was a long silent moment. The three watched as Reeve's face went ashen. "Sweet mother." Cid glanced at Cloud who only shrugged. After the longest time, he said, his voice unusually shaken, "I'll send a chopper for you. I'll see you as soon as I get back to Midgar.... No, that's alright. This is more important.... Right... I'll see you in a while." Reeve slowly lowered his phone from his ear, staring blankly at the sky.

Cloud peered at him strangely. Tifa pulled away from his arms and stepped up to their friend. "Reeve?" she said softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. He looked to her suddenly. Her face was broken in concern. "Are you okay?"

Reeve seemed to not understand for a moment, and then he nodded slowly, seeming to gulp. "Yeah. It's okay." He stepped forward to Cid. "I'm sorry, Cid, but I have to go. Congratulations." He grabbed Cid's hand and shook it briefly. "I'll see you guys later." Then he pushed past them and out the gate of the house. They could hear his voice as he disappeared into the darkness, obviously talking on the phone.

Cid looked flabbergasted. He shook his head. "What the hell was that all about?"

Cloud seemed just as confused as he shrugged. "I don't know." Tifa walked back to them and stood beside Cloud. "I guess he just had to go."

There was a moment of silence between them. That had been a startling moment, the look on Reeve's face one of sheer terror. All they had were questions. There was really no sense in worrying about it, though. Reeve was President of Shinra, after all. He had handled emergencies before. He could handle another one.

Cloud looked up from the ground at which he had been blankly staring for the past few moments. He asked, "So where are you and Shera heading for your honey moon?"

Cid shrugged. "I dunno yet. She's never been to Costa Del Sol. So hot there, though."

"Cid," Tifa said, looking at the older man, "it's a tropical resort. It's supposed to be hot."

"Damn, woman, I know that," Cid said, shaking his head. He pulled another cigarette from his packet but didn't light it. He sighed and yawned. "I'll go wherever she wants."

"Already a dutiful husband," Cloud said, leaning his head tiredly onto Tifa's shoulder.

She smiled and stroked his head. "Poor baby. Cid, your party wore him out."

Cid yawned again, this time wider. "Wore me out, too." He licked his lips and glanced at his watch. The blurry numbers came to focus only after repeated blinking of his tired eyes. Could that possibly read one in the morning? "Holy shit, it's way past my bedtime."

"It's past everybody's bedtime," Tifa remarked. "I suppose trekking back to Kalm is out of the question." Cloud just shook his head from Tifa's shoulder.

Cid leaned back over the fence, bending his back across it, looking at the upside-down street behind them. "It's no prob. You guys can crash in the god damn guest room." Cid gave a little sing-song sigh. "All the blood's rushing to my head.... Oh, that's nice."

Bang!

The sudden crash of snapping cables caused them all to rip from the drowsy state of mind they were all drifting toward. It took only a moment to realize where the noise was coming from.

Another one of the tethering cables that locked the Highwind to the ground cracked with earth-shattering force as the airship struggled to rise toward the sky. The roar of the engines filled their ears as the Highwind bucked and shook, fighting against the strong, metal restraints. The sound of scraping metal and straining machinery was deafening as the airship protested. Cid's heart leapt to his throat as another of the cables snapped. Shards of metal fanned out like a death rain

over Rocket Town as the cable whipped over Cid's house like a snake, nearly taking off the roof with the swipe of an arm, before coming to a rest with a crash on the road beside the backyard. The last cable vibrated and shook with force as the Highwind pulled against it, trying to stretch but finding no length or leeway in its metal coils. Panic pulsed through Cid as it too finally broke with a vicious bang. At speeds faster than the human eye could track, it careened downward, like a serpent striking at its prey. It was heading straight for the backyard. Right then, Cid didn't care about the bastard that was trying to steal his ship. The cord hit the ground causing a quake to rumble through the house and a rustle of flying leaves, tables, dirt, and lights. Screams followed.

"Shera!" Cid howled, heading towards his house. Cloud was quicker, though, the strong muscles in his legs flexing as he took off towards the front door and tore inside. Cid was fast on his heels, charging through his abode like a banshee, running through the lighted living room, leaping in a great bound over the sofa, sprinting through the kitchen, and out the back door. Cloud stood there, staring at the scene with his mouth open.

The entire backyard had been leveled. The food tables were toppled, their contents spilled to the grass in a mess of tumbled food, drinks, and broken glass. The two trees had been decapitated straight through, their trunks sliced by the cord. Their tops now lay over the fence, splintering and breaking the wood, spewing their green limbs and leaves into the lot behind them. The chairs were crushed underneath the thick cord, bent so far out of shape that they would never be repaired. The lights that had adorned the trees now were black, their connecting wires severed. Everything was crushed, smashed, ruined.

Cid stood there, gaping, his eyes wide. "Shera!"

"Get down!" Vincent shouted as he appeared from the side of them, rushing forward and knocking Cid bodily to the ground. The crack of gunfire filled the air as a spray of bullets struck the house where they had been. Cid hit the grass roughly beneath Vincent, squeezing his eyes shut against the thundering thud of the bullets hitting his house and smashing his windows.

When the firing stopped, Cid opened his eyes. And he saw where the shots had come from.

The Highwind was hovering at the end of the fence, a line of black clad soldiers standing at the railing with their machine guns pointed at them.

"Get the hell off me, Vincent!" Cid bellowed, roughly shoving the man off of himself. He scrambled up, shouting at the top of his lungs, "Shera!! Where the hell are you?! Shera!"

Then, her soft voice answered from the other side of the yard; obviously she was safely behind a tipped up table. "I'm all right, Cid!"

Yuffie then tore out of the house, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "What the hell's all that noise?"

Cloud reached up from where he was crouched at the door, Tifa beneath his protective form. "Get down, Yuffie!" He grabbed her arm and wrenched her to the ground. She crashed to her knees beside him with a yelp.

She rubbed her bruised arm indignantly. "Ya just coulda asked!"

"Shut up!" Cid shouted. His eyes were glued on the Highwind. The others followed his gaze and then quieted immediately. A rope ladder extended from the bow of the Highwind, unraveling as it tumbled the fifteen some feet from the hovering ship to the ground. A man dressed in a black suit began a slow decent down the ladder, a gun tucked under one arm. Shadows obscured his form as he continued to climb. Three rungs from the bottom, he leapt to the ground, the wind from the propellers of the ship blowing his red hair askew. He turned to face the group.

"I'll be goddamned," Cid muttered in rage and shock. He clenched a fist as he stood despite Vincent's insistent tugging on his tuxedo jacket. "Malachai."

The man smiled at him as he stepped into the moonlight, exposing two lines of perfectly white teeth that gleamed like pearls. "I guess you haven't forgotten me after all, Cid." His reddish eyes seemed to glow like the fires of hell with pleasure

at seeing Cid's angry expression. His face was thin and clean-shaven, a very clean complexion. Red lips that were always pulled in a sly smile for once frowned. "I was very disappointed that I didn't receive an invitation to this happy occasion."

"You bastard," Cid sputtered, hate seething in his eyes.

"So I decided to come and show my displeasure," Malachai continued as if Cid had never spoken. He clucked his tongue in mock sympathy. "Cid, Cid, Cid... is this how you treat your old friend?"

"Bullshit," Cid stated, his voice harder than stone. He stabbed an accusing finger at the man. "You were never my friend. So why don't you just tell me what the %\$# you want and get the hell out of my town?"

"Ahh, Cid, you hurt me with your coldness," Malachai declared. "I just came here to take back what is rightfully mine." His red eyes glittered in the moonlight.

Cid frowned, ignoring his feigned ignorance. "What is it you think I owe you, you bastard?" he demanded. "The last time I looked, I was the one who lost out on that little deal."

Cloud and Tifa exchanged muddled glances. Gently, Cloud let Tifa up, still standing defensively before her. Yuffie was watching the scene with confusion written about her young, smart features. Cloud glanced around the yard, taking in the situation. He could see Barret behind the same table with Marlene and Shera. Red was limping forward from behind one of the severed tree trunks. Vincent stood, eyeing the circumstances grimly. Cloud glanced at his holster, hidden in the blood red folds of his cape and the shadows beneath it. He gritted his teeth; it was empty. Apparently, Vincent had seen no need to bring the massive Death Penalty or any of his other guns. None of them had come armed. The only materia they had was what Cid kept stored in his house and whatever orbs Yuffie had hidden on her. There were an unknown number of assailants from an advantageous high point. And there was little light besides the moon and the stars. This was not good at all.

Malachai laughed then, the cackle of someone who never could manage a chuckle at the slightest joke, pulling Cloud back to the conversation. "You lost out, huh?" the man countered, the laughter suddenly gone, his voice cold. "The last time I looked, your pretty little rocket got shot into the high heavens, your pretty little ship was stolen from her berth at Junon, and your pretty little maid got married to you, didn't she? Didn't she? You always got the girls, and you always had the Lady on your side."

Cid frowned. "She's mine, Hariel. She was mine the day Shinra dropped the damn specs on the desk."

Malachai snorted in response. "You traded her."

"Bullshit! You cheated me. So you'll have to excuse me when I think you're a crock of crap." Cid's face contorted angrily. "She's mine. I built her with my own hands."

Malachai frowned darkly and deeply. "So did I." To mark his words, he pulled what looked to be a crossbow from the folds of his clothing, aiming straight at Cid. Everything was doused in shadows, but the glint in the lunar illumination was enough. Shera gasped audibly. "I think it's time I take her back, Cid. And I think it's time you pay for stealing what's mine." He fired.

"No!!"

Cid didn't hear his wife's cry, staring blankly at Hariel as the crossbow bolt soared towards him too fast to track, shrouded by night. He could never move out of the way fast enough, even if he could see it. This was where he was going to die. How cruel that it should be on his wedding day of all times. How cruel that when life was finally starting to take meaning, to take on love, it should be wretched from him. I'm sorry, Shera.

He closed his eyes and braced for impact.

A force knocked into him from the front, ramming him back into the wall of his house. His head cracked into the open window, raining glass down on him as he slumped to the ground, dazed, only then realizing what had happened.

Cloud smiled weakly before the crossbow bolt tore through him.

The metal object sliced through his back and out his front, tearing through cloth and flesh as though it were paper. Cloud fell forward with the motion of the bolt, blood spewing forth from his open mouth and splattering on the ground. He somehow remained on his feet as the arrow slammed into the wooden siding of the house with a thud inches above Cid's head.

The world stood still for a moment.

Cid took a slow, shaky breath, and then opened his eyes. Blood ran down through his vision. Had he been hit? Had he been killed? Was it over? He expected to feel excruciating pain, expected to see light, expected to feel his thundering heart stop and his charged breathing end. But it didn't. Something struck his forehead, splattering upon it and running down his nose. He looked up and felt as though he had been run through, gasping in shock and disgust.

Cloud stood above him, his left arm braced weakly against the wall, his right hand futilely cupping the hot blood as it rushed from his lower chest. The horrid bolt ran through him, the black arrowhead embedded into the wall. Cloud gagged, blood gurgling from his throat and down his mouth and chin, dripping upon Cid. He wanted to scream out from the agony but had no breath to do so. There was a wire on the bolt, connecting it to the crossbow, running from the house, through him, to Malachai. He could feel it grinding against his bones, against his organs, a foreign object that brought pain to everything it touched. He tried not to move, using all his strength to keep still. All there was was white, hot pain, and it enveloped him, consumed him. He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe. Everything was blood. Then, his strength gave out and he fell against the wall.

"Cloud!!" Tifa howled in terror, her voice shrill.

Malachai stared in shock at the scene for a moment, watching as the man with the wild blond hair sagged against the house, leaning above his intended victim. Then he smiled. "Oops..." He grinned again, his perfectly white teeth flashing. "I missed." With a deft flick of his wrist, the wire snapped tight and rewound sharply, tearing the bolt from the wall.

Cloud gave forth a strangled cry of pain as the arrow tore through him again, forcing him backwards with a sharp yank. The blade of its head caught on one of his ribs, snapping it with a sharp crack and pulling him back towards his assailant. He lost his balance and fell backwards, blood sputtering from his mouth and pouring from his wound. His body hit the ground with a thud, slid a few inches, and then came to rest. He himself made no movements, his body lifeless, sprawled like a rag doll.

The bolt clicked back into place on the crossbow.

Tifa screamed and fell to her knees.

Cid stared blankly through the blood Cloud had poured over him, his eyes finding the spreading pool of crimson surrounding the body. There was no sound for the longest time except the thundering of his heart in his chest and the pounding of pain in his head. He sat against the wall, quivering, breathing heavily, his wide eyes glued on Cloud's lifeless body. And then, the sound of engines exploded in his mind.

Malachai smiled with an evil twitch. Then he tossed the crossbow over his shoulder and turned back toward the Highwind. Quickly, he climbed the rope he had descended upon. The shadows covered him again, enfolding him in their safe shroud of blackness. Then he was gone.

The Highwind gained altitude, hovering over Cid in a taunting salute to her former owner before heading away from Rocket Town and the disastrous wedding reception. Lady Luck raised her hand to him in a silent, goodbye kiss. She had gone off to court another man.

Everything stood still, as if paralyzed, as if held back by forces intangible and unknown to humanity. Then, with a horrid jerk, reality violently snapped back around them. Everything began at once.

"Cloud!" Tifa shouted as she stumbled forward, skidding to her knees beside Cloud's form. Her hair came bursting forth from the barrettes that had been holding it in place. Trembling fingers touched Cloud's arm. Tears streamed down her face, smearing her makeup and dirt. "Help me!" she screamed hysterically.

Cid crawled to Cloud on his hands and knees, scraping his skin against the ground. "Shit, shit, shit, shit..." he moaned, reaching his fallen friend's side.

Red XIII limped quickly towards them, one of his paws streaked with blood. Upon reaching the scene he took a deep breath. "Get his shirt open! Hurry!"

Cid complied. He ripped Cloud's shirt easily, buttons flying haphazardly into the darkness. Tifa gasped, her hand going to her mouth.

Vincent and Yuffie appeared beside the two. "Oh my Gawd," Yuffie moaned, watching the spreading blood around Cloud. She looked almost green in the moonlight.

The wound in his lower chest was about the size of a child's fist. Blood formed a lake around it, running in great rivers down his stomach and off his sides. One could clearly see through the lacerated flesh and tissue. One of his ribs, horribly broken, could be observed protruding at a most nauseating angle, shards of bone lining the cut muscle around it. It was gushing blood, the red liquid rising with every gasping breath Cloud drew. None of them had ever seen anything more terrifying.

Marlene was crying as Barret emerged from behind the fallen table. Shera, quivering, ran towards Cid. Looking at Cloud, she began to sob. Quickly and strongly, Red declared, "Everybody calm down. We have to work quickly and efficiently, or Cloud will bleed to death. Yuffie, run inside and get the Full Cure. Hurry!" The young woman for once had no smart response. With a shaking form, she charged into Cid's house, holding her dress in her hand so she wouldn't trip. "Cid, take off your jacket. We have to stop this bleeding. Vincent, get some light."

Shera seemed to snap out of her paralyzing fear. She grabbed Vincent's hand. "Here. I'll take you inside to get the bright lights." They both ran in the house.

"Jesus," Barret moaned as he looked down on their fallen friend. "Ah, sweet mother, Marlene don't look at 'im."

"Cloud," Tifa said softly. His face was squeezed into a tight wince, his eyes squeezed shut in intense pain. Bloody froth bubbled on his lips with every wheezing breath he inhaled. He was shaking and breathing short gasps. With the back of her hand, Tifa gently wiped the blood from Cloud's chin. She rubbed his cheek with her thumb compassionately, holding back her own panic, terror, and tears with her solid composure. Cid placed his jacket over the gaping wound in Cloud's chest. "This is gonna hurt," she said softly. She grabbed his hand tightly. "Just hold on."

Cid closed his eyes, gritted his teeth, and pressed firmly over the wound.

Cloud screamed in pain, kicking up and bucking against the searing agony coursing over him. Tifa winced at both the hurt in his shrill cry and the painful tightening of his hand about hers. Cid applied steady pressure, trying hard not to let the howling affect him. Tifa stroked his sweat-streaked face. "Easy, Cloud. I know it hurts. Just lie still."

Cloud moaned, coughing up more blood still. His body began to relax, his grip on her weakening. Red XIII shook his head, the expression on his face one of a little child watching a parent die. "Hold on, Cloud. Please."

"Aw, shit! We're losing him! Yuffie, hurry it up!" Barret howled.

Tifa squeezed his hand, panic freezing her pretty face into a fearful grimace. "No, Cloud." She shook his shoulder gently. "Come on. Stay with us!"

Cid yelled, "Barret, give me that damn jacket! He's bleeding out of control! Goddamn this!" He rearranged the blood-soaked black jacket, trying to find an area not saturated with blood.

Cloud's eyes began to close, to roll back into their sockets. The spasms his body had been clenched under were slowing. His breathing was nothing more than a faint rattle through his lips, and that, too, was fading.

A thousand voices began to talk at once.

"Cloud, no! Wake up! You gotta hang on!"

"Shit! No, this isn't happening! Yuffie!!"

"Hang on, Cloud. Come on, don't die on us now!"

"I got it! I got it!"

"Hurry it up, girl! We've almost lost him!"

"Dammit, Cid! Don't yell at me!"

"It's almost over, Cloud. Hold on."

Cloud's eyes closed. His hand became limp in Tifa's.

"Cloud!!"