

Hell or High Wind

Chapter Ten

The silence of night was lifting, freeing the land to the energy of the day. The sun crept casually up over the horizon, in no particular hurry to spread her necessary light across the world. The very last of the stars faded into the brightening sky, losing their brilliance as they turned to waning specks. The coming of day kicked life into gear, banishing sleep until the come of the moon again.

She walked. Steadily, undeterred by the rough ground that tore at her blistered feet, she plodded on, without pause or repose. Like a machine, one foot fell before another without miscalculation that might lead to an unfortunate stumble. With perfect poise, she continued her journey.

The landscape around her was unindicative of her location. The grassy plains had turned to forest, though the trees were thin and meagerly spread across a floor begging for more rain. Now the woods had all but faded, leaving nothing but the starved earth. Clay and sun-baked rock rolled for miles ahead, stiff and hardened by years of weathering. Though vegetation was sparse in this climate so violently built against it, it did exist in the form of a few lonely shrubs dotting the ground, sucking at hidden water supplies beneath the surface. All around, desert stretched, spanning from horizon to horizon without bound or end. It lended no hope to its termination or to the weary traveler who had undoubtedly lost his bearings in its endless folds of hard rock.

But not her.

She knew where to go.

The wounds from the crash days back had faded to mere hints of abrasions. She had been walking endlessly since, yet felt no pain from the tears lining her sensitive, small feet. The blue jacket slung over her slim shoulders provided little protection from the heat or the cold, shielding very little from driving rain or biting wind. She let none of it slow her. Hunger or exhaustion did not weary her. She was not affected by that which ailed normal men. If she were, after all, her journey would have killed her long ago.

As the moon washed over her, her mass of green hair swept up in a gust of wind. The tangled strands shimmered in the wind like heavenly streamers waving behind her. She stopped suddenly, coming to a halt without falter or hesitation. Softly, she tilted her head to the sky and stared upward. The stars twinkled overhead in a pattern that possessed no rhyme or reason but seemed to have meaning nonetheless. And there she stood.

Behind her, a motor roared as it approached. A plume of dusty sand violated the clean air. A sand buggy neared, racing across the dunes with ease. As the craft reached the girl, it began to slow. One of two figures in the front of the vehicle stood, grasping onto the windshield for support. His gruff, masculine voice could be heard over the whine of the motor and the whoosh of air as he ordered his comrade to stop. The sand buggy skidded to a sharp halt beside her.

One man rose up, bracing his foot on the door of the craft. Long, greasy brown hair that was clumped and curled with dirt and sweat cascaded down beefy shoulders. The man was decked out in black leather, the sight uncomfortable to the eyes. "What do we got here?" His voice was slurred with alcohol.

The girl lowered her head, having remained still during the buggy's approach. She did not turn to them. Her hair whipped about, hiding her face.

The man glanced back at his comrade. "You need a lift, lady?" the other called from the driver's seat.

"Cause if ya do, we'd be more than happy to drive ya anywheres ya please," the first man added quickly, giving the girl a toothy, lusty smile.

When their words provoked no response, the two men looked at each other, dumbfounded. Though their hits had not scored any points, they weren't about to let an opportunity like this pass. The fact that the girl wore nothing but a torn suit

jacket only fueled their interest. "Ya deaf or something, lady?" the first man asked again. "We asked ya if ya wanted a ride. We want an answer." There was unspoken threat in his voice. It was pretty clear that their offering of the ride was the last thing on their minds.

She spoke not a word. Silently, she looked up, straight ahead, and began to walk.

The man glanced to his buddy. The other shrugged neutrally and downed a swallow of liquor, a hard glint in his eye. He grasped the handle of the door and turned it quickly, pushing it open. The first man jumped the side of the buggy and landed on the desert floor with a thud and a spray of dust. Quickly, he stalked up behind the girl. "Ya ain't walkin' away from hospitality, bitch!" He grabbed the back of her suit jacket and with a vicious yank, ripped it from her slim body.

She did not struggle as he grabbed her then, wrapping his meaty arms around her and dragging her back to the craft. His friend came around the front, finished off his drink, and tossed the empty bottle over his shoulder to the desert behind them. "Why the hell's she walking way out here with nothin' on?"

"Who gives a shit?!" his comrade shouted in a throaty voice, the sight of her naked chest exciting him. "Get the hell over here and help me hold her down!"

The other guy gave another shrug as he slowly ambled around the front of their buggy. His friend pushed the girl to the ground hardly and grabbed her arms, locking them down above her head on the dirt. She stared at him indifferently as he pried her legs apart with his knee. "Hold her arms," he ordered to the other man, his face red. The second man did as he was ordered, grabbing her small wrists and keeping them locked to the ground with one massive hand, the other entwined in her thick hair.

"Something's wrong with this chick, man," the second man said, shaking his head. The first stopped fondling her breasts for a minute to glance up at his comrade. "She ain't even fighting! Look at her!" The girl's eyes were closed, her face placid. It was as if she was oblivious to what was happening to her, as if she didn't care that she was about to be raped.

The first man began to undo his belt. "Who cares?!" The pants slid down his thighs.

Her eyes snapped open.

In a heartbeat and with strength that defied her size, she ripped her hands from the man holding her down. They careened forward and collided with the nose of the one straddling her. He fell back with a furious curse, freeing her legs. She wasted not a second, hopping up with the grace of a cat to the balls of her feet. Powerfully, she kicked back behind her and caught the other man hard on the side of the head.

By the time she rose again to her full height, the first attacker had recovered. He went at her in a drunken fury. "I'm gonna kill you, bitch!" he screamed in anger. His initial sloppy punch was blocked easily. The second came at her from the right. She side-stepped the blow nimbly. That was his fatal mistake, for she dropped her arms around his neck as he passed, jerking him back. Within a second, she ripped his head around and snapped his neck.

She dropped the corpse quickly and turned to the other assailant. He laid against the buggy, quivering in fear. Blood ran down his dirt-crustured face from a laceration on his temple. Whimpering, he scrambled to his knees and raced around the front of the buggy. He jumped back into the driver's seat and revved the engine. With a plume of smoky dust, the craft zoomed off in to the distant.

The girl stood still for a second, the body of the first man dead at her feet. The desert was still. She walked to where the man had ripped the jacket from her shoulders and picked up the dusty garment. The wind picked up, blowing the sand from it. "Reno," she murmured. Then she stuck her arms back through the jacket somewhat awkwardly. As if nothing had happened, she began to walk.

The night was still, calm, serene. Reeve stood on his private balcony, feeling the warm blanket of the night air and the cool whistle of the breeze lull him to sleep. Eyelids heavy with weariness slid down, sealing his world to black. He stood stiffly, locked his hands behind his back, and took a deep breath, feeling that warm cover closed over his lungs and send a wave of relief over his tired body. It truly was a pity that the night air could not do so right by his mind as it did his body.

With utter exhaustion, he bowed his head and rubbed his brow. Guilt ate at him, inside out. He knew, deep down inside, that he could not be held completely responsible for what had happened. He had done his best to eliminate the spies in Shinra, Inc. At least, he thought he had. Every office had been swept through, meticulously examined for moles, inspected for bugs. It was inconceivable that anything had been missed, that some minute, suspicious detail had escaped or been overlooked.

Reeve sighed. Who the hell was he kidding? The spy search hadn't been so conscientious. Every office that had been examined was done so with nothing more than a cursory glance. When he had come to power in Shinra, it hadn't exactly been a good time to start wondering what knives were poised above one's back. Meteor was still threatening to sunder the world. And Sephiroth was still on the prowl. After all of that had been dealt with, nobody had much wanted to think about the possibility that their position was precarious due to spies lurking in the depths of Shinra. Nobody had wanted to even consider it. So the attempt to remove them had been half-hearted, if that at all. Reeve hadn't thought about it much then. He had always figured that, as things settled in the years after Meteor, there would be time to hunt down the spies and dispose of them. There would be time to slowly undo the damage of the Shinra family and cleanse the company, from the inside out.

But fate had not granted him that time. And there was nobody to blame but himself for the agent that had leaked the existence of the Ancient to Malachai.

He turned away from the night and back to his office. The area was quiet, half cloaked in shadow, the office lights dimmed to a more comfortable evening level. He glanced around his room, to the leather couches lining the far left corner, the glass coffee table, glistening in the florescent beams, the plants, their long, narrow leaves still in the night. A sudden sense of fear claimed him, cold, from the pit of this stomach. How many taps had their meager scans missed? Only a day or so back he had sat in his chair in this room, listening to the Turks tell their story of the mysterious girl. And it was well known that, in the day of his reign, President Shinra had been spied on by his most "trusted" advisers. Any of those taps might have leaked the information to whatever greedy ears they happened to reach. What bugs might have been on his phone, so innocently resting upon his mahogany desk? Any number of cameras might have been placed surreptitiously behind the grating of the air vents....

Stop it, his mind admonished. Paranoia isn't going to help. The fact is there is a mole somewhere here in this operation, and you have got to find it. But who? Assuming there was no bug, no wiretap in his office, then it must have been somebody already involved. The thought sent shivers up his spine. He in no way wanted to consider any of his friends, question their loyalty or ambitions. But you have to. You screwed up, Reeve. You had this office checked this morning. It came up clean. It is possible that they missed something... Possible, but highly unlikely. As a more intensive search for bugs swept through Shinra, the more negative reports that returned sliced into him. He had hoped vehemently since this morning that it had been of a mechanical nature, that he wouldn't have to look to his friends and colleagues as suspects. It was becoming abundantly obvious, though, that that was the only course of action left. It was one he had to take. The mole was jeopardizing the entire operation. The call from Cloud that afternoon of the attack of Costa Del Sol only heightened his growing concern and suspicion that the perpetrator was somebody they all knew, somebody masked in friendliness. If the office was checked before AVALANCHE left, how else would Malachai have known where and when to attack? It left his mind reeling.

Tiredly, he collapsed into his chair. Weary hands massaged his forehead. The most difficult and pressing question of all pounded into his brain like a hammer. Who? Who would have the nerve, the gall, to commit the most heinous of all crimes? Who would stoop so low as to use friendship, loyalty, and honor to mask treachery, lies, and betrayal? Who was the traitor?

There was only one way to do this: to examine everybody closely. Everybody was a suspect. What was that old adage...

trust no one? That was exactly what he had to do. Bias would only earn him foolishness. That could get somebody killed. His mind resigned to start with those who had presented the problem: the Turks.

Reno. Sure, Reno was a bastard at times. He was arrogant, self-centered, and over-confident. He had been known on more than one occasion to royally screw loyalty and do whatever pleased him, what benefited him the most. He was not what Reeve considered to be trustworthy. He sighed inwardly, though. There was something about Reno, on the other hand. Something that forced Reeve to regard him in a higher manner. He had always come through when they had truly needed him. He had never shunned duty and honor when it had been utterly imperative that he not do so. At the pillar fight in Sector Seven, after all, he had nearly been mortally wounded for a cause that he had labeled faulty days before. Reno didn't seem like the one. Neither did Rude or Elena for that matter. Rude was the silent soldier, a strength in the Turks that was always a constant. He never voiced his opinion, only spoke when it was necessary. Reeve knew the type. Yet his loyalty was infallibly to the Turks and their honor. He would never smudge or dirty it. And Elena? She had more than once shown her distaste of what Shinra had become under Reeve's leadership. Her sass and lethargic behavior let on to her anger and displeasure. Yet she loved the Turks and all they stood for. Would she dishonor them or their loyalty to Shinra? Reeve highly doubted it.

What did that leave? AVALANCHE. Reeve felt cold guilt wash over him for even considering his comrades in this hunt. They had all hurt, suffered, and fought to save the world. They had all lost what they loved in fighting for what they believed in. Could he rightly accuse any of them of this crime? Could any of them even warrant suspicion? He didn't know. All seemed to be steady in their fight to protect the world. But Reeve knew the power of greed, the enticing qualities of money and power. He also knew how much such a never-ending battle could wear down a warrior. He felt it himself. How much easier it would have been when fighting Sephiroth to just give up and let others handle it. To turn to the other side because it promised ease, rest, and wealth. Would any of them have slipped away now?

He didn't know. They had all changed after Meteor. Could any of them become such a different person as to abandon his friends and side with everything they had fought against? He cursed himself for not knowing. His head was pounding.

Would Cloud turn against them? What the hell was he thinking? Cloud? He was the man who was most responsible for saving this world, for fighting Sephiroth and curing this people of his ills. Cloud was the one most hurt by Shinra. His home had been burned, his mother killed. And he had been experimented upon and tortured. He had no love for Shinra. Nothing in this world could make him fight for Malachai's cause. After Meteor, Cloud had lost his short-temper and his aggressive side. He was calmer, more collected, harder to pique. Their stolid leader couldn't have turned. If that had happened, all would be lost.

And Tifa was much the same as Cloud. She cared too much for other people to hurt them so bluntly. She was too kind, too compassionate. She believed in justice and the wealth of the human soul more than any other. And her love for Cloud would never allow her to hurt him.

Barret hated Shinra with all his being. Shinra had killed Dyne's soul, burnt Corel, and crushed Sector Seven. He had led AVALANCHE when it was nothing more than an underground resistance force, poorly funded and understaffed. Barret had a deep loyalty in him. He never turned his back on a friend or what that friend believed in. No way he could have been betrayed them.

Red? Never. Red was too kind, too wise, too trusting. He was young and helpful. Besides, AVALANCHE was the only family he had since Bugenhagen's death. He would never kill the close bond he held with them. He would never squash their affection.

Cid, too, was not an option. It was obvious from what had happened that he and Malachai were archenemies. He would never leave AVALANCHE to join his nemesis. Reeve could see the cold ice form in his blue eyes whenever Malachai was mentioned. Cid would rather die first.

Vincent, though, was a little less clear. Reeve didn't know what to feel for the man. He had not known him when he had been with the Turks. He did not know what Vincent was beneath his cold and mysterious exterior. He doubted anyone did. Where did his loyalties truly lie? Who did he love and hate? It was shrouded in darkness, obscure, hidden by the blood red

of his eyes. Yuffie was another matter as well. She seemed to be friendly towards AVALANCHE, upbeat and optimistic. But more often than not, she had left the team in search of money or materia. The instance where she had stole the team's materia and hid in Wutai was fresh in Reeve's mind. It was clear she loved money more than man. Would she have been enticed by the lure of wealth to the lines of the enemy?

Reeve let out a long, heavy breath. His head fell to the pillow of his arms on his desk and his eyes closed. He was so tired, his mind shutting down, buzzing with questions. He felt dirty, horrible for suspecting his friends. Was this trust? Was this confidence? His mind faded away.

The PHS began to ring on his desk.

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Shera pulled the brush through Marlene's thick, dark hair, feeling the soft strands slide through gently. The two sat on Marlene's bed in their room, both in their nightgowns. The young girl was holding her teddy bear protectively in her lap as Shera brushed her slightly damp hair.

It had been quite a hard day for them. Although they were assured the Shinra tower was "secure", Shera insisted that Marlene stay with her. It was clear from what happened to Cid the night before that Malachai was one step ahead of Shinra's security measures, and neither of them was safe. Not only that, but Shera felt the child could use some company and companionship. It must have been hard for the girl during the fight against Sephiroth to be handed around from guardian to guardian, missing her father constantly. To be again without Barret was no easy thing to face. Shera also missed Cid a great deal, even though he had only been gone for a day. It had been much more difficult when he had been out fighting Sephiroth, away for weeks. However, now that they were married, she felt an acute emptiness when he was gone, more so than before.

After hearing of the attack at Costa Del Sol, she had abandoned working on the pod. No state of concentration could be reached by her, her mind cluttered with fear and worry. Reeve had assured her that all of AVALANCHE was fine; the injuries were minor and nobody was in any kind of trouble. Yet panic gripped her heart in a cold vice, making work impossible. No matter how much she tried to assure herself, she knew that this was just the beginning.

"Shera, do you think they'll be back soon?" Marlene asked staring down at the bed.

Shera broke away from her thoughts and stopped brushing for a moment. "I don't know," she said, trying to mask the worry in her voice. Trying to be strong for Marlene. "I wish I did." She continued brushing again, somehow finding solace in the motion.

"What are they doing?" Marlene continued, scratching her leg beneath the light pink of her pajamas.

Shera sighed gently. "They're trying to find a girl before an old enemy of Cid's does."

"The man who hurt Uncle Cloud?"

Shera felt herself stiffen. "He's hurt a lot of people, Marlene. Cid and Cloud are just two." She didn't bother to correct the little girl. Cloud had no blood relation to her, obviously. All of the team had become her aunts and uncles, though, since the end of the world crisis.

"Did he hurt you?" she asked. The innocence was like an aura around her.

Shera frowned. "Yes. He did. But that was a long time again. The heart heals itself, Marlene."

The girl was silent for a moment, perhaps in contemplation. Shera smiled a bit, despite the dark cloak of worry about her heart. Children see things so differently. The world is bright and new to them. There is no hurt or death or pain or hate.

How can I explain something like this to a child who sees a world full of candy and toys and love and life?

"Do you think he'll hurt Daddy?" There was fear in her voice, quivering. Shera could imagine the tears welled in her eyes. Her heart went out to her as she gently turned the girl to face her.

"Come here, darling," Shera said as she pulled Marlene into her arms. She could feel the small body trembling with sobs against her. "Your father is a very strong man. Don't worry about him. He can take care of himself. Plus he's got Cloud and Tifa and Cid and all the others with him. They won't let anything happen to him. I promise." Marlene continued to weep, despite Shera's assurances, her body wracking with sobs. "Remember when they fought Sephiroth?" Marlene looked up at her briefly, tears streaming down her cheeks from wide eyes. Then she lowered her head to Shera's shoulder once more. "That was far more dangerous than this. Trust me, sweetie." Gently she stroked Marlene's back, the lies biting into her. Was fighting Malachai any less dangerous than fighting Sephiroth? At least Sephiroth had had a reason for doing what he had. At least somebody understood Sephiroth. In a sick way, Cloud had known why Sephiroth had done what he did. In some perverted manner, Cloud had realized that Sephiroth had been hurt and scarred. Although it didn't ease the hate the young man bolstered for Sephiroth, it at least made the general's motives somewhat comprehensible. Malachai, though, seemed to thrive on hurt. He lived for the cry of pain from others, the break of their breath and their pleas for mercy. He had no reason, no excuse. Did that make him more dangerous than Sephiroth? She didn't know. Malachai would stop at nothing to get what he wanted, which was for Cid to have everything he loved taken from him. And then to kill him.

Don't think about that now! Shera closed her eyes as she gently rocked Marlene, holding her tight in her arms. "Just sleep, Marlene. I'm sure Barret wouldn't want you to worry about him." Just as I'm sure Cid wouldn't want me to worry about him. Not that that is any consolation here and now.

The girl began to quiet as Shera held her. Without realizing it, she began to hum an old song her mother used to sing to her when she had a nightmare. The ancient tune calmed her as much as it did Marlene, quieting her fears and stilling her worries. A sense of nostalgia claimed Shera then, and her eyes began to close. She had loved her mother with all her heart. Her warm smells and hands always eased her when she was upset or sick or afraid. She had often wondered what kind of mother she herself would make. However, finally marrying Cid had been quite a prerequisite to that.

She began to doze off, lulled to sleep by her own voice and weariness.

"So, are you and Cid planning to adopt or have your own?"

Shera's eyes ripped open, her pounding heart suddenly leaping to her throat. That voice sliced through her peace; she knew immediately who it was.

Marlene screamed.

Malachai.

He stepped away from the door, slithering like a snake, his hands in the pockets of his expensive, black suit coat. His eyes glistened in the dim lights of the room, like liquid fire. He smiled, that damn twisted smirk.

Cold fear drenched Shera as she tore herself off the bed, taking Marlene with her. The young girl obediently fled behind her, arms around her leg. Her eyes narrowed, heart thundering, she looked to the man, keeping the bed between them. "What do you want, Hariel?"

He smiled again. Some women might have found it attractive. It made Shera want to vomit. "Just some answers, sweet Shera. Like why you married Cid."

Shera stepped back, astounded. He rounded the bed, stepping ever closer. "Is that why you're here? Jealousy?"

He shrugged as she backed into the wall. Strong arms were folded across his chest. "Not jealously. Just confusion. I don't

understand what you see in him. I never did.”

“Why I chose him over you?” Shera asked. For some reason, she was not afraid. Malachai did not scare her as he had before. She had a sudden power over him, she realized, for he wanted something only she could give him: her affection. “Because he has a heart. You don’t.”

“Now that’s a little harsh, isn’t it?” He laughed. “You never gave me a chance to show you how I feel.”

She laughed, short and harsh, despite their situation. “You don’t feel, Hariel. You just hurt. I can’t love a man who takes pleasure in other people’s suffering. Cid cares. He always has and always will. He has one thing you can never take from him: his soul. His is bright with love. Yours is black with hate.”

He said nothing to that. For a moment, the room was still aside from the slight breeze blowing in through the open window. The pounding of her heart in her ears was so very loud.

Malachai pursed his lips, and rubbed his goatee. “I’m giving you this one chance, Shera. Come with me. Leave Cid and be my wife.”

“No,” she said resolutely, without a moment’s hesitation.

He stepped forward in anger. “Why do you insist upon being with him? What does he have that I don’t? Come with me. I can give you so much more—”

“I said no, you bastard!”

She knew she had gone too far when she saw the anger flash in his eyes, his temper breaking with a nearly audible snap. Malachai slapped her, hard, straight across the face. The blow nearly took her to her knees, tears rushing to her eyes. Marlene screamed in terror, hiding behind her body further.

Slowly, she straightened, her hands clenched at her side. Tears flooded her eyes, but she would not cry. With seething hate, she glared at him. Ice was in her eyes. “I’ll die first,” she hissed through clenched teeth.

He seemed taken aback by the transformation, her usual timid demeanor gone. Violence roared in his eyes, his charged breath, his clenched fists. “I’ll have you, Shera. Don’t think you can stop that.”

With that, he turned and walked from the room. She watched him go, erect in her anger. He wrenched open the door, and stopped in the portal. “You’ll be mine.” Then he slammed it behind him.

Shera let out a long breath, the tears now rolling freely down her cheeks. She was at once terrified and proud that she had defended herself. I can’t break down now! Taking a few deep breaths, she stared at the door, trying to regain her composure, biting her shaking lower lip. Oh, God, Cid.... I need you...

“Shera?” The meek, timid voice reminded her that she was not alone. Jarred into action, she turned around. Marlene still stood behind her, trembling in fear, tears running down her face. “Is he gone?”

She immediately dropped to her knees and pulled Marlene into her arms. “Yes, honey.” The girl began to cry again into her shoulder. Shera stroked the back of her head. “He’s gone.”

They stood like that for a moment, gaining strength from the others’ presence. Shera felt a thousand emotions assail her; she knew not what to think. Damn you, Malachai, for doing this to us...

The phone rang. She glanced at the sniffling Marlene, whose eyes were red, and then at the phone on the bed stand. Startled, she reached over to pick it. “He-hello?” she said meekly into the receiver.

“Shera?”

She recognized the voice. “Reeve?”

“Listen, you’ve got to come down to my office. It’s Cid and the others.” There was a brief pause. “They’ve been attacked, and it’s not good.”