

Hell or High Wind

Chapter 3

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Light basked over Rocket Town with the coming of dawn. Most of its inhabitants slept soundly through the rising of the sun, oblivious to the beautiful cascade of reds, yellows, purples, and blues in the eastern sky as the burning ball tipped her head over the horizon. The light gradually forced the stars from the sky, their small twinkles fading and becoming dimmer and dimmer with each passing moment. The sun spread her illumination across the land, reaching with bright fingers to brush away the shadows of night.

Cid flicked the butt of a smoke to the ground and mashed his heel into it. He looked to the sunrise, admiring the celestial beauty before him. He took a deep breath of the air, feeling his lungs rise, forcing the exhaustion from himself, the fresh, morning smells and feel revitalizing him.

"Nice morning," Barret remarked from beside him. He had done away with his tuxedo, wearing now black slacks and a green, sleeveless shirt. He had been arrived at Rocket Town for the wedding the night before the actual ceremony. He, Marlene, Yuffie, and Red XIII had been staying at the inn, which was operated by one of Cid's friends and thus meant discounts for these particular patrons. Vincent had simply shown up the morning of the ceremony, armed of course. Cid had come to believe that the man never went anywhere without his gun. Thankfully, Shera had agreed to keeping the Death Penalty in her house. Cid supposed having a friend with that massive weapon on him would not go over well with the other guests. Cloud and Tifa had arrived shortly after that from Kalm also. Cid, at the time, had thought of it as foolish and stupid for his friends to pack so much. They were only staying one day, right? Now, the circumstances had changed and he was extremely glad Yuffie, Barret, and Marlene had brought a change of clothes. Tifa had had to borrow some of Shera's that morning, and now wore a pair of jeans and a large, white shirt, the biggest Shera had.

Cid felt his anger rise again. "Yeah, nice. Until you think about what happened last night. Then it ain't so damn nice anymore," he grumped, pulling another cig from the packet inside his blue vest. He had done away with his monkey suit and changed into work clothes, far more comfortable. He glanced moodily back at Rocket Town, not seeing the darkened houses in the morning shadows. He could only fixate upon the fact that the Highwind was gone, missing, stolen. He clenched a fist as his eyes traced the fluff of clouds where the rising bow of his ship should have been. "My poor baby," he moaned in utter despair.

"Quit yer whinin'," Barret ordered gruffly, a look of disgust on his face. "We'll get the damn ship back, Cid. What's important is that we're all freaking alive to see dis sunrise."

Cid knew Barret was right, but it didn't make losing the Highwind any easier. He turned his back to the rising colors and began walking through the field of tall, green grass, heading to where the rest of the team was standing. He puffed on his cigarette that he had lit moments before, stuffing one gloved hand into the pockets of his green pants, the other using the Venus Gospel as a walking stick, jabbing the butt of the spear into the ground with each step he took. Barret followed him after a moment, stepping through the waves of green.

The rest of the group stood waiting for their transportation to Midgar to arrive. They were far enough away from the sleeping denizens of Rocket Town that the noise of the powerful helicopter engines would not disturb them. How any of them possibly slept through the ruckus last night was beyond comprehension. The explosion of the cables as the Highwind tore from her berth shook Cid's house, violently rattling the entire town. The sound of the firing guns and the screaming had deafened them. However, only a few people roused to see what was the matter, and those that did immediately went back to bed upon hearing nothing else. It seemed the party had worn everybody out far too much to even wake up for a surprise attack.

Cid glanced around the group as he joined them. Red XIII sat in the grass, some of the longer strands tickling his upper chest. His paw had been completely healed a half an hour back, right before they had left Cid's house with their meager supplies and headed out to the field. He still looked tired but moderately refreshed after the three hours of sleep they had gotten last night. Yuffie stood beside him, decked out in her usual materia-hunting garb. She was cranky, much more than the rest of them and she had slept the most the night before. Her Conformer was clenched in one hand. Cid didn't

understand why she had brought her weapon or her materia for that matter but was rather glad she had. One less thing to worry about. And if Malachai attacked again before the rest of the team could re-equip itself, her sizable stash of spells would hold him at bay.

Vincent was watching the sunrise with dull red eyes. He must have been tired; nobody had seen him rest a moment the night before. He did not show it, though, as alert as ever, unfazed. His red cloak and black hair flapped in the small breeze. Tifa yawned tiredly, Marlene sitting by her feet on the grass, leaning against her leg. When she saw Barret, the little girl charged into his embrace. Tifa really looked beat, circles around her eyes, her face flushed from lack of sleep. Her long, dark hair had been quickly braided on the move, so now, tugged at by the breeze, long strands were already beginning to pull free. Cid smiled a little when the wind pushed her hair from her ears. She was still wearing those beautiful earrings, a small reminder of how radiant she had looked the night before.

Cloud stood beside her, his arms folded across his chest. His eyes were closed, the breeze ruffling the wild shock of blond hair atop his head. He was forced to borrow some of Cid's clothes, being that his tuxedo had been destroyed. He now wore a pair of brown khaki pants that were a bit too big, ruffling into the top of his boots. A baggy white shirt accompanied the outfit that was too tight across the shoulders. At least the tanned leather boots fit soundly. Apparently, Cid also had huge feet.

Cid spent a moment staring at his friend. Aside from some stiffness, residual aches, a pounding headache, and tiredness, he seemed undamaged by his close brush with death the night before. It was truly a miracle; Cid could find no other way to describe Cloud's miraculous recovery. That wound would have been fatal. Shortly after Reeve's mysterious phone call, they had awakened Cloud, tearing him from the sleep that had claimed him since he had lapsed into unconsciousness in Tifa's arms. He complained of no real pain once he had risen, although the first few steps from the bed had ended with his stumbling and Cid and Tifa catching him on the way down to the floor. The only thing bothering him was his pounding head and all his confusion. As Cloud fought off his dizziness and got dressed, Cid condensed his story about Malachai and Reeve's phone call into smaller version, trying to explain what was going on without having to get into any of the messy details. The whole team had been ecstatic to see him walk from Cid's room, dressed, pretty much cleaned up, alive and well. After that, everyone grabbed something to eat or some coffee, and they rushed to catch their ride. Seeing Cloud once again, the light in his eyes, hearing the voice that had so shrilly screamed in agony the night before... having him back breathed life into the team. They were once again whole.

Shera walked up to Cid and looped an arm about his waist. She was wearing a plain and modest wine colored work suit, her hair once again in a ponytail. Cid had refused to let her stay in Rocket Town alone, not with Malachai running loose with the Highwind at his fingertips. He wasn't about to let the rest of his happiness slip away.

"Where the hell are they?" moaned Yuffie, jiggling up and down with impatience.

Barret said darkly, a lot of old contempt registering in his voice, "Just like the damn Shinra. Always late."

They were silent again, watching the sunrise, feeling the cool breeze wash over them, and the wonder of the morning cleansed them of some heartache. Cid scanned the horizon. When they had left the house, the sun had barely shone itself, condemning much of the world yet to darkness. Now, he could see all around him, feeling the Planet come alive with morning. Birds squawked in the distance somewhere, flying above the grass. Crickets still sang their night time melodies, as if crying for the secure and comforting blanket of dark to once again cover them. In the distance, just barely visible through the morning haze, were the Nibel Mountains, rising above the land, towering with their gray, rocky peaks. It really was a beautiful morning, peaceful, soft, tranquil. It was almost surreal after what happened last night.

"Cloud?" Tifa's voice pulled him back to the group. She gently laid a hand on his shoulder. His eyes were still closed, his head bowed. "Are you alright?"

He cracked open his left eye and then his right slowly, glancing at her. He sighed. Ever since he had rejoined the living world nearly an hour ago, he had found everybody on the team watching his every movement with a hawk's eye, carefully taking in his posture, analyzing his body for signs of weakness or pain. It was understandable at first that they should be so concerned, but he was really feeling fine. They didn't need to worry so much. "I'm okay, Tifa."

Red watched him with a worried, doctor-like expression in his eye. "Is your headache still bothering you?" he asked easily.

Cloud threw his hands up into the air. "Will you all please stop?!" he said with a half laugh. "I am fine," he declared, smiling, a light in his eyes. He jabbed a fist resolutely to the spot where the arrow had sliced through him the night before, meeting hard bone and solid flesh. "It doesn't even hurt. That's the last time I'm saying it. You ask me again, and I'll ignore you." His voice was without threat, though, and he shut his eyes once more, resuming his stance of before.

Tifa grinned a little before hitting him with a whipped puppy expression. "I'm sorry," she said, forcing all the guilt and shame she could muster into her voice. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Cloud opened his eyes again and smirked. "I dunno," he said, putting his weight onto his left leg. "Depends on what you give me." He gave her a playful grin.

Tifa wrapped her arms around his neck and looked up into his eyes. "How about this?" She leaned up and kissed him passionately, pressing her lips hard against his. Cloud kissed her back just as hard. Finally, she broke the kiss, grinning at him.

Cloud slid his arms around her waist. "That'll do. You're forgiven."

"Thank you, sir," she said, gently twirling a lock of his hair between her fingers, smiling at him with a mischievous look in her sparkling, brown eyes.

Yuffie made a gagging face. "Ew, gawd. That was way up there on my sappy meter." Barret whapped her upside the head. "Hey!" she stammered, stumbling away from him, rubbing the back of her head. "What the hell was that for, you ass?!" she demanded.

"For being such a damn, inconsiderate kid," Barret said back.

Whatever Yuffie was about to retort was cut off by the howl of approaching engines. The group looked up to the rapidly lightening sky as two large helicopters neared them, slowing about twenty feet before them. The gray vehicles hovered, the grass billowing in violent waves in the wind. They were obviously military craft, probably troop transports. It looked as though a half dozen or so people could fit comfortably inside each. The Shinra logo glistened brightly on the side of each of them as their giant propellers slowed. The two craft set themselves on the ground gently, about ten feet apart. Their doors were slid open with a metallic noise that was inaudible over the howl of the wind, the sound of the propeller blades slicing through the air, and hum of the engines. A soldier stood in the door of one of the choppers, decked out in a Shinra uniform complete with a radio headset, motioning them closer.

The team made their way to the two transports, being whipped by the wind. Barret watched their backs for a moment and then glanced at the aircraft warily. He sighed indignantly. "The world's gone to hell when you find yourself getting a ride from the Shinra," Barret muttered as he scooped up Marlene and began to walk towards the waiting helicopters.

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Reeve took a sip from the steaming cup of coffee, the heat melding through the white porcelain and warming his hands. His eyes blank, he stared out the large window in his office that ran clear from the gray carpeted floors to the paneled ceiling. From his standpoint at the top of the Shinra towers, he could see Midgar fanned out below him. The rubble of the fallen plate upon Sector Seven was darkly contrasted against the brighter outlines of buildings and structures upon the other remaining plates. Construction crews worked below, giant cranes lifting titanic pieces of metal that had once composed the plate. A mess of debris lay on top of the fallen plate, what had been the homes, shops, buildings, and lives of those who had been living upon it when it had crashed down to the slums, killing hundreds, burying and crushing innocents, costing millions in gil of repair. Even now, a year after the actual incident, Sector Seven remained a graveyard, a treacherous place of rubble and death. Midgar had suffered extensive damage all around during Diamond WEAPON's

attack and Meteor's violent pounding. The repair had begun with restoring the high-rising Shinra towers, naturally. Most of the reconstruction done on the city, the cleaning, the repair of houses and city blocks, was paid for and carried out by the denizens themselves. Shinra had purposefully ignored the disaster of Sector Seven for as long as possible, dragging out each individual repair project. Perhaps it was out of shame. Perhaps it was out of dread at realizing how little work was done and how tremendous of an undertaking it was. Either way, Sector Seven lay desolate, baking in the sun, moaning in the rain and wind, dejected and destroyed, much as it had been the day the support was yanked from under it by the violent thunder of a bomb and the plate had come tumbling down into the world below.

We were such fools, Reeve mused, setting his coffee on his desk. He rubbed his chin and felt a tiredness brought on by heavy frustration and constant failure overcome him yet again. Sector Seven was one of the many problems in a great legacy the Shinra family had left behind for him correct. He was trying hard to rebuild Shinra and transform it from a leech sucking from the Planet and the people to a helping, benign, company that gave as much as it took. It was probably an idealist's dream, however. Though President Shinra and his son were gone, their ways and morals were still very much in place in the hierarchy of the company. Changing structure, protocol, initiatives, and premises was easy enough. Implementing them in such a way that transformed the present, faulty structure into a rigid code of conduct was far more difficult, especially with a group of people so set into their ways as the hierarchy of Shinra, Inc. Reeve felt as if he was pulling the entire weight of the company up hill, and all it was doing was dragging its feet.

And this new problem wouldn't make things any easier.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut. Three cups of coffee so far, and the only thing they managed to do was give him a distended bladder. He turned back to the three others occupying his office.

The Turks sat in the black leather chairs before his desk, each watching him keenly. They all had immediately changed and eaten upon their return to Midgar, refusing to speak a word until their personal needs were cared for. Elena's ankle had also been attended to by a doctor. They now sat, dapper and cool as ever, in his office, waiting for their find to provoke some kind of response from their president.

Reeve shook his head and leaned onto his desk. "Are you absolutely sure?"

Reno rolled his eyes. "Damn it, Reeve. Yes, I am sure. No matter how many times you ask me, it won't get rid of the problem. And the problem is: you got an Ancient running around loose."

Reeve almost winced as the truth was brought out into the light. The Turk was right, no matter how much Reeve disliked his blunt and arrogant frankness. Denying the problem wasn't going to make it go away. And with a situation like this, time could not be wasted on trivial and worthless ventures.

"And this Ancient destroyed that... thing that attacked you?" he asked about, for about the billionth time.

Elena sighed, clearly irritated by his childish response to the problem at hand. Reno leaned forward in his chair. "She killed it. And not by any normal means either. She had some kind of power and it put her into some kind of trance. I dunno. She didn't even seem to notice us until we were right in front of her."

Reeve rubbed his chin as he sat tiredly into his chair. "And you don't know what kind of power it was? Materia? Mako?"

Elena stood up suddenly, clearly tired of Reeve's constant and redundant drilling of the facts, as if he didn't trust the story coming from the Turks. "Look," she snapped, her voice full of indignant irritation, "this is getting us nowhere. Stop this bullshit. I'll explain it to you real clearly so you and your bureaucratic brain can understand. There's some naked woman walking around who clearly doesn't have a clue where she is or what she's doing here. She doesn't understand us and doesn't know who we are. Plus, she's obviously got some whacked out power that can destroy huge monsters with a single blow and that's probably the tip of the strength she has. To make things worse, she thinks she's an Ancient."

Reno shook his head, red locks of hair coming loose from the sunglasses atop his head that had been holding them back. "She could be one. How the hell do we know? For the longest time on this Planet, all we've seen of Ancients was that girl.

A being from another Planet hasn't come here since that thing that Sephiroth flipped out over. What was it called?"

"Jenova," Rude supplied obediently, his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses.

Reno nodded. "Jenova. How do we know what kind of powers they possess? And there's not a damn doubt in my mind that she came down in that craft the teams found out in the field. How else can you explain her appearance?"

It was a valid and logical conclusion that the craft they had located out in one of the huge grass fields between Kalm and Midgar was indeed the means through which she had appeared on the Planet. The craft hadn't as yet been examined by anyone, just as now being blocked off by a squad of Shinra troops ready for a person who had the expertise and knowledge to make a definitive analysis as to the nature of it. Unfortunately, everyone who had had enough experience and scientific background with Ancients, namely the team from the Jenova Project, was dead. That left a lot of questions and no one to answer them.

Reeve rubbed his forehead, trying to soothe the hurt brought on by lack of sleep and too much worrying. No amount of aspirin could make it disperse. He had a weary and dreaded sensation in his bones that it would remain until this new and very possibly devastating problem was remedied. "Did she say why she was here?" he asked, moving the massage of his fingers to his eyelids.

"Jesus, Reeve, she couldn't understand a single word we said!" Reno declared, his usual cool exterior blemished by a show of anger and frustration at the President of Shinra's total lack of initiative on this problem. The man seemed far more apt to review the facts, what little they had of them, than act. "She didn't go, 'Look, I'm an Ancient. Take me to your leader.' " Reno shook his head and went on with, "Like I said, the only word out of her mouth was 'Cetra'. That doesn't necessarily mean she is an Ancient, but I say there's a helluva lotta evidence pointing to that direction."

"The fact of the matter is," Elena said, her voice quieter more controlled as she sat back into her chair, "this woman, Ancient or no, is dazed and confused. We can't let her do something to the Planet, and we can't let her blunder into the wrong hands. You saw what happened with that Aeris girl. You saw what Sephiroth did. We gotta find this girl and send her back to where she came from real quick before anything else happens."

There. That was the truth of it. It was pretty clear that even in this new state, having such a source of unbelievable power would no doubt entice some of the Shinra hierarchy. Having another Ancient would only cause an exact repeat of what had happened with Sephiroth. Reeve seriously doubted that he could control any of the men that supported a regression to the old times in Shinra if they caught wind of this girl's existence. He had been privy to the wild struggle for power in both the Jenova Project and in Shinra itself when the Aeris' whereabouts had been discovered. He felt like he was a king, struggling to keep a country of power-hungry and barbaric warlords together. If any of them got a hold of a weapon that could seriously tip the scales in his favor, good-bye peace, hello world crisis. And Shinra could not afford another world crisis right then.

He opened his eyes again, feeling the weight of the world pressed upon his shoulders. What was possibly worse would be the fight to acquire this girl. No doubt something like this could split Shinra into small factions, enough to cause conflict and fighting everywhere. It could very well turn into a regular bloodbath. And what if this girl was there to destroy the Planet? Nobody knew of her intentions. It was certainly possible that she was an enemy to all the life on the Planet. The safest course of action, thus, would be to find her quickly and secretly and get her off the Planet as covertly as possible. And that would be no simple task. First of all, they had no idea where she was and only the Turks knew her description (although, he suspected, with a hair as long and green as they described and wearing only a jacket, she would probably be hard to miss). The world was a big place. Finding one girl within the millions inhabiting it would be the proverbial needle in a haystack. Locating Sephiroth, Reeve knew from experience, had been no easy task, and he had been far more conspicuous than this lone visitor might be. Tracing her movements could be near to impossible. But once they found her, how would they dispense of her? With the bribery and extensive spy network still running through Shinra beneath its legitimate façade, keeping a secret like this for long would be impossible. The key to this entire operation would clearly be the control of the information. Keeping things very tightly silent would ensure they could accomplish this task without friction or bloodshed. It could be disastrous otherwise, for Reeve knew if Shinra split, he would not come out on top. The company at the moment was nothing more than a hodgepodge. Some things had been left unattended to after Meteor.

Others had only been dealt with half way. The company had little order or structure, and what it did have the stubborn bureaucrats about which Reeve was worried ignored. If this tore the corporation apart, Reeve was positive he would be the first to go. All the money, resources, and supplies owned by Shinra would go to the highest "warlord". And that would be that. They would have nothing with which to fight. Yes, keeping this girl secret was imperative.

And then they had finding a way to get her off the Planet to think about.

One thing at a time, Reeve, he told himself. Worrying about things far in the future would do him no good. He had learned that a long time ago. A million things had to happen before they even got close to creating means by which they could get this girl, this very dangerous security risk, off the Planet. He would worry about that later. First he had to deal with finding this girl in a world full of people, tracing her movements across the globe. The sheer magnitude of the undertaking was astounding.

At least there was one positive highlight to the entire situation.

He had a group of people that had attempted this before, and done it successfully.

His secretary's nasal voice emanated from the intercom on his desk. "Sir, AVALANCHE is here to see you."

Finally. He jabbed his finger on the return button of the intercom box and said, "See them in."

A moment later the red, polished oak doors to his office swung open. In walked Cid first, a cigarette stuck between his lips. One hand was jabbed into his pocket, the other wrapped around Shera's slender fingers as she came in beside him. They both looked horridly tired, their eyes outlined in weariness and fatigue written into their statures. Barret with Marlene asleep in his arms followed. It still was awe-inspiring to Reeve to see the gruff, foul-mouthed man transition to a loving father so easily. Red XIII came in next, limping a little. Reeve assumed that he had been injured in the attack but saw no visible wounds on his body. Vincent followed and then Yuffie who was dragging her feet, her hair mussed. She appeared quite cranky. Reeve made a mental note to keep his distance from the ninja girl, not wanting to be the victim of Yuffie's sass. Cloud and Tifa came in last, both of which in clothes that looked none too comfortable. Reeve looked to the leader of the team. Cloud looked a little pale and tired but otherwise healthy, it seemed. Of course, Reeve knew none of the particulars of their attack last night. But Cloud seemed to be okay. They all did.

He smiled at his friends. "You guys made it. Are you alright?"

Yuffie crossed her arms across her chest and plopped onto the couch against the far wall indignantly. "If you call being dead tired, starved, and having a pounding headache alright, than I guess that's true," she mumbled. Then she fell to her side, using her arms as a pillow.

Reeve chose to ignore her. He looked to Cloud, watching him keenly for any clue of what had happened. He was curious to know the details but did not want to pry. "Are you alright?" he asked, unable to keep the concern from his voice. Cloud shot Tifa a tired, annoyed look. "I'm fine, Reeve. We're all fine," he said. The tone of his voice clearly meant the topic was no longer open for discussion. He folded his arms across his chest. "Now, what happened? Cid said it was about some Ancient. Is that true?"

Reeve bit his lip. For some reason or another, this problem was bothering him more than most. He couldn't place his finger on it, but he knew there was something wrong about the whole thing. In some ludicrous way, his mind seemed to believe that by ignoring it, it would go away. Illogical, yes, but then again, life was very rarely logical. In stead of leaping into the discussion, he stalled some more. "Barret," he said, turning to the big man at his left, "why don't you give Marlene to my secretary? She can take her to a room where she can-"

Barret's face tightened in rage, clutching Marlene's sleeping body protectively in his arms. "No way in hell I'm letting Shinra scum touch my-" Cloud laid a firm hand on his shoulder and shook his head as Barret looked back at him. "Ah, shit." He sighed, his shoulders sagging. He knew a lost battle when he saw one. This "AVALANCHE and Shinra allies" thing was going to take some getting used to.

Reeve's secretary, who had come in after the group, watching them suspiciously through beady black eyes that were partially obscured by red locks of hair falling over her brow, nodded at him. Her stout body pivoted on high heels of navy blue and she gestured towards the door. "Right this way, sir," she declared, her voice pinched.

Barret grunted and mumbled a low curse, glancing back at the team, before following the lady through the doors. They closed softly behind him with a dull thud.

Reeve turned back to the group assembled in his office. He politely offered, "Would any of you like some coffee or-"

"Dammit, Reeve, will you just cut to the chase?!"

The sound of Reno's voice caused all of AVALANCHE to look around Reeve's partial obstruction of the seats before his desk. Yuffie sat up on the couch as if jolted with a live wire. Her eyes widened as they found the three Turks sitting in the black leather chairs, then hardened with anger and disgust. "What the hell are they doing here?!" she demanded, standing with new found energy borne from fury, pointing wildly at them. Displeased malice was written into her form.

Elena stood, too, her face stone. Apparently, Yuffie's presence offended her equally so. "Watch your mouth, ninja brat!" she shouted back, stalking up to Yuffie, her hands clenched into fists.

"Bitch!" Yuffie shouted back, brandishing her Conformer, standing nose to nose with Elena. There was murder in her eyes. The tension was too thick to be cut by a chain saw.

"Whoa!" Cloud shouted, stepping between them. He held his hands up innocently, not wishing to provoke Elena, his back to Yuffie. "We don't need to fight!"

Red shook his head. "Cool it, Yuffie. It's not worth it," he said, coming up beside her. Despite his efforts to diffuse the volatile situation, his eye was warily watching the other two Turks approach. After all, the last time the group had encountered the Turks, they hadn't exactly been very friendly or benign. Throughout their quest for Sephiroth, the Turks had caused them continual problems, a constant irritating annoyance that slowed them down. Red hadn't much forgotten what Reno's nightstick felt like, the electricity jolting through him with a sharp pain unrivaled by much else.

Reno laid a hand on Elena's shoulder. "Let it go, Elena."

Icy glares were shot back and forth between the two women. Cloud eyed them both warily, feeling control of the situation beginning to slip. Gently, he said, "Whatever happened in the past is the past. Let's forget about it and move on. No hard feelings."

Silence fell over them as they stared each other down. It seemed to last forever, as if fate was contemplating on exactly what should happen right then. Yuffie, finally, broke her cold gaze and turned away, sighing in disgust. Through clenched teeth, she snapped malignantly as she headed back to the couch, "I don't care what happens here. As long as I don't have to be with her." She sat on the couch without grace, roughly folding her arms across her chest, pouting.

"Same here, twit," Elena retorted over her shoulder as Reno turned her away. It was enough, the catalyst that began everything.

Cid winced as Yuffie suddenly exploded, screaming at the top of her lungs every curse he knew and then some. He grimaced as his head began to pound, the barrage of foul, sharp words reverberating through his skull. Finally, she stopped, her face red. She sat back down on the couch and re-folded her arms across her chest, silently fuming.

It was silent for a moment, Yuffie's words echoing in the emptiness about the room and in their ears. Everybody was a bit taken aghast by that very unfeminine display. Reno regarded the girl with a shocked look on his face. "Geez, you should really consider seeing somebody about that problem."

"Why don't you just stuff it?" Cid said, taking a step forward. Yuffie wasn't his favorite of people in this world, but she was by far more preferable to him than any Turk. Especially one with as big an ego as Reno.

Shera laid a hand on his shoulder in a silent plead for restraint. Tifa shook her head. "Cid..."

"Why don't you, old man? And who the hell are you to tell me what to do?!" Reno retorted, stabbing a finger at Cid.

"Please, let's not fight-" Reeve moaned in a desperate attempt to hold onto the rapidly disintegrating situation. He should have seen this coming.

It was all in vain. A second later, everybody was arguing, insults were being thrown. The whole office was near to erupting in a full-fledged bar fight. The mesh of voices was so loud, nobody could hear anyone else. People no doubt on the street below were deafened by the yelling and cursing.

"Everybody, shut up!!"

The sound of Cloud's voice rising up over the din surprisingly silenced the group. Cid lowered a fist that was prepared to smash Reno's smug smile in as the young man's eyes narrowed. He glared each side down. Cid had never seen Cloud so utterly pissed in his entire life. "Will you all just stop?! Why can't you just get along, huh?" He glared at Yuffie, who had started it all. For a moment, both sides just stared at him in shock. The tension mounted. Cloud's eyes were full of maleficent intent. The moment dragged on. "We'll try this again, and this time let's keep it down to a dull head stomp." He gave each side another cold glare, his eyes seething unspoken threat if they should start a fight. He then turned to Reeve who was just as surprised as the rest of them. "Now, what happened?"

The shock faded. Reeve sighed silently with relief as both sides unclenched their fists and backed away, only staring coldly now. It seemed safe enough to speak again. He took a deep breath, thankful that Cloud had stopped the fight before it had turned violent. "A ship crashed to the Planet last night at around eleven," Reeve declared, watching the group. The anger slowly left their faces limp as they lost interest in the fight. He jabbed a thumb at the Turks. "They, and a group of guards, saw it."

"What sort of ship?" Tifa asked, coming up to stand beside Cloud.

Reeve shook his head. "We don't know. According to everyone we talked to, it looked like a shooting star," he said, confusion in his voice.

"That's right," Vincent suddenly said. Everybody turned to look at him in shock. Most had forgotten he was even in the room since he had remained in the background of the fight, flinging not one insult, shouting not one word, watching the scene without any visible display of emotion. He did not grow embarrassed at the attention he was now getting. "I saw it, too. Last night at your fence-" he gestured to Cid, "when I was watching the stars."

Cid eyed him strangely. "Why the hell didn't you say anything, damn it?"

Vincent shrugged in a weak but effective indifferent defense of himself. "I didn't think it was out of the ordinary. Stars fall all the time, don't they?"

"How often do they fall with naked women proclaiming themselves to be Ancients inside of them?" Elena asked, her voice full of sarcasm, her hands planted on her hips.

Everyone turned to look at her. Before Yuffie could mutter any kind of sharp demand for more information or insult, Cloud raised his hand, quieting them instantly. He looked to Elena and said gently, "Explain."

She, with help from Reno, told them of the experience last night in the woods. She elaborated on the girl and how they

had been attacked by that monster while looking for her. She did play down their inability to injure it quite a bit. After all, what was a Turk without his pride? Then she explained how the woman had killed it and stood there after, staring at them, not disturbed by her nakedness before complete strangers. Reno told the part where they had talked to the girl and she had said the only word they understood. "Cetra". Then she had fled. Rude had nodded occasionally during the story but supplied nothing himself.

There was silence after that. Then Cid, absorbing all of this, summarized with, "So there's another Ancient on the Planet and we gotta find her."

"Yes," Reeve said, nodding. "We can't let her fall into the wrong hands."

"Wait," Red said, shaking his head. "Aren't we jumping to conclusions? We don't even know if this girl is an Ancient."

"Weren't you listening, Red? She said-" Yuffie began, her young face fractured in confusion.

Red looked up at her. "What she said and what she meant could mean two completely different things. All she said was 'Cetra'. That could signify anything. I'll admit the evidence does point to your conclusion, but not undeniably so."

"Red's right," Cloud said. He looked to Reeve. "We gotta be sure. Any idea where she went?"

"None," Reeve declared. "All we have on her is the description the Turks gave us and the ship. It's being guarded by Shinra's finest troops."

Cid rubbed his chin. "Has it been looked at?" All things being equal, he wouldn't mind seeing a spaceship. Hell, it might get his mind off his missing Highwind.

"Not yet," Reeve admitted. "There's definitely some kind of writing inside. Unfortunately, all those that could understand it are dead."

Cloud's eyes grew distant with thought. There was silence for a moment, each waiting for another to break it. All thoughts were on the problem, old rivalries momentarily forgotten. Finally, Yuffie asked, "So what do we do?"

Red stood. "Our first order of business, I should think, would be to talk to those guards."

"Yeah," Tifa said, looking about the team for their reaction to the idea. "Maybe they can tell us something."

Reeve nodded and began towards the door. "I'll take you to them." They all followed as he pulled open the door, first the Turks then the team. Reeve told his secretary as he passed to hold his calls and cancel his appointments as he continued down the richly furnished hall. The team followed briskly, breaking into their own conversations, eager to investigate.

Barret suddenly came down the hall from the other direction, huffing, winded, back from putting Marlene to bed. His face broke as he saw the parade of people heading the other way. "What's going on?" he asked Reeve as he passed. The president didn't answer, in conversation with the Turks. Barret's brow knitted with disdain at their sight, but his confusion was more predominant. The team rushed passed him. "Wait! Guys, what's goin' on?!" None of them answered. "Damn it, wait!"

Tifa looked over her shoulder at him. "Come on, Barret! Quite being such a retard and hurry up!"

"Ah, shit," he muttered before following.