

Hell or High Wind

Chapter 4

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Almost an hour later, the group stood in a small office in the soldiers' barracks. It was sparsely furnished, without life or energy, the walls a dull, battleship gray, only a metal desk and a couple of chairs standing, lonely, in the center of the room. It was hardly big enough for the group to fit into. Cid idly compared the cramped conditions to a can full of sardines. Trite, yes, but entirely suiting. He stood, leaning back against the wall, between Barret and Yuffie, his arms folded across his chest. Way too close for comfort, in his opinion. He glanced about the rest of the room.

The three Turks stood on the opposite end, Reno with his back against the bulkhead behind him, one foot braced against it. His head was bowed, red falling haphazardly all around his face. He looked to be dozing off. Cid looked away from him in disgust to the other two. Elena stood beside him, her hands planting arrogantly on her hips, leaning to the right of her stance. She eyed AVALANCHE without trust or friendship, her eyes sharp and declaring that no matter what anybody did, she would never place any faith in them nor confide in them. So much for team work. The other Turk, Rude, just stood silently, whatever dark thoughts running through his head masked by cold, stoic indifference and the sunglasses that hid his eyes so well. Cid had never noticed before how waxen and flat his personality seemed to be. Then, of course, in battle one rarely pays attention to such aspects of his foe.

Red sat near the table, watching the guards to which Reeve had been alluding. He eyed them keenly, taking in their ruffled appearance. There were two men and one woman seated at the table, each a Shinra trooper by the looks of their blue uniforms. The oldest was seated on the left corner of the table. His face was gruff and unshaven, dark stubble covering his chin. Thick fingers that were stained with nicotine drummed against the table, creating a soft thud with no particular rhythm or melody. The woman beside him watched the group warily with dark eyes, her long brown hair falling lifelessly down her shoulders. She had the face of a gambler, one that could easily be holding the greatest cards in the world or at the same time be bluffing. And one would never know. Her jaw was obstinate and firm, her skin freckled. The final guard on her right was the youngest of the three. He looked nervous, gray eyes darting about and taking in his situation with a terrified fervor. Thumbs twiddled before him on the table restlessly. It was clear he had no idea why he, a lowly, young guard, had been called before the president and was dreading finding out.

Cloud stood near the end of one table, his arms folded across his chest. Tifa was beside him, eyeing each guard with an analyzing gaze, trying to learn as much as she could through appearance and demeanor. Vincent stood in the corner, his head bowed, no emotions betrayed by his face.

Reeve had been outside speaking with the commander of the troops for a few moments. The room was tense with an uncomfortable silence. The Turks and AVALANCHE stared brusquely at one another, fire from the fight still pulsing in their veins. And the guards trusted neither group, glaring at both ends of the room warily. It was so tense nothing could break it or offer any sort of repose.

Then, the door to the room opened with a creak and whine of hinges. Reeve stepped through, his hands in his pockets. The troops at the table immediately stood, their chairs scratching against the floor with the force of it. Cid winced at the sound; just one more thing pounding in his head. "President, sir!" they all boomed, saluting Reeve crisply.

The first soldier said stiffly, "Lieutenant Joseph MacNare, sir!"

The woman chimed after him, "Lieutenant Miranda Jay, sir!"

"Sir, Private William Basley, reporting!" the last soldier shouted. His voice was full of bravado that did a marginal job of masking his nervousness.

Reeve nodded at them, his face stern. "At ease, soldiers," he said plainly, stepping forward to table. At these words, the three troopers dropped their arms and fell into a relaxed stance, spreading their feet a bit, hands clasped behind their backs tightly. They still continued to stare past him almost blankly, as though looking directly into his eyes would be a great disrespect. Reeve sighed, irritated with damn military protocol, he being a businessman. "You can sit. You don't have to stand up like some god just walked in," he said, gesturing to their chairs tiredly.

The three soldiers looked a bit flabbergasted. They had been taught to greet commanding officers in this manner, with stern decorum and tight-lipped deference. It baffled them that their president was so annoyed and bothered by it. Glancing at each other, the three sat down slowly.

Once they were once again in their chairs, Reeve leaned forward onto the table. "This is AVALANCHE," he began, waving a hand at the group on the left side of the room. "And these are the Turks," he finished, as if the troopers needed reminding. Everybody in Shinra knew who the Turks were. Not only that, but most gave the three special agents a wide berth, unwilling to invoke any kind of silent and deadly wrath upon themselves by bothering them. "They, with my help, are investigating that craft you saw last night. It looked like a shooting star."

The three looked at each other with surprised and confused expressions on their faces. That more than anything signified that they had indeed seen the object in the sky. The young one, Basley, suddenly turned to Reeve, his eyes wide and his face, despite his uncomfortable feelings, was filled with pride. "I told you it was worth looking into," he said in a low voice, watching his two friends' muddled looks.

"What happened?" Red asked, watching the three.

They all looked a little taken aback by the creature, not realizing until now that it could speak. MacNare recovered more quickly than the others, turning back to Reeve. He didn't feel comfortable talking to a "dog". "We were playin' poker, you know. There was a light in the sky. It was really clear, so it was real easy to see."

"What kind of light?" Cloud queried, taking a step forward. He narrowed his eyes as he regarded the three.

The woman shook her head as she looked at him. "It just looked like a falling star. I swear, Mr. President, we were going to report it but..." She trailed off, a look of helpless apology on her face. Basley shot her an angry look, the glare in his eyes sharp and full of cold spite.

"But what?" Reeve asked. He felt his anger rise, twisting his stomach, pumping in his heart and filling his blood. "It was your job on that remote post to watch for anything out of the ordinary. Anything that might pose a threat to Midgar. Doesn't that qualify as out of the ordinary?"

The guards looked helpless. MacNare stammered, his face flushed with anger and shame, "It looked like a falling star. Basley here thought it was just a piece of Meteor--"

"A year after it blew up?" Cid shook head. "Not damn likely."

Reeve gritted his teeth and silently cursed these troopers. Had they followed orders and procedure and reported the falling object the night before, he could have had troops out to where it had landed in moments. The girl could have been contained immediately before getting the chance to escape. Now they had no idea where she was. Imagine the sheer amount of time, effort, and money that could have been saved if these three morons had done what they were supposed to! Reeve clenched and unclenched his fists in an effort to control his anger. "It doesn't matter what you thought it was. Just because it looked like a shooting star didn't necessarily mean it was! Do you have any idea what you have done?!" The soldiers flinched as he towered over them, anger flaring hotly in his eyes. He never lost his temper, never vented his rage or displeasure on others. He was not temperamental in the slightest, always remaining cool and composed when faced with a problem. But this... the thought that all of this could have been prevented just pissed him off beyond all comprehension. He suddenly realized how furious he was and ordered himself to keep cool. Taking deep breaths, he counted to ten silently in his head, closing his eyes. When he felt the need to smack these guards upside the head pass, he slowly peered at them again. Animosity and hostility would get him nowhere fast. "You had strict orders to report something like that. Why didn't you?" he asked with carefully controlled displeasure.

"I'm sorry, sir," the woman stammered, embarrassment and confusion on her face, her eyes quizzical. Why were they receiving such a chastisement and scolding for this? It hardly warranted a reprimand. However, knowing what that falling object had truly been made quite a difference.

Reeve licked his lips. His temper was quickly slipping through his fingers with every unsatisfactory answer from these troopers. "That is simply unacceptable. You will be strongly reprimanded for this. You ignored procedure and failed to

inform Commander Hastings of what you saw. That is beyond unsatisfactory. It's despicable."

MacNare suddenly looked up from the tabletop he had been eyeing in shame. His face was tight with indignant anger at being treated so harshly for, in his opinion, anyway, no reason. "With all due respect, sir," he snapped, unable to keep the malice from his voice despite the fact he was speaking to the president, "what's the big deal? It was just a shooting star, wasn't it?"

With that, Reeve backed off. He suddenly realized he was only taking his anger out on these soldiers. It wasn't really their fault. How could it have been? If he had been witness to the sight in question, would he have labeled it as more than a simple falling star, tumbling from the heavens to burn brightly in the upper atmosphere? Would he have acknowledged it for anything more than its momentary beauty and grace? Would he have questioned the wonder of Mother Nature before him? Would he have called it in?

No. He wouldn't have.

He stepped away, suddenly exhausted. He closed his eyes again, wishing desperately that this problem would just go away. He was so very tired of dealing with constant emergencies, constant conflicts and fights, constant disruptions of peace. He was so damn tired.

"Hey, Reeve, man, are you alright?" Cid's voice pulled him from the dazed state under which his mind had been. He opened his eyes again and looked around. It was all still there. AVALANCHE stood there, all watching him with some measure of concern, all except Yuffie, who had sour irritation written all over her face. And the Turks were still there, as well, regarding him impatiently. Wishing hadn't worked. Hoping hadn't worked. When fate refused to intervene, men must take charge. What other options were there? How many great men in history had stood by waiting for their lives to change? None. The situation would not go away. It was time to acknowledge it and deal with the problem.

"Yes," he said, looking to Cid for a moment. "Yes, I'm fine." Cid's face relaxed; that seemed to assuage and satisfy his concerns for he asked no further. Reeve turned back to the guards. He was still angry, yes, but less than before. There was no sense in holding these troops accountable for something over which they had had no control. They couldn't have stopped that craft from crashing to the ground with an explosion of land that would no doubt leave a lasting impact on the life of the entire Planet. They had had no will to intervene or to prevent this. It was most likely destiny that this crisis should appear now. Reeve operated himself under the impression that everything happened for a reason, often too abstract and obscure for him or humanity to understand, but a reason nonetheless. And what control did people, much less these lowly guards that only concentrated on receiving their weekly pay, have over fate?

"You're dismissed," he said darkly, a gruff tone of disdain in his voice, to the guards. They glanced at one another, still confused by the turn of events, and stood. Quickly, they made their way to the door, not looking at any of the other people in the room. The portal slammed shut with a bang.

Cid looked to Cloud, lack of understanding written clearly on his face, his blue eyes cluttered, as if to ask "what was that all about?". Cloud only shrugged neutrally, chewing his lower lip in thought.

Yuffie grunted, her face locked into a pouting expression, "Well, that was a waste of time."

"Damn straight," Barret declared, folding his arms across. "They don't know shit about shit."

Reno suddenly lifted his head and pushed himself off the wall. "That was frightfully illuminating, my good man," he said with mock deep respect in his voice. Barret glared at the Turk with murder in his dark eyes, his face tight with rage. He took a step forward, raising his gun arm, obviously intending to fill the arrogant, smug jerk so full of lead, he'd be a red colored pencil. But Cloud shot him a pleading glare and Barret only backed down reluctantly, muttering things that should not be repeated in front of small children to himself. Reno sighed and jabbed his hands into his pockets. The movement of his suit jacket caused his gun to be exposed in the florescent lights of the room, the metal holster gleaming wickedly in the illumination. "So what do we do now?"

Reeve only bowed his head in weariness, desperate for an idea, a panacea, but unwilling to think of one himself.

Red paused thoughtfully. If he could manage such a thing as purse his lips, he certainly seemed to do so, his eye distant and clouded with pondering. "Did you say something was written on that ship, Reeve?" he asked.

Reeve stopped rubbing his brow tiredly and opened his gray eyes slowly, lifting his head to look at Red. "Yes, in passing. It looks like Cetra text." His heart rose in hope. "Red, can you read it?"

The whole team suddenly became interested, turning from the storms of their own private thoughts to look at Red as he answered, almost sheepishly, "Somewhat. Bugenhagen could read, speak, and translate it fluently. How do you think he knew so much about the Lifestream and the Planet? He read a lot of books written by Ancients." Nanaki shrugged neutrally. "Being his grandson, I learned a little from him. One couldn't be around him as often as I was and not learn. Bugenhagen was a wellspring of knowledge of all kinds." He saddened and grew silent, soft grief, longing, and loneliness in his voice. He let out a little wistful sigh. It was obvious he missed his grandfather, his mentor and friend, more than he let on to.

Cloud stepped up beside him, one arm across his chest, the fingers of his other rubbing his chin. He pulled his hand away and lifted it to Red. "If you can read what's on that ship..." He didn't finish; it wasn't needed. It was clear that if Red could understand what was written on that ship it would be a great boon. Perhaps they could determine for sure if this woman was indeed an Ancient. Better yet, maybe they could understand why she had come and for what she was looking.

Red shook his head. "Don't get the wrong idea," he admonished quickly, somewhat embarrassed. "I'm far from functional in the language. I might be able to get a few words from here and there..." He looked around, noting the fallen expressions of those around him, hopes plummeting.

It was silent for a moment. "Well," Cid finally offered, leaning up from the wall. "It's better than nothing." He pulled a cig from his pack but caught Barret's sharp look and, with an inward groan, jabbed it back inside the crushed, flattened box in a plastic wrapper. According to Barret, this room was too enclosed and cramped for him to smoke. "There wasn't enough air circulating through it", or some damn thing like that, for him to lit one up. He was dying for a smoke! Worse, his head was pounding in time with his heart, he was starved, and his body was aching like there was no tomorrow.

And no matter how hard he tried to concentrate on this Ancient thing, all he could think about was the Highwind. He felt he could feel every harsh finger Malachai laid on her poking into his own side, every damned word that left his mouth and that she was forced to listen to filling his skull. What if Malachai destroyed her? What if that bastard stripped her and raped her delicate machinery and soft innards, forcing her to become something that she wasn't? Who knew what Malachai could have been doing to his ship right then? Every second he had his grimy hands on her seemed to tick like a countdown in his head. A countdown until she was gone forever.

Shera, before she had been sent to bed by Cid, had told him not to worry. She had wanted to accompany him as they looked further into this Ancient predicament, but he hadn't allowed it, ordering her to rest. Besides, getting her involved in a situation that could very possibly turn south and get drastically dangerous at any moment was the last thing he wanted. He almost wished she was there now, to help him get his mind off of his missing ship. But there was no repose from the worries buzzing about his head, plaguing him like mosquitoes intent on biting him and sucking his blood dry. No, all he could feel was some abstract clock ticking down time in between his ears, a bleeding painful headache, a stiff protest from all over his body at every slight movement, and his damn cravings for some damn nicotine.

He would have told them there was a chocobo running around outside with a tutu on if it would have gotten the team out of that room any quicker.

Thankfully, it didn't need to go that far. "Well, I suppose we ought to go take a look at that ship then," Tifa supplied, wondering why, after that revelation, they were all just standing there and not racing to the crash site. "Cid's right; it won't hurt to look."

Elena folded her arms across her chest, a lock of blonde hair falling before her eyes. "No, it will only waste time. What we should be doing is heading out and scouting the area."

"We don't know where she is," Cloud declared with a sharp look in his eyes. Despite his attempts to be friendly and open with the Turks, he was clearly also displeased with their reckless and restless attitude.

Elena gave him a sour, disbelieving look, curling her lower lip. "How far can she possibly walk?" she demanded, sarcasm and irritation in her voice. "And she's probably exhausted. She doesn't have any money, clothes, or food. She isn't going to go far."

Red stood. "The fact of the matter is," he began, his usual calm and collected voice tinged with annoyance, "we don't know what she is. We can't just very well approach a woman who is obviously very dangerous. And what's to say she'll let us approach her to begin with?"

Reno shook his head. "She came to me," he said evenly, matter-of-factly. His face lost his smirk and arrogant charm, changing to a dead serious placid expression Elena had only seen upon it a few instances in the past. "She might again."

Barret humphed, darkly crossing his arms over his chest and staring menacingly to the floor. "What makes you so goddamned special?" he wondered, his voice low.

"I don't know." Barret actually looked up and regarded Reno, surprised that the other had actually answered that question, especially without insult or sharp retort. The look on Reno's face and in his form was completely uncharacteristic; he seemed genuinely confused. He gazed up at them, for once staring without conceit, anger, or threat in his gaze. For a moment, he seemed like he truly wanted to act, wanted to understand, wanted to be a part of it but not out of personal gain or love. He wanted to help. Barret shook his head. There was a lot more going on here with Reno than he saw. "For some reason, she trusted me. Maybe if I see her again, I can get her to trust me again."

Elena sighed heavily. "Whatever. At any rate, looking at some crashed ship isn't going to help."

"How would you know?!" Tifa snapped. She was getting just a little tired of Elena's snobby, pushy, know-it-all attitude.

Reeve raised a hand before anybody could say another word. He closed his eyes in an attempt to control his temper for the second time that day. If they did not have time for something, it was petty bickering based on old grudges and emotional baggage. He looked up at Elena. "Alright. Since you have no patience, I'll send you Turks to Kalm. Ask around there if they've seen the girl. Report back here immediately."

Elena's face broke in pleasure at Reeve's final decision to act. "Yes, sir," she said gleefully, cracking her knuckles. Cid moaned inwardly. Oh, brother, he thought as he watched the Turks rally like a football team about to charge valiantly onto the field. Together, the three began to the door, the thought of an actual mission feeding them with energy and excitement. Reeve winced. "And try to be tactful!"

Reno smiled, that cocky grin once again returned to his face to replace his moment of tolerability before. He stopped in the doorway to call over his shoulder, "Hey, 'tact' is my middle name." Then he slammed the door behind him and they were gone. What an exit.

Yuffie pouted with a soft voice, "More like 'asshole'."

Reeve chose to ignore her comment, silently thanking whatever gods there be for Yuffie's ability to keep that little observation to herself until after the Turks had left. Instead, he opted to concentrate on the present problem. "We'll head out to the ship, then," he declared, not leaving much room for question but looking up to see confirming nods from the group anyway.

"Before we go," Tifa said, trying to pull the white shirt she wore a little further down her chest, as if she could stretch the fabric to accommodate her better, "I'd like to get some clothes from our house, if you don't mind." She glanced to Cloud who also looked rather uncomfortable in Cid's garments, used to his own size and cut. "And Cloud and I need our weapons and materia. It's obvious that we'll need to be armed for this situation if it should turn--"

Reeve waved her off. "Already taken care of."

Tifa's face broke in confusion. She glanced at Cloud. "What?" he asked, regarding Reeve strangely.

"I sent men to your house in Kalm this morning. They got enough clothes for the both of you and your weapons. As we speak, guest rooms are being prepared for all of you in the towers. The finest, I assure you. We can change, get something to eat quickly, and go--"

"You what?!" Tifa asked again, her eyes alive with anger. Cloud immediately backed down, pitying Reeve. Tifa was beautiful when she was angry, her face so serious and dark, her eyes flashing violently, her full lips compressed into a thin line. She was also decidedly dangerous if she was furious. She could fight, verbally and physically, with the best of them, not a toy to toil with. He had seen her blunt wrath before. She always told him that she could never stay angry at him. She said that one look at his eyes, and she'd just pool in his hands. Their fights, however few, always ended up with a passionate kiss and a heart-felt apology on both their parts. But Cloud had seen her angry at other people not as fortunate to be loved by her. And those he felt sorry for. "You let soldiers into my house without permission?"

"Tifa, I didn't want to--"

"I didn't give you the key to it for that reason, Reeve!" she yelled. The look on her face couldn't have been dented by a blowtorch. "You let soldiers come into my house, look through my closets at my clothes, touch my weapons... No, that's not even important! Those ruffians could have stolen something! You should have asked first! Friends don't send their guards into their friend's houses!"

Cloud winced. Cid shook his head and stepped forward. "Look," he snapped tiredly, "can we fight about this later? Right now, I'm starved, damn it!" He fumed, staring at both of them. Grabbing the metal knob of the door, he yanked it open for everybody to walk through.

Reeve used this as a convenient excuse to vacate from Tifa's ire. "Sure. Let's go," he stammered, backpedaling and heading to the door.

Cloud stepped up behind Tifa, grinning, proud of her. He wrapped his arms around her abdomen and pulled her to him, kissing her cheek. "Yeah, you tell him," he said softly.

Barret muttered something as he headed out the door, followed by Yuffie. The thought of food rejuvenated her. "I want something good, Reeve," she said on her way out. "None of that Shinra cafeteria crap, you understand me? Fine food." Her voice grew distant in the hall.

Red shook his head as he followed. Vincent trailed behind, having remained silent as he often opted to do. Tifa grabbed Cloud's hand. "At least I can change now," she said. "This shirt is way too small."

He gave her a lopsided, stupid grin, his blue eyes dancing with mischievous mirth. Her jaw dropped as she whapped him playfully upside the head. "Don't even say it, Cloud Strife." She stalked past Reeve and jabbed an accusing finger at him. "Due to the fact we have a world crisis on our hands, I will refrain from kicking your ass." Then she walked out. Cloud shrugged at him before following.

Reeve was a little ashen. "Women," he breathed softly. Cid could only nod as the president began out the door. He glanced up at Cid for a moment, narrowing his eyes. "What's in your hair?" he asked.

Confused, Cid raked a hand through it, the sticky blond strands running stiffly and through his fingers. He pulled his hand away and held it before his eyes, inspecting the tiny red flecks on his skin. He paled a little. "I need a shower," he groaned before following Reeve out the door, letting it shut behind him.

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An hour later, the two helicopters gently set down in a field, the long strands of grass around them cushioning the large metal platforms of the craft as they touched the ground. The props began to slow, their deafening noise gradually lessening. Finally, the engines died with a wail of powering down machinery, and the large blades stopped slicing through the air.

The large doors on the sides of helicopters opened, and AVALANCHE, freshly showered, changed, and fed, stepped out into

the bright noon day illumination.

"God damn sun," Cid growled, wincing as his vulnerable eyes wracked in their sockets in the sudden increased light, shielding them with his forearm. "Always gotta be so god damned bright." The cigarette shifted up and down between his lips with every word.

The rest of the team filed out, each with a wince or a muttered curse at the brightness of the world around them. There was not a cloud in the sky, nothing to block the piercing rays of the sun and provide any relief to the world below. Reeve was the last to emerge. As the others fought with the sharp pain of adjusting eyes and the irritating afterimages that plague one's vision after being exposed to bright light, he simply slipped on some dark sunglasses. Stepping through the group, he began walking through the field. "It's this way."

Sighing, Yuffie began to follow. Red walked beside her, stepping nimbly through the tall grass. Cid, grabbing the haft of the Venus Gospel tightly, followed, his eyes narrowed, puffing darkly on his cigarette. Barret walked at his side, with Vincent not far behind.

Tifa stared at Cloud for a moment, watching as he rubbed his forehead, his face tight with a grimace. "Cloud?" she said softly, laying a hand on his arm in concern. "Cloud, are you alright?"

He opened his eyes and gazed at her. For a moment, he regarded her with a blank stare, as if he was looking at her but not truly seeing her. Tifa was startled by this, concern written all over her pretty features. Then Cloud shook his head as if to clear it, and his bright blue eyes focused on hers. "Yeah," he finally answered, exhaling loudly. His voice sounded... different to her. Strained.

She rubbed his arm up to his shoulder compassionately, feeling his strong muscles brought on by years of heavy sword-fighting tense under her firm fingers. "Headache bothering you?"

He closed his eyes again, rubbing his forehead once more, and nodded slowly. No assurances about how fine he was passed his lips that were now compressed into a tight, thin line. That more than anything told Tifa that he was in real pain.

She reached up and laid a gentle palm across his forehead. No fever. Fearful that something was wrong, she asked, forcing a wistful note in her voice as if pleading with him to accept her offer, "Do you want to go back?"

The bright blue eyes opened to her again. "No," he said with a weary sigh. He gave her a weak smile. "I'll be okay, Tifa. Really."

She seemed doubtful, watching him sigh and blink his eyes repeatedly. What could she say to him to convince him to rest? His injury the night before wasn't something to take lightly. He had nearly died. Although the materia had removed any trace of the wound, it was likely he was not completely healed as of yet. He needed more rest than five hours of sleep. He should see a doctor. But if there was one thing that made Cloud nervous, it was other people fretting over his health. He didn't like having anybody, much less physicians, push and prod him, this strong aversion most likely brought on by his years in captivity under Hojo's scientific wrath, experimented upon and examined by countless doctors. It was hard to get him to acknowledge his hurt and rest. Often, his reluctance to allow his body efficient time to heal only made it worse. She hoped this time he would take it easy for at least a few hours. Knowing Cloud's objectives during a potentially dangerous situation as this, which was namely to put everybody's welfare above his own, she found that his resting, how ever much she wished it, would not be so.

Cold fear washed over her as Cloud winced again, a distant look returning to his eyes. She hadn't seen him like this... since those headaches accompanied by those trance-like memories during the quest to stop Sephiroth. She suddenly felt the need to be assured that it wasn't that, that it wasn't memories resurfacing from a storm of Mako and mist in his head, that it wasn't the voices or Sephiroth trying to control his mind. "It isn't that, is it?"

It wasn't very clear to what she was alluding, but Cloud understood, seeing the look of extreme worry, terror, and dread in her eyes. He grabbed her hand tightly, squeezing her fingers in gentle reassurance. "No, Tifa. It's just a headache. Those went with Sephiroth. Trust me."

She did trust him, more than any other. He would know the difference between a simple headache and that more than anyone. If he said it was just a headache, then it was. No reason to doubt.

Then again, she could remember countless instances in the year before when he had lied about how okay he was while the headaches and the voices and the memories tore him up.

"Hey, love birds!" Barret hollered, standing about twenty feet in the distance. They looked up to him. "Hurry it up!" He muttered a low curse and then turned away, heading towards the crashed craft.

Cloud and Tifa rushed to catch up.

Cid walked steadily, his eyes on the ground, watching it blankly as it disappeared under his rhythmically falling feet. Every footfall, every step of crunched grass beneath his boot, was one less he could use to find the Highwind. "Damn emergency," he muttered beneath his breath. He felt more and more of a need to search for his ship every second he spent searching for the Ancient. "Always gotta come at the most damn wrong times."

Yuffie stopped up ahead, wiping the sweat from her brow. It was alarmingly hot beneath the burning sun despite a cool breeze wafting through the grass like traveling spirits. She squinted. "That it?" she wondered.

Cid looked up to see what she had found, the Highwind momentarily forgotten. There, about ten feet away, surrounded by blue Shinra troops barring heavy rifles, was a small craft, in the shape of an oblate sphere. It was about the size of a car, around seven feet in diameter. The exterior of it was a gleaming metal of some composition, the silver surface glinting to the point of blinding in the sunlight. Parts of the outside was singed and blackened, most likely caused by the intense heat of entering the atmosphere. The bottom of it, nestled in the long grass, was dented, scraped, and cracked. Cid could see why as he stepped closer, noticing, with a bit of shock, deep grooves in the land extending a good five hundred feet behind it, soil, grass, and rocks crushed, flattened, and ripped up from their homes in the land.

Barret stood beside him, scratching his head. "What the hell is it?" he asked.

"It... it looks like a giant..." Cid fumbled for the right word, his face scrunched up in concentration. Finally, he spit out, "egg."

Yuffie shook her head. "No way," she said. "It looks like a giant materia."

"Yuffie, to you, everything looks like materia," Red declared as he stepped up closer to the mysterious craft.

One of the soldiers stepped up, blocking Red's access, hefting his weapon with authority.

"Who are you?" he demanded. A couple of others that had been patrolling the area approached, staring them down. "I can't let you in here unless you have permission from the-" Reeve emerged through the group. The guard, a bit shocked, gave a crisp salute. "Mr. President, sir!" He was obviously surprised to see Reeve with these strangers. "The area is secure, sir!" he stammered.

"Good," answered Reeve, dabbing his forehead. "These people wish to examine the craft. Help them with whatever they need."

The guard seemed a little dubious, eyeing the group suspiciously. Far be it from him, though, to go against the orders of the President of Shinra. The soldiers parted, allowing AVALANCHE to pass through and approach their charge. Barret gave them a wide, triumphant smile as he walked by.

Cid stepped up to the small craft, eyeing it doubtfully. "And this is what that Ancient crashed in?" He shook his head, tossing his cigarette butt after making sure it was no longer lit. "Da-amn. I was expecting something a little bigger."

Vincent, who had been silent for most of the trip as usual, approached the strange object. He pulled his hand from his glove and gently laid it upon the shiny surface. Cid winced; it must have been burning hot to the touch baking out in the sun all day. However, Vincent did not yank his hand away, touching and feeling the exterior. "It's amazingly smooth. There's no grain or imperfections in the metal."

Cid raised an eyebrow. "That's damn strange. All metal usually has got some flaws." He walked the perimeter and then crouched, running fingertips at the base. "No seams. How the hell is this stuff attached?" He thumbed a particularly deep crevice, gouged in by some rock no doubt. "And she don't look like it, but this ship's got a tough hide. I woulda expected a lot more damage from a crash slide that long."

Cloud stepped closer, his hands on his hips. The Ultima Weapon gleamed wickedly in the sun where it was strapped to his back. "You said there was writing on this thing, Reeve?"

Reeve nodded and led them all to the opposite side of the craft, the side facing the long tracks in the ground. He pointed a finger to one spot on the outside about halfway down the circumference of the sphere. From a distance, it melded completely in with the rest of silver casing, imperceptible. On closer observation, though, carvings in the metal could be seen. It was indeed some form of writing, alien and obscure to those on the Planet. The letters had a more flowing texture and shape to them, like waves on an ocean.

"I'll be damned," Barret muttered.

Red peered at it closely, his one eye narrowed as he analyzed the text he saw. "It's definitely Cetra writing," he said after a tense moment in which the team waited anxiously for his conclusion.

"Can you read it?" Tifa asked, watching Red as he stared at the long strands of unintelligible characters.

Red turned away and glanced at them briefly. "I can understand a some words here and there. Give me a few moments."

So they did. Yuffie sat cross-legged in the grass beside Red as he struggled to translate the writing. Tifa talked with Reeve and the soldiers about what had been done to the craft since it landed, finding out that nothing in it or on it had been touched. Reeve explained to her that upon finding the craft, some sort of door had been open. When the soldiers looked inside, though, it shut mysteriously. Nobody knew how to reopen it. Barret leaned on the ship like he would a post, with complete disregard for what it might contain or who might own it.

Vincent returned after walking the length of the tracks. The craft had plowed straight through a thicket full of trees and brush, destroying trunks, tearing limb from limb the life of the forest. The force with which this small ship had hit the ground must have been incredible for something of that size to do that amount of damage. He approached Cid and Cloud, who stood by the tracks. Neither had spoken since Vincent had left them to scout out the deep gouges in the earth, Cid smoking his cigarette, Cloud closing his eyes and rubbing the nape of his neck. The red-caped man returned, walking alongside the upturned grass and soil. "It's incredible," Vincent said lowly, turning back to look at the tracks. "This tiny craft plowed through trees like a knife through butter."

Cid fingered his recently lit cig, blowing a stream of smoke into the breeze. "Amazing it got down in one piece." He looked to his comrades for some kind of reaction and was surprised to find Cloud's eyes still closed. Cid's brow furrowed in confusion and concern. He couldn't have sworn to it, but it looked like the young man was shaking a little. "Cloud," he said loudly. He put a hand on his friend's shoulder when his words failed to get his attention. Cloud's eyes snapped open. He looked awfully pale, sweat beading across his brow. "Hey, man, are you alright?"

For a moment, Cloud did not seem to have heard him. Then he responded quickly with, "Yeah. Fine. What were you saying, Vincent?"

Vincent regarded him oddly for a moment, not having missed the uncertainty and waver in his friend's voice. He only shrugged it off, though, as he continued. "It must have been a very bumpy ride for whoever was in there."

"Shit," Cid said, stepping closer. "In a craft that size? Bruises and cuts would be the least of it."

Cloud swallowed hard; his mouth tasted like sandpaper. "But Reno didn't say anything about the woman being injured. God, it's hot out here."

"Damn straight," Cid muttered, flicking yet another cigarette butt away.

Vincent's eyes narrowed. "If the girl wasn't injured when they saw her," he said, bringing them back to the conversation, "then she must have healed herself somehow."

Cid's eyes widened. "Damn it, Vince, ya know ya can't do that without materia. Nobody can just heal themselves."

"How do we know?" Cloud asked, raising his hands in a neutral shrug. "She could. If she is an Ancient, and from another Planet at that, what do we know of her powers? According to the Turks, she killed a monster that could easily match all of us with no visible weapons or strengths. Nobody we understand can do that, either."

Vincent nodded, his long black hair wavering in the breeze. "Cloud has a point, Cid," he agreed. "We don't know anything about her anatomy, powers, or genetics. We can't make any conclusions on her based on humanity because she is clearly not human. At least, not as we know it."

Cid shook his head. That was all beyond him, too abstract for him to grasp. All he cared about was finding the woman, superhuman or no, and finding the Highwind, preferably not in that order.

Yuffie jogged up to them, winded. "Hey," she said. "Red's got something." Giving each other nothing more than a glance, they headed back to the pod. Cid pulled the collar of his shirt away, feeling sweat soak into the cloth. The sun beat mercilessly down upon them, relentless in its quest to make this day as uncomfortable as possible. He looked to Cloud who seemed sick with heat, his eyes glazed a bit and his face flushed. Cid supposed he himself looked about as nice. If Vincent was at all uncomfortable, he did not show it. He must have been with those heavy clothes and that dragging cloak on. So must have been the soldiers, dressed in hot, itchy uniforms, too tight to breathe in, those masks covering their faces and cutting off the oxygen.

They reached the ship, Tifa, Barret, and Reeve already standing about Red. Cid held the Venus Gospel in one hand, leaning upon the ship with his other. Cloud drew his sword from the sheath on his back and rammed it with a heavy thud into the ground, leaning on it tiredly. Carrying that huge thing must have only made him hotter, Cid realized as he watched the young man rub his eyes.

"What have you got, Red?" Cloud asked.

The creature looked up and licked his lips. "Well," he began, turning to face the group surrounding him. "I can only make out a very few words but enough to be helpful. This one here..." He jabbed his muzzle to a character on the ship. It was a sweeping loop topped by a line that ended in a sharp point on one end. A lone dot appeared in the middle of the majestic symbol. "This means 'Cetra'."

"So she was an Ancient, then," Barret concluded, his deep rumble coming from beside Yuffie.

Red gave a small nod. "I believe so." He indicated to another shape, this one a square with some lines about it. "This one indicates 'search', or, more precisely, 'seeker'. Then we see Cetra again beside it..." Red pointed that out. They all looked closer. "And this circle symbol here means 'the Planet'."

There was silence for a moment. Then Tifa said, a little uncertainty in her voice, "So she came here looking for something."

Red sighed. "I think so."

"What?" Reeve asked, rubbing his chin.

"I don't know," Red answered, a little disappointed in himself. "I can't make the rest of it out. Cetra appears a few more times in the text but without the context..."

"It could mean anything," Vincent finished.

Red nodded solemnly. There was more emptiness as the team contemplated this. They all wracked their minds for a reason. What could she be searching for? Where was she headed? All tried to unlock the puzzle.

Except Cid, that is. His mind was with the Highwind. God, he was so worried. He had never felt so alone, so depressed and hopeless, so utterly... naked, like a part of himself he could never replace had been stolen. He was miserable. And when Cid Highwind was miserable, he wanted others to know about it. "I miss my baby," he whined.

They all turned to look at him, shocked that he had brought that up. It had nothing to do with the Ancient with which their minds were all occupied. Cid's expression was one of a half pout, half grimace. He looked like he was about to cry. Imagine that: a man as gruff and tough as Cid Highwind about to weep like a baby.

"Oh, Cid," Yuffie shot back, disgusted at him. "Grow up. We'll get the damn ship back. This is more important. Gawd."

Cid flared with anger. "Damn it, Yuffie! You try losing something you love, and we'll see how happy you are then!" Cid's face was beat red with rage. "My poor baby could be laying in a god damn scrap pile and you don't give a damn! #*\$%^&!!!"

It was all so far away.

Cloud felt the whole world pitch and turn about him, the flawless sky spinning above him in endless loops. Nausea, dizziness, and heat sucked the strength from his muscles, leaving him with a weightless, weak feeling of being split from his body. His head was pounding violently in time with his heart, blood thundering between his ears. The noise seemed distant; he could hear it but could not focus on it or make out the words being shouted. It was as if the world was slipping away through his fingers.

Tifa had noticed that Cloud was blinking his eyes rapidly and swaying on his feet. "Cloud," she said, knowing immediately that she had been right. He wasn't well enough yet for this, and now heat exhaustion would help no less! "Cloud, are you alright?!"

He was trying to stay focused. His vision was red and blurry. He wanted to answer but his mouth could not make words form. He felt like he had swallowed a gallon of paint. Rubbery, weak knees suddenly gave out and he fell to the ground, landing on his back hardly with a thud, the breath rushing from his body.

"Shit," Cid moaned, his argument forgotten as he saw Cloud pass out. "Not again."

Tifa knelt frantically beside him, a hand on his forehead. The team gathered around their once again fallen leader. "Cloud," she said, worry in her eyes, a question on her lips. Sweat rubbed onto her fingers. His eyes were open but staring blankly at the sky above. He did not seem to see her. "Cloud, can you hear me?"

Could he? Everything echoed in his ears. Deeper voices shouted, booming with his heart. He just wanted to sleep on the soft grass, his body exhausted and weak. And he was so hot. Absently, he turned his cheek to the green grass, the cool blades leeching a bit of the fever from his skin. Thus when a cold darkness fell upon him, he welcomed it, allowing it to envelope him, caress him, consume him, and turn him away from this world until the burning ball overhead that so painfully scorched his skin, wracked his eyes, and burned his lungs as he breathed the air, turned black with the coming of night.