

## Hell or High Wind

### Chapter 2

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The silence blanketed the Highwind house as the night did the land. There was no noise, the entire structure silent besides the creaking of the wood and a gentle tapping of tree limbs against the windows. The large grandfather clock in the living room chimed. Once. Twice. Three times. In the silence, it was like a death toll. It was dark everywhere, one light in the kitchen turned on, illuminating the sink and the refrigerator. Shadows covered the entire living room save for a single lamp situated between the two blue couches, shedding its dim light. The dreary darkness of their surroundings matched the moods of its occupants all too well.

Cid tried to keep his eyes open as he sat on the big couch beside the empty fireplace. He was exhausted, every muscle, bone, and tendon in his body crying out in weary protest at every move he made. Tired eyelids kept stubbornly sliding down no matter how many times he scrubbed the sleep from them. His longing for his soft bed and clean blankets with Shera at his side had faded hours ago. He now simply wanted to stay awake and aware enough to figure out what the hell was going on.

Yuffie laid on the couch next to him, her bare feet dangerously close to being in his lap. She was snoring softly, her head pillowed on her arms. Vincent was sitting on the opposite couch, his eyes closed. He was not sleeping, however, his acute senses scanning the room, on constant guard. Marlene was in a deep sleep in Barret's arms. The big man had spent hours trying to calm her, trying to get her to rest. Finally, she had dozed out, her pretty pink dress now soiled. Barret himself was staring blankly at the black fireplace, his eyes clouded, his thoughts distant. In the room down the hall, Cloud was unconscious, laying in the newlywed's soft bed. Tifa and Red XIII were in there with him, caring for him. The house was silent in anxiety and anticipation. Nobody had the courage to speak, too weary to make any effort to lighten the melancholy so heavily draped upon them. Dark thoughts swirled about their heads, intermixed with horrible images and fears.

Shera walked up to Cid on soft, cat-like footfalls. He had never noticed how graceful and quietly she stepped on delicate feet until then. In all their years living together, this was the only instance he had realized how she crept like a wife. She gave him a weak smile as she handed him a steaming cup of hot tea. Soft tendrils rose from the cooling liquid, snaking up into the air before dissipating, disappearing as if they had never existed. Cid accepted the cup gratefully.

She sighed as she sat on the arm of the couch beside him. Cid took a sip of the tea. Honey. The silky sweetness danced on his tongue before smoothly running down his throat, warming his chest and leaving a comforting trail down to his stomach. No matter how angry he had ever gotten with Shera, no matter how damned exasperating she was, she sure could make a wonderful cup of tea.

Cid rubbed her knee in silent thanks. "How's Cloud doing?"

"Sleeping," she said softly. She looked down at him. He still wore his tuxedo, minus the jacket. Blood spots marred his white shirt that had once been crisp with starch. It glowed in the moonlight. Grass stains also decorated his elbows, a long rip running from his upper arm to his wrist. Dark red stains covered his collar and shoulders. There was still blood matted in his hair. Cloud's blood. A long, dried river of it ran down his forehead and cheeks. Blood covered his eyebrows. He had quickly washed some of it off a while ago. He still looked like a monster from a splatter movie. "Captain," she began, gently picking dried flakes of blood from his hair, "why don't you go get yourself cleaned up? Take a hot shower..."

Cid immediately shook his head. "Not until I know for sure Cloud's okay."

"He's okay, Captain."

Cid looked up at her. "Is he?" he asked softly. He set his teacup on the small table beside the couch. Yuffie stirred in her sleep and gave a snorted breath. "He got goddamn run through, Shera. Because of me. For me. Shit."

She sighed again and shook her head. "It's not your fault," she whispered.

Cid grunted, darkly narrowing his eyes. "Goddamn bastard. Malachai'll pay for this. Ruins my wedding, steals my ship, and

nearly kills my friend. ^%\$&!!! He'll pay."

Shera closed her eyes. She tried to will out of her head the picture of Cloud laying in a pool of his own blood, his face wound up so tightly into a painful wince, Cid's panic filled eyes, Tifa crying for him to hang on... She rubbed her face and then her forehead. She could still hear the screams. Malachai's dark face, one that she had hoped never to see again... God, what had happened? "I thought he would leave you alone," she said softly.

Cid's hand wrapped through hers, his head braced upon his fist, his elbow leaned upon his knee. "I thought so, too." He leaned back, looking up to the darkened ceiling above him with tired eyes and tired mind. "Damn it all to hell, I thought so, too."

There was silence again. Cid absently stroked Shera's knuckle with his thumb. Every mind was elsewhere, on other things, thinking of before when their leader's life had nearly slipped through their fingers. Cloud had faded away from them right before their eyes. His breathing had stopped, his heart fluttered, his very life slipping away, drifting from them towards whatever lay after. Panicked beyond all belief, Tifa had wrenched the Full Cure materia from Yuffie's hands, the green orb glowing brightly with power. Whispering softly, she had cast a spell in an effort to save Cloud's life, powered by her own love and vitality and the Mako of the materia. Beautiful, heavenly light that twinkled with tiny specks of all colors of the rainbow streamed from her hands that cupped the glowing materia. It had burst forward with a shower of illumination and encased Cloud's limp body, tugging his soul back. Gentle rays of light surrounded him, seeping into his body, running with his blood and breathing with his lungs. With the soft touch of angels, it caressed the gaping hole in his chest. A flash of light blinded them briefly.

Everything held still as the circle of golden illumination that had surrounded Cloud shattered into a million shards of sun.

Tifa had clasped her hands together in silent prayer. She peered closer through her tears. One hand grasped Cloud's, the other gently laid over the new flesh, the ragged ends of the torn skin sown back together with the thread of life, the gushing blood sealed, the hemorrhaging muscles and split bones healed. All that was left of the wound was a red splotch. "Cloud?" she asked softly.

There was no motion from Cloud's face. It had lost the tight grimace, now placid and wax-like. He wasn't breathing. Cid shook his shoulder. "Dammit, Cloud!" he shouted angrily, "You're not dying out on us now, god damn it! Breathe, damn you!"

"Come on, Cloud! Breathe!" Tifa exclaimed.

As if on cue, Cloud's chest had suddenly heaved with a sharp inhale. He wretched up, coughing violently. Blood that had been caught in his throat splattered through his open lips as he weakly turned onto his side, heaving. His body was quaking. The team cheered in relief that their friend was alive and healed. Tifa began to sob in joy as she pulled his shivering body in her arms. Shera, who had just returned with Vincent and the light, threw her arms around Cid, crying gently. Yuffie jumped in the air and then proceeded to inconspicuously snatch the Full Cure materia from beside Tifa. Vincent smiled and bowed his head. Marlene was still crying at the sight, but Barret hoots and smiles made her grin despite her tears. And Red XIII, clearly shaken, weak in the limbs from cold relief, walked up to Cloud and gently pressed his muzzle to Cloud's cheek.

Cloud's head was buried against Tifa's breast, blood dripping off his lower lip, smearing on her dress. She didn't care as she stroked his hair. "It's okay, Cloud. You're okay," she whispered softly, kissing his forehead tenderly.

Cloud continued to shudder relentlessly, his body caught up in spasms. "Ti...fa," he gasped slowly, his eyes squeezed shut. She smiled as she gently caressed his face in reassuring strokes with her thumb. Weakly, Cloud's hand reached up to her find her cheek. "Tifa," he repeated again, his voice a little stronger but still nothing more than a hoarse, strained murmur.

She rubbed her face against his hand, one of hers sliding up his arm to hold it against her. "I'm here, Cloud," she said, before gently kissing his palm. "I love you."

"Love you... forever..." he whispered.

She leaned down and kissed him hard.

Shera had hugged Cid tightly as he sat there on his grass, his backyard leveled around him. "Oh, God, Cid," she cried into his ear. His head was bowed between his knees, his face in his hands, as the realization of how dangerous the situation had been, how lucky and foolhardy he was, how close he had come to losing his life and how they almost had lost Cloud's, hit him like a ton of bricks, sucking the breath from his lungs and the strength from his bones. Shera held him firmly. "Oh, Cid. Cid..."

"Cid!"

"What?!" Barret's voice yanked him from his thoughts, and he looked up to the dark eyes of the former leader of AVALANCHE.

He looked exasperated, and it was understandable, considering he had spent the last few minutes trying to pull Cid from a place to which he wasn't privy. He shook his head. "You back from La La Land now? \*^%&."

Cid rubbed the ache behind his eyes in slow circles with his fists. He had no energy to mutter any kind of sharp, sassy, curse-ridden retort. All he muttered was, "Sorry." Shera's hand lay upon his back, bringing him more comfort by that simple gesture than any other could.

Barret sighed, almost surprised at Cid's forlorn demeanor. "Dis team needs to have a talk, Cid. Seemin' how Cloud's outta commission right now..." A pair of hurt blue eyes pierced him. Barret raised one hand in submission, the other around Marlene's sleeping form. "Sorry, man. You know I didn't mean dat."

Cid waved him off. He laid his face back into his hands wearily. Shera handed him his tea, from which he took a sip. He hoped the caffeine in it would give him the energy and strength to run this team for the moment. They were no doubt confused. None of them knew the story, or why their assailant had appeared, what he meant or the conflict's history. It was time to dredge up the past.

A door opened and shut. The sound of gentle footfalls filled their ears as somebody made his way down the hall, too many soft thuds to be human. Cid looked up as Red XIII entered the living room, his advanced eyesight allowing him to deftly maneuver around obstacles as if he had known exactly where everything was. Cid noticed he was still limping pretty badly, his front left paw roughly bandaged. With a heaved sigh, the beast collapsed onto the floor beside Cid, clearly exhausted.

In an uncommon show of affection, Cid reached down and stroked Red's fur with an amiable hand. He sighed again, all the strength leaving his body. "Cloud's fine," he said softly. Everybody relaxed just a little more after hearing that, although they all had known the fact for a while. It was still good to hear it from the one among them the most apt in the medical field. "He'll be okay."

Cid leaned back on the couch, letting out a long breath. He closed his eyes. All his silent prayers had been answered. He never much believed in any kind of god or deity, never putting much faith in religion. But he thanked whatever gods there be for Cloud's life.

There was silence again, but a comfortable emptiness, filled with release and cheer. Cid closed his eyes and for once felt content enough to sleep. His mind immediately began to shut down, to relax, too overwhelmed by thought and feelings and too overrun by tiredness to continue aimlessly worrying about things over which he had no control. The very sleep he had been fighting for the past few hours began to overtake him, and he gratefully welcomed it. Just a few minutes of sleep was all he needed. To rest his eyes, to let his mind drift to more pleasant things, to completely relax his body of its stiffness and his soul of worry... He just needed a few minutes.

"Cid," Red said softly from the floor beside him. He sat up, looking at Cid through his one eye which was simultaneously weary from pain and wide with curiosity and a need to understand. "Who was that man?"

"Yeah," Barret rumbled as he gently readjusted the sleeping Marlene in his arms. "Who the hell was that asshole? Malak? Malaky?"

Cid opened his eyes tiredly and looked to the team around him. "Malachai," he said, slowly. He felt his fists involuntarily clench and his heart speed up, adrenaline being slowly added to his blood. "Haniel Malachai."

There was silence. None that had paid attention had missed the slight change in Cid's demeanor, the hiss and malignant tones in his voice. Nanaki and Barret exchanged glances. Vincent just stared neutrally at Cid. When it was clear Cid would say no more, Barret prompted him. "And?"

Cid's face contorted in tight anger. "And what? He's a &^%\$@#\*&, lying, cheating, damned bastard."

"Come on, Cid," Red said, the sharpness not gone from his voice. "We need to know who that man was. He stole the Highwind, shot at all of us, and nearly killed Cloud. He's obviously not an ally. We must know what we are up against."

Cid sighed again. It would be no easy thing to explain. "I'll get Tifa," he said, standing. His legs and back cried out in stiff ache, protesting their use. "Somebody wake Yuffie. I ain't gonna explain this whole thing twice." With that, he walked out of the living room and down the darkened hallway. He could hear Shera's soft voice beckoning Yuffie to awaken, then the ninja girl's own, in his opinion, irritating tones moaning and groaning about how tired she was. Hell, they were all tired.

He reached the end of the hall. The dark, oak door was closed, so covered in black it blended in with the surrounding walls. Only someone as familiar with this house as he would know it was there in the shadows. Softly, he knocked upon the door, wrapping his knuckles against the wood. "Tifa?" he said softly. There was no response to his voice. He called her name again but was answered by silence. He gripped the brass knob, turned it to the right, and opened the door.

Inside his bedroom, it was warmer, it seemed, than outside. One of the windows was open, the white, lace curtains blowing delicately with the soft breeze. The desk lamp was on the lowest setting, shedding meager light. On the chair near the closet was a pile of Cloud's ripped and blood stained clothes. His shoes lay on the floor near them, blood spots marring the shined, black surface. A first aid kit laid open on the desk, gauze and scissors having been used. The blue blanket that had been neatly covering the bed that day was now crumpled at the foot. Cloud lay on the bed, the white sheet covering up his bare chest. His expression was peaceful, the blood having been cleaned from his face and hair. Tifa was stretched out beside him on the bed, her hip spooned about his, her head on his shoulder, one arm across his chest. They were both sound asleep.

Cid approached the bed very quietly, careful not to trip on her black, satin shoes. He laid a hand on Tifa's shoulder and shook it gently. "Tifa," he said softly. She stirred a bit, turning her head before resettling herself closer to Cloud. He nudged her more insistently. "Come on, Tifa. Wake up." The girl's eyes opened slowly, focusing on Cloud's face. Then she turned over, feeling Cid's firm hand upon her shoulder.

"Cid," she said, her voice thick with sleep. She sat up, rubbing her eyes. Tifa shook her head as if to clear it. Squinted, rusty eyes looked to him. "What's going on?"

Cid ignored the question for the time being. "Cloud's okay?" he asked her. If anyone could understand Cloud's health, both physical and mental, it was she. During their quest to stop Sephiroth and save the Planet, she had often been the only thing that had kept Cloud going. Cid himself was no expert in their relationship or Cloud's psyche, but it was pretty obvious that the two needed each other. When Cloud had been lost in the Lifestream, the confidence and vitality had been sucked out of the group, but the hardest hit had been Tifa, no doubt about it. The days he had been missing she spent moping, weepy at times, without life or love. Cid knew that Cloud's life before he had met the kid had been far from easy. There was a lot about himself that Cloud didn't understand. Something had been done to him by Shinra, something so painful and horrible Cloud had completely suppressed it. Nobody knew about it, not even Tifa. But of all of them, Tifa was the only person who understood what Cloud had been before that fateful day, five years ago in Nibelheim. She was the best judge of his health and well-being. If she said he was okay, then he was.

Tifa smiled at him reassuringly. She looked back to Cloud's sleeping form, gently tugging the sheet and covering his shoulders. "He's gonna be all right, Cid," she said strongly.

"That's a relief," Cid remarked. He watched as Tifa gently rubbed Cloud's arm. He was by no means a master of romance; it had taken him years to realize how much he loved Shera. Still, he had seen the change in both Cloud and Tifa after they had confessed their affection for each other. They had gained a light in their eyes, a spring in their step. It seemed as if a

great weight had been lifted from them. But they weren't the only ones who had seemingly undergone a metamorphosis. In the year since Meteor, everybody had changed a great deal, himself included.

Tifa grinned. "Some wedding, huh?" she said as she swung her legs to the floor. She looked up at him with eyes red from crying and exhaustion but still twinkling with an ounce of mirth.

"Yeah," Cid grunted, folding his arms across his chest. He flicked a speck of dirt from his tuxedo. It was a futile gesture; it was ruined, stained with blood and ripped. "Waste of a perfectly good tux."

"Oh, c'mon," she said. "When were you ever gonna wear that again?" she asked with a knowing look on her face.

Cid smiled innocently. "At your wedding."

Tifa humphed. "If sleeping beauty here ever gets around to it, you can bet it will be a trifle bit less exciting than this. Not a dull ceremony with a bunch of stuffy people, but a little more tame than your party."

"Hey, you can always count on a Highwind for a good time," Cid declared proudly as Tifa stood.

"Yeah," she said in mid-stretch, extending her slender arms to the ceiling. Her long black dress was just as destroyed as his tuxedo, washed in blood and ripped in more than a few places, the sheer, black satin torn and ragged. Cid almost winced when looking at it. That gown had cost a pretty penny, no doubt. "I bet Shera knows about that already."

Cid was shocked. "Why, Tifa Lockhart, such impure thoughts!" he admonished with mock scold and disgust. "Does Cloud know about this?"

Tifa flashed him a playful smile. "He knows a lot more than that."

Cid laughed heartily at that. Then they lapsed into silence. Cid looked on as Tifa leaned back over the bed and kissed Cloud gently on the lips. She straightened again. Cid laid a hand on her shoulder as she stood there, watching Cloud, observing the steady rise and fall of his chest as if to make sure he was okay. Cid bowed his head as a dirty feeling overtook him. He hadn't felt so low and horribly guilty in a long time. Shame nibbled at his pride and at his soul. He hadn't apologized to many people and certainly to no one else on this team that night for what had happened. But he felt the need to apologize to her. Maybe it was because Cloud was her love and that sight would no doubt traumatize her for many years. Maybe it was because the memory of Tifa's crestfallen face from the days in which Cloud had been Mako poisoned was engraved in his mind and he had no wish to ever see her as such again. "I'm sorry, Tifa."

She was silent for a moment. "It wasn't your fault, Cid," whispered Tifa after a few moments. Her hesitation and lack of voice indicated she wasn't as stoic as she wanted to appear.

"The hell it is," he growled. He raised a hand to Cloud's unmoving form. "If it wasn't for me, he wouldn't be in that damn bed. He wouldn't have nearly bled to goddamn death out there. That bastard wouldn't have shot him with that thing, that damn cord running through him..." Tifa stiffened. Cid found himself unable to continue. He lowered his voice. "I'm sorry."

Tifa suddenly turned around to face him. Tears were collected at the corners of her eyes. For a moment, they simply gazed at each other. Strongly, Tifa blinked away her tears. "Don't worry about it, Cid. In my eyes, it wasn't your fault. It never will be. Don't blame yourself." She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly. Not knowing what else to do, he hugged her back. Tifa kissed him lightly on the cheek. She pulled away, smiling, as if those gestures could assuage the black vice of guilt and shame clamping his soul. "Now, come on. The others are waiting."

Cid managed to grin. As she pulled him through the door, he couldn't help but glumly wonder if she would have so easily forgiven him if Cloud had died.

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Once the team sat in Cid's living room, he began to feel a little better. The close companionship of his friends, of his family, wiped away some of his guilt and despondency. The lights were turned on in his living room, casting away the shadows that

had shrouded over everything, the golden illumination warming his heart. Shera passed out cups of coffee and tea, all at once falling into the dutiful role of hostess. Cid, Yuffie (who remained quite unhappy at being awakened), and Tifa sat on the couch closest to the door. Vincent and Barret sat upon the other. Red lay with his head on his paws on the floor between them, alongside the glass coffee table, dead tired but unwilling to sleep. Marlene had been moved to the guest room, now sleeping comfortably in the large bed. The only thing that was missing was Cloud. The thought that he was just resting in the room down the hall was at once relieving and infuriating. Relieving because he was alive and well and would be continue to be. Infuriating because it was a sad reminder of how close he had been to dying due to this mysterious assailant most of them had never met before but for which now they suddenly had strong malice and hate.

Shera handed the last steaming cup of tea to Tifa who accepted it with quiet thanks. Then she walked to the big chair and sat tiredly.

Cid leaned forward on the couch, holding his now cool cup of tea in his hands. The blue fabric was still stiff beneath him, still not having been broken in. He had recently remodeled the house, buying new furniture and furnishings, as a sort of present for Shera. What he wouldn't have given then for his old, comfortable, ratty couch so broken into his weight and form to soothe his aching back, not this merciless, rigid seat.

There was silence. Nobody knew what to say, how to break the tired monotony of emptiness that had settled upon them. It was clear everybody was waiting for Cid to speak and explain what had happened, to shed some light on it all. But the pilot said nothing. Cid had never been one for subtlety or grace. If he thought something was important, he'd say it bluntly. So his hesitation and apprehension to speak of this man that attacked them clearly meant it was a painful subject he did not touch often.

"Well?" Barret asked, irritation and impatience in his voice. He set his teacup down on the table with a rattle. "Are ya gonna tell us about that man or do we hafta keep guessin'?"

Cid glared at him. "Listen, Barret. We all got our little dirty secrets, our dark pasts, our in-the-closet skeletons. How would you like ta sit here and rattle off some damn bit of history you've spent years tryin' ta forget?"

Barret's face broke as Cid's words hit home. He suddenly sympathized, remembering his own pain and grief at having to explain to Cloud, Tifa, Red, and Aeris about the shameful events that had happened in Corel all those years ago, before Sephiroth had changed the world. About Dyne and Marlene and his wife... Corel left to burn because he had abandoned it. It was a painful spot on his soul that he refused to deal with. There were a lot of things in this life of which he was not proud. That, more than anything, was one of them.

Tifa shook her head. "Please, Cid," she said softly, without anger or threat, although she, too, must have been anxious to understand. "We need to know about it."

"It's obvious the bastard was gunning for ya," Yuffie said with a yawn. She leaned back beside him, folding her arms across her chest, smacking her lips tiredly.

Red looked up and asked, "What was he talking about with the Highwind? I thought the airship was yours."

Anger rekindled in Cid and he clenched a fist. "She is. She always was. Hariel's just a \*&^%\*\$@ cheater, that's all. He's one of those types that think just because they're alive, everybody owes 'em something. Bullshit." He shook his head, his eyes narrowing darkly. "The Highwind was never his." He sighed resignedly at seeing his friends' befuddled and quizzical looks. None of them had any idea what he was talking about. Except for Shera. She understood well what had happened, having been more than a witness, but part of the conflict. But she was more reluctant than he to recall the experience. "I met Hariel when I was in high school. He was one of those guys that everybody loved to be around, 'cause he was a laugh a minute. We pulled some great pranks together. Hell, he was practically my brother. The both of us lived in the sky. Every damn day we'd swipe his father's hang glider, attach a make-shift engine we'd built, and go fly it somewhere. We had great plans, to go to flight school, to build planes for Shinra. When we graduated, we both went to Midgar to apply to their flight school. Neither of us made it in."

"Why?" Yuffie asked, suddenly interested in the story.

Cid shrugged. "The two of us weren't damn responsible, that's why. Our track records through high school weren't so hot. The only classes we were any good at were math and physics. Hell, I never passed goddamn English." Tifa grinned, somehow not surprised. "The only thing we were ever good at was building planes. And even at that, I was best." Cid gave a hint of a prideful smirk. "It was always that way with us. I was number one, he was number two. Hariel was a damned good engineer, but he had no instinct. He could fix things that were already broken really good. But he couldn't build anything for his life." Cid paused and stood, despite his aches, and began to pace. "At any rate, we didn't get accepted into flight school. But we did get offered jobs at Shinra's Air Development Ministry. Thinking back on it now, I shoulda never accepted that damn position. I mean, look what it led me to. None of that shit woulda ever happened if I had been smart enough to turn it down. Hell, I wouldn't have been sittin' on my ass for years waitin' for Shinra to get back to the space program. I could have built my own ships with my own crap, away from their damned restrictions."

He shook his head as if to clear it. "Anyway, we got jobs there, fixing broken planes. For a while it was fine. We moved up the ranks. No, that's not right. I moved up the ranks. Shinra needed more designers and builders, not mechanics. And like I said, Hariel couldn't build anything if his damn life depended on it. He was bitter about my success like any normal friend would be, jealous and envious. But his father was the one who really blew the roof."

Red cocked his head. "His father?"

Cid nodded and stopped pacing, rubbing his shoulder where a nasty kink had formed. "Yep. Ole man Malachai, the king of bureaucratic bullshit. His father was a real piece of work. He was one of the higher up's of Shinra, a rich politician type. Always bitching about this or that. He was a power hungry bastard if I ever saw one. He never considered me to be 'pedigree' enough to be around his son. He was always pushing Hariel around, making him do things he didn't want to. I asked Hariel once why his dad was like that. It was hereditary, he said. I never thought about how true it was until years later. See, all them Malachais were good people until you gave 'em a little power, a little control to make their hearts beat just a little bit faster. Then the whole lot of 'em turned into assholes, with the old man at the top." Cid shook his head ruefully. "So, of course, old man Malachai wasn't too pleased with his son's position. I mean, he was a powerful man in Shinra, Inc., and Hariel was a lowly mechanic. Not good enough. So he used his 'powers of persuasion' to convince the promotion and advancement officers that Hariel had what it took to build Shinra fast and powerful airplanes."

"In other words," Vincent added in softly, "he bribed them."

"Damn straight he did. And Hariel was promoted faster than a straight dude runs out of a gay bar." Cid shook his head and started to pace again. "I was pissed. I mean, I had to work to get where I was. My best friend who had half the talent I did was promoted to the same position because his daddy paid our boss off. I forgot that money runs the world, and those who don't have it just lose out. But I tried to be a good sport about it. I mean, Hariel wasn't going to turn an opportunity like that down just on account of morality." There was spite in his voice. Cold hate and disgust. "Well, after that, things went pretty smoothly. Together we built some planes. A lot of them were used, some of them weren't. That went on for about three years." Cid stopped. "Then Shinra dropped the plans for the world's first airship in front of us."

The whole team listened closely, paying close attention. They had all secretly wondered at one time or another how the ship they often used for transportation, the vehicle that had allowed them to chase Sephiroth around the Planet, had been built. "It was thrilling. Every pilot dreams to build his own baby. Sure, flying around in some other guy's plane is one thing. Building your own from scratch is another. No way in a million years was I gonna let this chance pass up." Cid sat on the couch again. "Hariel wasn't gonna, either, but not for the same reasons. He wanted the glory, not the experience of it. I could see him turning more into his father every day. As senior engineer, I had control of the project. And then I made the worst mistake I have ever made. I let him partner up with me to run the construction of the airship. I have never been able to figure out why I did it. But I've regretted it every day since." He sighed. "So we started on the project. I designed the ship, so I got to name it. That's just a rule of ship building and nothing Hariel could do would change it. After the designs were okayed, a construction team was sent in. That's where I met Shera." He smiled as he looked to his wife. She grinned back. "She was just one of the minor engineers sent to help build Shinra's pride and joy. I hardly knew anything about her except her name. We started construction. At first, we shared the power of the project. Then I became more engrossed with building the ship and I gradually let some of my control slip over to Hariel. Big damn mistake. Like I said, the more power a Malachai has, the more of an asshole he turns into. But I had my head in the goddamn clouds, dreaming about how great the airship would be. I spent days and nights working on her, keeping the construction teams up all hours. Hariel spent the time with his father, slowly sucking the funds from our project. When I found out a lot of our money was missing, I was pissed. I knew immediately what had happened. I confronted Hariel only to be laughed off. The project was his, now,

and I had no control over it. Bullshit. He barely ever came down to the hangar to help. I was deep in grease, trying to get my baby to fly." Cid's face was contorted with anger. "But we were running low on money. Shinra was about to yank the project, seeing as how we were behind the damn schedule because we had a helluva time finding supplies. Finally, after working for two long years, the Highwind was finished. Of course, she was property of Shinra but I can remember the pride I felt at her unveiling, when Malachai, that bastard, christened her. I was never even mentioned."

Cid gave a short little laugh. "After that, things got really \*&^%\$# up. When Heidegger found out that the budget for the Highwind came up more than a little short, Hariel pointed the finger at me. He accused me for stealing the money. He was such a two-faced, goddamned liar! Nobody believed me over him, except for my team of techs and engineers. They knew I didn't do it. But in Shinra, it don't matter what the peons think; only what the politicians believe counts. We all knew Hariel didn't deserve the Highwind. Plus, if I hung around in Shinra, I was gonna get by ass burned. So I was planning to steal the Highwind and hit the road."

"You were gonna steal a huge airship without getting caught?" Yuffie asked incredulously. "How were you plannin' on doing that?"

"I don't know!" Cid said, exasperated. "All I cared about was that ship. She was my pride and joy. I sure as hell wasn't gonna leave her in Shinra's hands." He shook his head. "But I never got a chance. Hariel showed up at my room that night. I hated his damn guts. He ambled on in, arrogant, and I couldn't help but wonder what happened to my good friend, my damn brother. Power and money, that's what happened. He offered me a deal, that son of a bitch. He told me that if I gave up the Highwind to him and Shinra, he'd clear my name. He'd come forward about the money. If I didn't, he frame me and implicate my team in the crime."

"Nice options," Red declared in disgust.

"What was I supposed to do? I couldn't just as well let Shera and all them get in trouble because I was too fond of a ship. So I traded the Highwind for my name and the safety of my friends." Cid closed his eyes and clenched his teeth in anger. "I don't know why the hell I ever trusted that &^@\$%# asshole. He didn't clear my name. All he did do was take the Highwind and transfer me and my team from the airship project to the space program. Shit! Even after all these damn years, I'm still furious over it!" Cid gave a short little laugh. "And he took the Highwind to Junon and there it sat. Just a nice little transport for the President. He didn't give a damn about the ship. He only wanted it because I had it." For a moment, there was silence. The only sound was Cid's sharp breathing through clenched teeth. "After that, I turned my attention on space, trying to forget it all. I moved to Rocket Town and set myself to be the first man in space. And I was happy for a while. Then the rocket went down the crapper. Hariel only showed up once after that." Cid looked to Shera. "It was late one night nearly a year after the space program was canceled. He came into my house, all dressed up in a fancy monkey suit with some broad on his arm. I was all covered in grease and dirt from working on the Tiny Bronco."

"What did he want?" Tifa asked.

"Satisfaction," replied Cid with hate seething in his voice. "He came to gloat. He was Heidegger's right hand man. He was the one who canceled the space program, that bastard. I was cheated by him in every way, shape, and form. That smug asshole smiled at me with his perfect teeth and laughed that all of my dreams had come plundering down to the ground. And my pretty little maid was the one who cost me everything." He looked to Shera apologetically.

She looked to the floor. "I could hear them yelling," she said softly. "I was in the kitchen doing the dishes. I only came out when I heard a crash. Hariel had broken a vase and was laughing about it. The Captain had murder in his eyes."

"I wasn't going to let him talk about you like that," Cid said softly. For a moment, the two just gazed at each other, love communicated silently between them. Then Cid turned away and sighed. "And that was it. I never saw him again until now. I always assumed he'd show up again, but Jesus..." He shook his head disdainfully. "He couldn't just let me win. He always had to be on top. Bastard. Now he's got the Highwind, like he always wanted."

Tifa saw the broken, worried expression plastered upon Cid's rough face, her heart going out to him. She reached over Yuffie and laid a compassionate hand on his knee. "We'll get it back, Cid. I promise."

He nodded after a moment, finding strength in her solemn resolution. Then he leaned forward and braced his head wearily



on his hands.

There was silence again. Now that they all understood why this man had attacked them, why he had stolen the Highwind, why he fostered such hate for Cid and Cid likewise for him, nobody knew what to say. Barret tapped his cup of tea with his fingers, absently chewing the inside of his cheek. He shook his head as his eyes focused again. "So, what do we do now?"

Red licked his lips. "Until Cloud regains consciousness, we wait, I suppose." He looked up to Cid, anticipating the pilot's dour look. "What else can we do? Do you know where Malachai would have taken the Highwind?"

Red, as usual, had a point. Cid's spirits plummeted even further. He rubbed his eyelids tiredly. "No. Who the hell knows where he went after Shinra fell? Damn, I never even thought to ask Reeve about it."

Vincent added, his arms folded over his chest, "He obviously has some power in whatever position he now holds. Stealing the Highwind was no small feat. I counted at least twenty soldiers on the deck." Cid stared at Vincent in shock for a moment, his mind blankly wondering how anyone could see anything in that darkness. Then he remembered about Vincent's honed senses, his ability to hear, see, and smell far beyond what a normal person could. "Most likely not a foe to take lightly."

"That's for damn sure," Yuffie muttered, pouting. "Ruined my nap."

Tifa shot a cold glare at the ninja girl. If Yuffie paid it any heed it was not apparent. Barret shook his head. "So you're tellin' me that we gotta chase around some maniac wit' an airship that can fly anywhere around the world and all's we got are our own damn feet?" he asked incredulously. Cid nodded. "Damn..."

"Should make searching for Sephiroth seem easy," Red remarked, trying to make light of an obviously dour situation. Cid only hoped that wasn't true.

There was silence again. Nobody had the energy to speak anymore, it seemed. Each resigned to his own thoughts, praying for some kind of solace from the day's painful experience. Cid closed his eyes and tried hard not to feel his guilt. Guilt for making that damn trade all those years ago. Guilt for letting Malachai once again get to him. Guilt for Cloud's injuries which should have been his own. He should have known better than to trust the fickle fates which so often ruined everything good and amplified everything bad. And the Highwind was gone. That fact alone gnawed at his soul until his anger built up so tightly he felt he could just scream and lash out at anything close enough. How could this have happened? It was his wedding day, goddamnit! They had had peace for all of a year, happiness and love. And the climax of that peace had been his marriage. But as life so often seems to remind them all, all good things must come to an end.

Cid just wished that fate would give them a chance to start first.

Too tired to think anymore, he began to drift off to troubled sleep.

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A low beeping filled his ears. Cid cracked open one eye and then the other. At first, he thought he had dreamed the sound. Then it resonated again, soft and mechanic. And he recognized it right away, despite his lethargy. The PHS.

Who the hell is calling at this hour? he wondered as he quickly, pushing away his tiredness again, stood and headed towards the room where the PHS was ringing. He distinctly remembered pulling the phone from Cloud's blood-soaked suit jacket and placing it on the bed stand. He tried not to step on anybody as he walked, still half asleep, to his room. Once there, he opened the door. There sat the PHS on the stand, the little red light on it blinking. He lumbered over and picked it up, trying to clear the fuzziness from his head. He opened it, held it up to his ear, and murmured, "Hello?"

"Cid? Is that you? You sound horrible! And what are you doing with Cloud's phone?" It was Reeve, his voice echoing through his dozing head.

Cid snapped out of it, opening his eyes wider. He turned to look at Cloud who had turned over in bed to lay on his side. "Yeah, well, the party got a little rough after you left," he declared almost matter-of-factly, pushing Cloud's clothes to

the floor and plopping tiredly in the chair they had occupied.

"What?! What happened?" Reeve demanded, his voice taking on a concerned tone. Cid couldn't help but grow suspicious. Every since he had found out the toysaurus that had joined them during their quest for Sephiroth, Cait Sith, was a spy controlled by Reeve, he had always been a little on edge of their so called "friend", a little suspicious. It certainly was convenient that Reeve had left right before the attack. And that worry in his voice sounded a little fake... Snap out of it, Highwind. Your damn brain's running away on ya.

Cid rubbed his forehead, the ache dull behind his eyes. "An old friend of mine decided to show up and crash the reception. Stole the Highwind. Cloud was hurt pretty badly. He's okay, now." He found himself staring at Cloud's still sleeping form in Cid's bed, the young man's chest rising and falling with each even breath.

"He's alright, though, right?" Reeve asked, as if the first answer wasn't enough.

"Yes, Reeve, he is fine," Cid said slowly as if he was trying to explain multiplication to a child. "A little cure patched him right up." Cid closed his eyes as he tried to sink into his big chair. "Everything's alright here. So why'd you call so damn early? I was sleeping, damn it."

Reeve's voice gained a hard edge to it. "This is very important, Cid. I can't really explain it to you over the phone but I need you and the team in Midgar right away. We have... a problem."

Cid opened his eyes again. "What sort of problem?" he asked, curiosity in his voice. Reeve seemed kind of hesitant. He didn't answer, silence on the other end. Cid's forehead furrowed in confusion as he leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, more awake now by the clear apprehension in the other's voice. "Reeve? Buddy? You still there?"

More emptiness. Then, "Yeah. Uh, Cid, I really shouldn't talk about it over this line... Who knows who might be listening--"

"Damn it, Reeve, just tell me what it is or I ain't settin' one foot inside Midgar!" he ordered softly. He looked up at the door to the room opened softly. Tifa stepped inside, rubbing her eyes. He looked up at her as she stepped forward to Cloud.

"Cid," Reeve said softly, suspiciously, "apparently something crashed on the Planet a while ago. And according to the Turks, an Ancient came with it."

Cid's mouth dropped open. "Say what?" he stammered, shocked. Tifa looked at him with a questioning expression on her face as she sat on the foot of the bed, her hand laying on Cloud's lower legs that were covered by the blankets. "That ain't possible, Reeve. Aeris was the last one and I saw her die." Tifa's face broke in a mixture of confusion and surprise, obviously taken aback by his words.

"Look, I'll explain everything when you get here. Is Cloud fit for travel?"

Cid looked up at Tifa's bewildered face, his heart still fluttering in confusion. "He will be when he wakes up," he answered.

"Good," Reeve answered. "I'll send choppers out for you guys in an hour. See you then." With that, Reeve hung up.

Cid lowered the phone slowly from his ear, his face blank, mind distant and running with the situation. Slowly, he closed the PHS.

Tifa watched him keenly, confused. "What, Cid? Who was that? What'd he say?"

"Go wake everybody up," he said softly. "Including Cloud. We're leaving for Midgar in an hour. Reeve's sendin' helicopters." He looked up at her as if he had seen a ghost.

Tifa shook her head. "What happened?" she demanded, a little irritated with his lack of response.

Cid bowed his face and rubbed his eyes. "I dunno," he muttered, "but I think the shit just hit the fan."