

Hell or High Wind

Chapter 5

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The waves pounded the hull of the ship with the all but restrained ferocity of an oncoming storm. Round after round of violent water slapped the small vessel, relentlessly wishing to bash the stern of the craft in. As ominous as the dark, blue, foaming waves looked and as malevolent as the building thunderheads in the distance seemed, those on board the fishing vessel were not worried. Their small but sturdy ship had endured far worse, and, like any good boat, she had the complete trust of her sailors.

At the moment, a few of those loyal men stood at the starboard railing of the ship watching the ocean below them churn violently and furiously, the dark waters swirling and splashing about with a clear warning to any weary sailor that dangerous weather was on the horizon. The two men found it all too true as they looked to the east. The black clouds were collecting as if drawn to each other, their tops spiking sharply, rising towards the heavens as though they were evil hands reaching to snatch the peaceful light of the stars. They promised pounding rains, booming thunder, flashing lightning, and gales of wind. The sense of foreboding one felt upon the observation of the building thunderheads was dark and heavy. Almost the complete opposite, however, were the skies of the west, where the sun was just about ready to migrate to her nightly position. There, splashes of color, of bright yellow and orange hues, painted the sky with the sunset. It was breathtaking and awe-inspiring, one of the more beautiful sunsets to behold. It was so odd, in fact, that one side of the sky could be so amazingly radiant and heavenly and the other a scene from hell itself, as if the apocalypse was riding in a breath of stormy wind.

One of the men blew out a long trail of smoke, pulling a cigarette from his mouth. Leaning against the railing, he remarked to his comrade, "Sky sure is talking, ain't she?"

"Yep," the other answered. They were both middle-aged men, gruff and tanned, their skin browned in angry protest to too many hours beneath a broiling sun. The little ship broke a large wave, sending the bow up against the water. Anyone weak of stomach surely would have collapsed against the railing with a heavy bout of motion sickness. The men simply stood still, as the well-accustomed sailor did, more comfortable with the rough attitudes of the sea than the steady placidity of the land. He looked to the dark clouds. "It'll be quite a storm."

He caught the irk of his friend's smile, which spurred his own coy grin to twist his lips. Sailing was one thing, but sailing in the fury of a storm, well, that was another. A rush not comparable to most things. Those clouds promised a night full of rushing water, pounding rain, and fierce winds, the bulkheads of their ship bucking and moaning with the force of the waves. The sense of excitement and adrenaline made it an experience quite unlike anything else.

The two sailors turned back to the sea below them. The first flicked his still smoking cigarette into the churning waters where it rapidly disappeared. Then he turned to his friend. "Be nice if this ship never had to reach harbor, eh?"

The other grunted. It was too true that the old days, the days of free shipping and trading, were gone with the flash of Meteor in the sky. The small export business that owned their ship operated from Costa Del Sol, sending supplies from that continent to Junon and on to Midgar. The trade had not been heavy, but moderate, enough for the captain and his crew to live comfortably. Everything, however, was about to change and, in the sailors' opinions, it was far from for the better. The new Shinra was placing heavy tariffs on goods entering Junon. There was some corporate reason for it all, they knew. Shinra wasn't making enough money as things were, so it was time to suck more innocents dry. This "fair company" was all a façade; they still exploited the hard-working people of the Planet whenever they got the chance. What a crock of crap. Thus, this was likely to be this ship's last voyage across the open seas, ferrying her last shipment of cargo.

They were silent for a moment, minds blank with nostalgia for times now lost, gone into the past, fading away as waves do into the shore. The second man muttered darkly then, "Damn Shinra." The other nodded. A company as small as theirs could not afford to continue their trade under these painful and draining taxes. Like any good captain, though, theirs was not about to give up on account of Shinra trying to monopolize the entire shipping industry. Thus, a new port of trade had already been designated and new routes had been laid for the next trip. They had simply adjusted their course a bit to sell their goods to another city. It wasn't too big a hassle. Just the principle of the thing was irritating and more than a slap in the face to the free, unrestricted world of oceanic industry.

The first man shook his head. "Like I said, they ain't nothing but what they used to be. Best times was when that damn Meteor thing was falling on us. Shinra was so busy with it that they didn't give us the time of day." It was true that their small company had had its most profitable and busy season during the world crisis of a year back. When the rest of the Planet had thrown in their hats and called it quits, knowing life would all end in a few short days, the men of this small ship had continued shuttling goods to and from distant towns and cities. All though all faith in life had disappeared, the needs of those alive had not. A fair amount of money had been made during that time, more than any other fiscal year. "We should just keep sailing. Straight on into the sunset. Ya know what I mean?"

The other man watched the brilliant display of color across the sky with squinted eyes, as if musing over what exactly lay there, at the horizon. "What about your family?"

He shook his head. "Ah, I'm a sailor, man." He leaned farther over the railing, feeling the salting sting of the ocean spray as it splashed him. The rolling waves in the distance were building. In no time at all they would pound the shore which was all but a line in the distance. There was something mesmerizing about the swirling and churning depths of those waters that allured certain men to this life. Above all else, above their families and homes and money on the dry land, their hearts belonged to the sea unquestionably. Maybe it was a function of the human psyche to dull the sharp loneliness of those months away from home. Maybe it was just a sense of pride and affection for the currents and tides which propelled their ships onward and a sense of respect for how volatile those currents and tides could become on a whim. Whatever it was, the wife of a sailor had married him full-knowing that she would always come in second place next to the majestic deep blue waters of the ocean. "I only love the sea."

The other man grunted softly. "What would your wife say to that?"

He gave a weak grin. In the distance, thunder rumbled. They both looked up as the sky blackened overhead. Their small ship was sailing right into the storm, which brewed over Junon with an agitated fervor. Bright lightning that was only dulled by the setting of the sun streaked between clouds. The wind picked up, kicking sharp droplets of ocean water that prickled the skin upon. It would be raining in no time. The spray of the ocean obscured their vision. The waters darkened to the color of the clouds, making the horizon disappear into a mixture of grays and blacks. Specters of images floated upon the waves of the ocean, only shown to be apparitions by the occasional flash of lightning. It would be quite a storm.

The first man couldn't help but smile as sense of excitement claimed it. "This is gonna rock, man. Just look at those clouds! No way am I sittin' this one out! Uh-huh!"

His comrade suddenly perked up, his narrowed eyes having scanned the ocean for any other ships. With a storm, visibility was greatly reduced. The threat of blundering upon another vessel that was masked by pelting rain, spray, wind, and darkness was especially prominent. One could tell a ship's relative location and distance by the lights positioned on its masts. However, in particularly violent and heavy storms, which this almost promised to be, that tactic of identifying other craft was difficult. It would be much easier to ascertain their position relative to other ships now when their vision wasn't totally obscured. And it was clear to see they were alone, the seas uninhabited right to Junon. But it wasn't the presence of other craft that had alerted his senses. He peered out to the left more closely, trying to see through the waves and ocean spray. When the object once again became clear, he grasped his friend's arm tightly. "Look at that!" he shouted.

His shipmate tore his eyes from the sky to gaze upon what the other had designated. Then his jaw dropped in shock. "Hot damn," he murmured.

It appeared to be a person walking about twenty feet from their position. Just walking, as though the waves of the ocean were a path on a quiet, afternoon stroll through a park. It was clearly a woman by the shape of her body. A blue coat covered her down to her knees. Bare feet, delicate and small, plodded across the waves, heading with eyes fixed on a distant point back to the western continent. A long mane of bright green hair whipped in the fierce winds of the storm.

The two sailors stood, paralyzed with shock, as the woman walked by their ship. She did not pay them the smallest attention, did not turn her head to even look, continuing on her way as if their small craft riding the waves beside her did not exist. The two sailors, on the other hand, could not look away, their eyes glued to her as though if they were to blink or glance to the side she might vanish as though she had never existed. The heavy bursts of wind would have no doubt staggered her and cause her to lose her balance upon whatever force that kept her suspended above the water. But she walked on, seemingly unaffected by the world around her.

In all their years upon the high seas, neither had ever seen anything like it. They just watched, transfixed, not knowing what to do or what to think in their shock. The thought of speaking, of trying to reach her, of alerting their superiors never crossed their bewildered minds. Speechless, they watched as she walked on into the distance. The waves rose up around her, hiding her from their eyes, until all they could see were the whipping locks of her hair. Then, that, too, began to fade as she walked from view, the sea concealing her like a shroud.

All was forgotten in the moment. The two stood there dumbfounded, their mouths hanging upon, their eyes wide. Neither could breathe. Finally, after quite some time, the first asked softly, "Was that what I thought it was?"

The other could only answer with, "Yep."

"Holy crap," the first murmured. Then he slowly grinned. "Now there's something you don't see everyday."

"Yep."

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"Heat exhaustion," Doctor Berkins said as he approached the examination bed. He tightly held his clipboard under one arm, the other in the pocket of his white lab coat. He was an older man, with red hair that at one point in time was thick and full of vibrant color. Now the years had drained the bright red hues from the strands, leaving them a whitish pink almost. They thinly arranged a rapidly balding head. His face was rounded with a white beard lining his chin. Black eyes stared up from beneath bushy eyebrows that were in desperate need of clipping. His face was warm and ruddy, reminding one of a friendly, old grandfather.

Cloud slowly sat up on the bed. Any quick movements caused the hammer striking the anvil inside his skull to do so all that much louder. The pounding headache had hardly receded since he had awoken all but a half an hour ago. "That's it?" Tifa wondered from beside him where she stood, her face open with worry.

The doctor gave them a reassuring smile but it seemed forced for some reason. "Heat exhaustion, Mr. Strife." He neared them, shaking his head ruefully. "It happens when you force your body to recover from a grievous injury too quickly."

Cloud grinned, bright color burning into his cheeks. He rubbed the spot on his bare chest where the arrow had run him through almost subconsciously. Tifa smacked him upside the head lightly, trying hard to be angry with him but only finding relief washing over her. "It's not funny, Cloud," she admonished. "You shouldn't have rushed it."

"The combination of the heat outside and the fact you were still weak and tired caused your collapse," Berkins continued. He gave a small shrug, as if that in itself were no big deal. Tifa found herself angry with him for taking the whole situation so lightly. Seeing your loved one ill twice in two days was no easy thing to stomach.

"He's fine, isn't he?" The look in Tifa's eyes was one borne of concern and love, so intense that the doctor was almost taken aback by the strength of the wistful expression upon her young face.

He faltered a bit and smiled. Bedside manner was not one of his strong points. "Oh, yes. As long as he takes it easy and gets some rest, he should be well again in a few days."

Cloud seemed to ignore the less-than-subtle hints in the doctor's voice that warned him to take it easy by sliding off the examination bed. Although the white, clean office pitched around him, the large silver cabinet full of tools and medicines spinning about his head at least a few times before coming to rest in one spot, he said nothing, ignoring his pounding headache. He reached forward and grabbed his purple tunic from where it laid on a nearby chair. "So I can go, then?" he asked the doctor, though there was no tone of inquiry in his voice. It was pretty obvious was his demeanor that he would leave with or without the doctor's permission.

The doctor nodded and began back to his office, thinking of all the better things he could have been doing as opposed to examining some arrogant, stubborn kid who refused to take care of himself and fainted because of it. Disdainfully, he huffed a little sigh and returned to his desk.

Tifa looked back to Cloud, unable to stifle a small grin as he outlandishly and silently mocked the older man. She bowed her head, smiling at him widely. Despite his funny expressions and impressions, she was unable to shake a dirty, fearful feeling that was claiming her mind, body, and soul. A pained sense of foreboding overwhelmed her, like a knife jabbed about her and with every moment it twisted, cutting into her innards. It was a sickening foresight of bad things to come. She had felt it through most the battle against Sephiroth. And she knew it well enough to trust it.

Cloud gently tipped his face to hers. "What's wrong, Tifa?" he asked her, an innocent look in his bright blue eyes. If he could only understand how much he worried her, how much his careless disregard for his health hurt her...

"Nothing," she said, after a moment of silence. She gave a quiet sigh as she grabbed his strong hand from beneath her chin and held it tightly between her own. She looked up into his face. The laughter faded from his eyes as surely as the sun did in the sky as a storm rolled in. "I just wish you would rest a few days-" He gave a tired sigh. Her face broke in an uncommon show of anger. "Cloud, this is serious. You're not well enough for this right now. Just rest and let Cid and the others take care of it."

He had heard this argument before; they had discussed it many times in the past. Even before they had admitted their love for one another, she had expressed great worry for him during their fight with Sephiroth, asking him, sometimes pleading with him, to rest and let the others handle the fighting if he were hurt. And he had never once listened to her. She could see from the defiant glint in his eyes he wasn't about to change his habits. "Tifa, I'm alright."

That was what it always was. "Tifa, I'm alright" or "Tifa, I'm fine" or "Tifa, it'll be okay". His words were like wine in that they were good at the time, comforting, soothing a problem. But it didn't really help and later they faded leaving only pain. And she wouldn't let herself become drunk on his words. "Cloud, you're not alright. You should be in bed. If you keep forcing yourself to be strong like this, eventually you're gonna get sick." She shook her head, stepping closer to him as she worked herself ill with worry and fear. "What if that didn't completely heal you?"

He heard the fear in her voice, cold and shaking with care for him. "Tifa, please, you know I can't back out on this-"

"Don't you trust us?" she demanded, struggling to make this argument hold as much water as possible. There were bright tears in her eyes, building, threatening to spill over in complete desperation. She clamped her throat in an attempt to hold back a choked sob that was itching to be free. "Don't you trust Cid and the others to handle this?"

"Of course I trust them!" Cloud said in exasperation, plainly hurt that she could think such a thing. "How can you think that I don't?!"

Tifa's face flushed with bright embarrassment as she realized what had left her mouth in the heat of her anger. She bowed her head, the tears stinging her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered. She hadn't meant to hurt him. She just wanted him to take it slow and rest, to let the rest of the team handle the problem for just once. That was all she wanted. She couldn't say it, though. Something deep down inside of her prevented her from letting her true wants out. She didn't want to be a nag or a burden to him, always telling him what to do. She didn't want her fears to bother him, to give him more to think about. It had always been like that. Tifa loved Cloud from the very bottom of her heart, but she was very much afraid that her love would make him weak. So she always kept her fears to herself. But now... after what had happened, she wanted his comfort and assurances so bad that she felt she would just burst if she could not have it. She wanted to make sure he was safe. Her body was still trembling with the after-images of the experience. "I just love you so much, Cloud. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

His face broke. She looked up to him, surprised to see tears collecting in his own bright blue eyes, like clear pools of ice. This caused her own defenses to melt. She collapsed into his embrace, her head on his shoulder, openly sobbing. Cloud immediately put his arms around her quaking body, holding her close. He stroked her hair as she cried, feeling horrible and guilty. "There was so much blood," she whispered, her voice quivering with sobs. "And... and you were in such horrible pain..." Cloud tightened his arms about her as if that action could diffuse some of her sorrow into him. He closed his eyes against the sting of the tears in them. "You were screaming... and I - I couldn't help you!" she cried hysterically. "I felt like... like I was dying with you. Your eyes closed and you - you stopped breathing... and I thought you were dead. Oh, God, I knew you were dead!"

"Shh," Cloud whispered into her hair, his head atop hers. Her body shuddered against him as she let out all the pain and fear and anger and worry she had bottled up. "It's over," he assured her, running his strong hands through the silky strands of her hair. "It's all over. I'm safe now."

Tifa gradually began to quiet as Cloud continued to whisper comforting words and promises into her ear, the gentle caress of his fingers easing away some of her pain. The feel of the warm skin of his shoulder beneath her cheek, of his heart beating, and the rhythm of his breathing brought a delicate sense of peace to her that not much else could. The strength of his arms made her feel safe and secure. He was warm and solid and whole. Nothing else in the world could make her feel as complete as Cloud did.

He eventually tipped her face to his. She looked up into his eyes, so resolute and assuring, and sighed. "It's all okay, Tifa. I promise you. It's gone. It doesn't hurt me anymore." Hands that had been braced against his bare chest now wrapped around his neck. He, with delicate fingertips, wiped away her tears. "Don't worry about it anymore. It's all in the past. What matters is that I'm okay, and you're with me."

She smiled bashfully. "I'm sorry that..." She gave a small hiccup from the heavy weeping, unable to finish. Cloud grinned.

"Don't apologize, Tifa," he declared, rubbing her back. "I've been a jerk for not seeing how worried you are." His face grew more serious. "But I can't back away from this." Her expression fell a bit as she realized that he still, despite her fears, intended to lead the team and fight, even in his condition. "After this is done, I promise I'll rest. We both will. But until then, I can't."

It wasn't what she wanted. She couldn't demand more, though, and she couldn't be angry with him. Those stunning blue eyes prevented even an ounce of disdain from kindling within her. God, he was so gorgeous. She kissed him then, sealing his full lips with her own, feeling his warmth permeate her and bring her alive with a jolt of heat and electricity. Her heart began to pound within her chest, the tension leaving her with a wash of ecstasy as she deepened her kiss, exploring his mouth, dying with pleasure as he returned the gesture.

Without consciously realizing it, she pushed him down flat on his back on the medical bed. And she came in between his legs, leaning down across his chest, her hands tangled in his thick hair. She continued to kiss him, his taste filling her, drawing gently on his lips with her own. She could feel his hands slid up her back, beneath her white shirt. Her gooseflesh rose under his light touch. Somewhere, idly in the back of her mind, which was so fazed with pleasure and love, she wondered how his hands could be so violently deadly in battle and yet so soft and quiet now, bringing her skin alive with tingling and numbing delight.

Her own slender fingers caressed his chest, sliding up his muscled stomach, across his ribs, up his breast, to his shoulders. Her mouth followed the path of her hands, trailing a line of hot, heavy kisses from his navel to his jaw. She could feel his muscles ripple beneath the soft pressure of her lips. She pinned his hands to the bed with her own, wrapping her fingers through them, as her mouth found his again. Gently, she traced the contour of his lips with her tongue before kissing him passionately again. Her whole body was alive with his scent, his closeness, his unique feel that was known only to her. Everything was forgotten in that instance. All she could think about was her love for him and the ecstasy which so claimed her. Not a second thought crossed her mind as her nimble fingers fell to his waist, quickly unfastening his belt and then the buttons and zipper of his pants.

"Ahem."

Shock coursed through Tifa as her heart skipped a thunderous beat, leaping to her throat. A thousand buckets of ice cold water drenched her, quickly putting out the raging fire of passion, as she looked up from Cloud, abandoning the sweet torture of his mouth.

Berkins stood in his office door, his face tight with anger as he observed the scene before him. Black irises narrowed disdainfully as the two young adults, in the midst of making love, snapped their eyes to him. He folded his arms across his chest with scorn and contempt, and tapped his foot impatiently. "This is a doctor's office," he hissed in carefully controlled anger, murder in his cold voice, "not a hotel room."

They both seemed paralyzed with shock. Then bright color burned into Tifa's cheeks so hot, she thought they were on fire.

Quickly, she disentangled herself from Cloud, climbing off him. "I'm so sorry, sir," she stammered in embarrassment. She felt like she could die, just run into the nearest corner and hide. Cloud leaned up, his face bright and alive with merriment, his lips swollen from her fervent kisses. They twisted in a mischievous, smug smile, making Tifa's heart flutter. Bright fires burned with mirth in his eyes. She resisted the urge to grin back at him, though her lips were itching with need. She looked back to the doctor. "It – it just happened."

The doctor rolled his eyes. He had always known this generation had gone down the crapper, but honestly! Trying to assuage his tight anger, he said through clenched teeth, "A moment of your time, please, Mr. Strife."

Part of Tifa really did not want to leave Cloud, her body screaming to continue just where she left off. The other half was so embarrassed, she thought that if she remained in that room one moment longer she would just die. Cloud gave her a lusty grin. "You go on ahead," he said, sliding off the bed. Quickly, just as the fabric was beginning to slide down his thighs, he realized his pants were still undone, grabbed them, and re-buckled the belt. Tifa choked back a chortle of laughter, her hand covering her mouth, and now he was blushing. He shot her a mock angry look which quickly dissolved into a smile. "I'll be right there."

Tifa nodded and backed away. Quickly, she fled to the door. "Really, sir, I'm so sorry." Then she walked deftly from the room, closing the door behind her. Cloud winced as he heard her loud laughter outside, his face vibrant with sheepish embarrassment. He grabbed his shirt, tugged it over his head, stuffing his arms in the sleeves, took a moment to right it over his broad chest, and walked to the doctor. The man only shook his head in disgust before leading Cloud into his office.

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Cid paced back and forth in the waiting room of the infirmary, which was buried deep in the maze beneath the Shinra towers. He was jumpy with anxiety, filled with such agitated apprehension, that he could not stand still. He walked the length of the hall, then pivoted on his heel and, with such swift violence that he nearly seemed like he would lose his balance and tumble to the gray carpeted floor, stalk the other direction. His hands were clasped together in a tight ball behind his back, his eyes narrowed sternly, his face tight. If he were pacing any harder, his heels were be grinding through the carpet and cement floor into the ceiling below.

Barret's face was dark with irritation. "God damn it, Cid!" he bellowed, all his reserve and control on his anger finally snapping. "Would you sit yer ass down and quite that damn pacin'?!"

Cid stopped then, halting in the pattern he had been walking in for the last half and hour, ever since they had brought Cloud in. Thank God those choppers had been so quick in reaching the crash site, loading the fallen leader up, and rushing him back to the towers under the flag of emergency. The ride had been so quick, hardly giving any of the team a moment to think, as they raced to the infirmary. Cloud had been loaded onto a stretcher by the medical assistants, an oxygen mask strapped securely over his mouth and nose. Tifa had remained constantly by his side, holding his hand, stroking his hair, beckoning him to awaken from whatever unconsciousness now held him captive. On the helicopter pads atop the tower, there had been much confusion, shouting, and arguing. The doctors wouldn't let them accompany their fallen leader below. Cid had cursed, Barret had yelled, Red had pleaded. Not any of that had proven fruitful. In the end, only Tifa had been allowed to stay with Cloud as he was taken into an elevator and rushed to the infirmary some eighty floors below. Cid suspected it was more due to the fact that nothing the medics could do would remove Cloud's frantic lover from his side than anything.

After that, Reeve had gone back to his office. On his phone and at Cid's insistence, he had ordered his secretary to summon Shera and take her the infirmary. The rest of the team had quickly made their way through the normal public elevators. It had taken a good ten minutes just to get down the many floors and stops to the bottom of the towers. Every moment that went by Cid vividly cursed the need for rich corporate yuppies to build such large towers. Finally, they had reached the infirmary, the white washed walls and smells of disinfectants and medicines signifying their destination. The nurse at the desk would not allow them to pass, despite their whines and arguments and gripes and curses. Cid had even at one point threatened her with the Venus Gospel, declaring something to the affect of he would stuff it up her rear sideways if she did not let them in to see Cloud. She had remained adamant, the old windbag, ordering them to either take a seat, or she would call the guards and have them escorted out. Knowing a lost battle when they saw one, Cid and the rest of the group, grumbling, marched to the stiff gray chairs in the drab of the room, sat tiredly in them, and began to wait.

A half an hour later there was still nothing.

Cid darkly stomped to one of the chairs and wearily collapsed into it. Shera, who was beside him, laid a hand on his knee, compassionate, understanding what he was feeling. Understanding his guilt. She, gently and imperceptibly to all but Cid, stroked his knee.

They were silent again. Then Yuffie, who had her chin braced upon fists, said in an effort to extinguish some of the heart-felt worry plaguing the entire group, "I'm sure Cloud's fine. It ain't like him to back out on us." It did little to make them feel better, but the thought was welcomed.

Cid grunted and rubbed his eyes. "Shoulda seen that he wasn't feelin' too good. You were with me, Vince. Why didn't either of us notice?"

The other man opened eyes that had been closed. His red irises narrowed. "It is as much our fault as it is his for not telling us," he said evenly, his golden claw glistening in the florescent light of the room.

Cid let out a long breath before leaning back in his chair. God, he needed a cig. But the no smoking signs plastered all over the room taunted him. If this went on much longer, he'd ram the Venus Gospel into any of those damned things. No smoking, his ass.

Suddenly, the sound of approaching footsteps and laughter caused them all to perk up. Cid felt his spirits rise as he looked anxiously down the hall, praying that it was Tifa or Cloud or the doctor or anybody who could shatter this boring waiting period and tell them what the hell was going on. Thankfully, it was indeed the young woman walking quickly toward them. Cid stood, gratitude that it was finally over washing over him. Waiting had never been one of his strong points. Tifa reached the team, her face vibrant. However, they did not miss the redness about her eyes or their misty character. Obviously, she had been crying quite hardy. "What's the story, Teef?" Barret asked, trying to mask how worried he was about Cloud with a nonchalant tone in his voice.

Tifa smiled genuinely. "Cloud's fine. It was just heat exhaustion. The doctor gave him a clean bill of health."

It seemed as if the great weight that had been pressing over them, crushing happiness and killing joy, lifted, leaving them weary with relief and tired rapture. Cid fell back into his chair. "Thank God," he murmured, closing his eyes and tipping his head back. His hand found Shera's, tightening his rough callused fingers about her smaller, womanly ones.

Tifa nodded, her grin relaxing the team. "He's just finishing up with the doctor now."

There was silence then. Red gave up his chair so Tifa could sit, which she readily did. Then he laid her jaw against her thigh and she scratched his ears blankly, her eyes clouded, her mind distant. Five more minutes passed in silence, everybody's thoughts elsewhere, on other things, worried about the future, reminiscing about the past. The silence was not uncomfortable; it was that gentle variety that good friends often shared, completely unneeded to be filled by trite conversation. Then, it was broken.

"Maybe we should ask Cloud to sit this one out," Vincent suddenly said softly from where he sat beside Barret. His eyes that had been blankly analyzing the floor looked up to see the response from the group.

Cid felt his anger grow. "No," he said, shaking his head vehemently, without second thought. "Uh-huh. No way in hell." He knew what Vincent was thinking and didn't like it in the slightest. Asking Cloud to back away meant that things were wrong. That Cloud hadn't recovered. He was paying for saving Cid's life with the team's confidence in him. And that was something Cid, in all his pride and guilt and horrible conscience, wouldn't accept.

"Why would we wanna do that?" Yuffie wondered, rolling a green materia in her hands as if the highly valuable orb was only a child's ball.

Red shook his head, lifting his head from Tifa's soft touch. "Cloud's obviously not up to his full potential. This situation could very easily turn dire. If he falters like that in a battle, he could easily get himself or somebody else killed."

Cid shook his head. "No," he said again.

"I ain't gonna do that to Cloud," Barret said. "It's like we jest stabbed him in the back for bein' sick."

Tifa looked at them, strangely torn. She wanted more than anything to agree with Vincent. With their support, Cloud would back down. She knew he would. He would keep himself away from the fight and be safe. He wouldn't get hurt. That, more than anything, was what she could hope for. But she knew that by her taking sides with the team, by her voting against his leadership and asking him to step down, she would hurt him more than help him. He would feel betrayed. She couldn't make herself do that to him, no matter how much she dreaded the next injury he might receive because he hadn't healed fully from the last.

Thankfully, Cid put an end to it before it went any further. "Cloud's my friend. I ain't gonna hurt him like that. This team sticks together. As long as he's here, he's leadin' it."

Tense silence followed. If Vincent was offended by the fact that he had been bluntly debunked, he did not show it. They all returned to their thoughts, but this time uncomfortable with this slight betrayal of their leader.

An indecipherable amount of time followed. Then more soft footsteps followed. Everybody looked up as Cloud came down the hall. Tifa smiled devilishly at him as he approached, her thoughts still fresh with the incident before. But he did not return her sentiment. In fact, he did not meet the gaze of any of those around him as they all stood and began to inquire as to how he felt, happy to see him return. He did not respond with even the mimic of fervor as Shera hugged him compassionately, or as Cid clapped him on the shoulder, or Barret ruffled his hair like an affectionate uncle. His face was absolutely ashen, as though he had seen a ghost. The blank look in his eyes startled Tifa. She felt that cold fear come over her again, the same she had felt out at the crash site.

She wove her fingers through his hand. His palm was clammy. "Cloud, are you okay?"

The sound of her voice seemed to snap him out of her trance. He shook his head, as if to clear it. "Yeah," he stammered. He gave her a weak smile. "Yeah, I'm just fine."

It was happening all over again. Tifa knew he was lying. Dammit, why couldn't he ever just admit that he was hurting and let her help him?! Had what she said before meant anything to him? Had it gone in one ear and out the other?

Still, she said none of this as the team reformed. "So, now what, fearless leader?" Cid said, as if proclaiming to the others that Cloud was still in charge of their team, and that was that.

Cloud shook his head. His mind was obviously elsewhere. He was silent, as if blind to the fact he had been addressed. Finally, he said, "I don't know. Did... did Reeve hear from the Turks?"

Barret shook his head as to the negative. "Nope. Those good-fer-nothin's probably are off gettin' drunk. Shitheads."

"I think we ought to have that ship moved here, to one of the labs. If I can study that text more, I might be able to make a more accurate translation," Red declared. "Shall I ask Reeve to do that?"

"Sounds good," Cid declared, looking to Shera. "Me an' Shera can probably pick at it and see what makes it fly." He gave a neutral shrug. "Ya never know. Could be useful."

Yuffie nodded. "What about the rest of us? We wait?" She humphed darkly, putting her weight onto her left leg in her stance. "Waiting sucks."

"Amen to that," Cid grunted. Shera looped her arm through his, her head on his shoulder. "What do you think about it, Cloud?"

They all turned to him. He was so distant, gone, his mind beyond their reach. Something was bothering him. "I..." he trailed off. His hands went to his forehead to rub it wearily. "Look, I really have a headache. I gotta sleep. You guys do whatever." He bowed his head and pushed through the group, heading with quick steps to end of the hall, heading towards the

elevators. "Excuse me," he mumbled. Then he was gone around the corner.

They all stood in shock, wondering what had provoked that. They had never seen Cloud so utterly hurt and shaken. Cid was aghast. "Do you think he heard us?" he whispered harshly, a guilty and yet simultaneously accusing note in his tone.

Tifa only shot him a cold look as she quickly followed after her love.

~*~

Thunder rumbled with the fury of hell overhead.

Cid looked up at the black, swirling clouds over head, watching as lightning raced between the dark outlines. The wind ruffled his hair, the warm bite of it seeping through his clothes to rush against his skin. The supports of the Shinra tower shook with the heavy boom of the thunder, vibrating beneath his feet as he leaned against the railing of the balcony adjacent to his room. He was some sixty stories above the bustling lights of Midgar below but wasn't bothered by the height. He was a pilot, after all.

The storm was overhead, threatening the city and all her inhabitants with a lashing of pelting hail, a deluge of rain, and pounding winds. The dour sight of it fit Cid's volatile mood perfectly, matching the angry swirl of distended thoughts in his head. Another crack of thunder and flash of lightning rocked through the tower. Some would have cringed and fled inside, knowing in they, in their insignificance, were no match for the anger of Mother Nature. Not Cid, though. He calmly blew a trail of smoke into the gale of wind roughly pummeling and flicked the ash from his cigarette.

He stared darkly out at the sky, recalling how he had once flown the Highwind through a storm such as this. The memory brought a twist of a smile to his lips. The weather system had been completely unpredicted and took the airship by surprise, forming about her with a vengeance. The whole chaotic event had lasted nearly an hour as she was whipped about, pelted by hail, wind, rain, and lightning. But his crew remained steadfast at the controls, knowing their ship would survive. She could endure the whipping the storm dealt. They had had complete faith in her. And survive she did, without more than a scratch. Lady Luck had been with him during that cataclysmic event of a few months ago, seeing his ship, his crew, and himself safely through the night.

And now she was gone.

Everything seemed to be wrong. His ship was in the hands of his hated nemesis. His friend was losing the confidence of the team because of him. His guilt was eating him inside out. His fears and worries pounded him at all hours, filling him with an increasing sense of dread that the Highwind was gone forever. And on top of all that, the world was facing another crisis, one in which he had not the will to stop.

Cid grunted in anger as he flicked the butt of his cigarette over the railing. Damn it all. Why couldn't the fates ever let good things be? It must have been the inherit cruelties of life that continually struck the good with bad luck, and the bad with good fortune.

At least he had Shera. At times this past day, that had been enough to relieve his tensions, the light massage of her fingers at his hurting nerves easing his pain. She was a godsend to him. He would never be able to convince himself that he deserved her. If there be such a thing as angels, his wife, his love, was one. She was waiting in sweet slumber for him to come to bed. After a quick dinner, the team had separated, most going to their rooms for they were still exhausted from the day's events. Cid had sent Shera to theirs under his guard, observing her lock the door after they kissed, telling her that if anybody besides him attempted to get that heavy, oak portal open, she should use the Venus Gospel, which he had left gleaming wickedly in the lightning beside the bed, without any reserve. She assured him she would. He was not about to lose the woman he loved on top of everything else.

God, how he wanted this to all just disappear.

The sound of soft footfalls made him turn around as thunder crashed over him again, the lightning blinding him in an instant. He look to the door of the balcony, expecting to see Tifa or Barret or even Vincent there, wishing to speak to him. There was nothing, though. He peered into the shadows, trying to see into the darkness. The flashes of bright light created

shifting afterimages burning into his vision, like haunting ghosts. He felt his goosebumps prickle, his heart pounding. "Must have been my imagination," he breathed, staring intently into the black, praying that indeed it was just his tired mind conjuring up strange sounds and sights. He was about to turn back to the railing when a low creak filled his ears, echoing along the stone masonry of the walls around him. He held his breath, straining his senses. This was getting too damn spooky. He took a couple of tentative steps forward, knowing it was all some practical joke Yuffie was pulling for a laugh deep down inside, fully intending to show her what was what.

He stopped as cold fear washed over him. What if it wasn't? He was completely unarmed. And who knew what could have been lurking around the Shinra towers this late at night. Stalking AVALANCHE. Stalking him. "Malachai," he whispered. And he knew.

It was too late to stop it now. A strong arm wrapped around his chest, pinning both his arms to his sides, yanking him back. Cid felt his heart leap into his throat in shock as a musty, gloved hand clamped over his mouth. Lightning flashed in his eyes, blinding him. In that instant, something cold, hard, and steel cut into his side with a bite of agony, slicing through his flesh and muscle. He screamed, though the hand over his mouth and the boom of thunder muffled it to an inaudible state. Whatever had stabbed him was yanked from his side quickly, tearing the gaping hole wider. He could feel warm blood run down his side.

The shadow covered hands restraining him were gone. He fell backward in shock, hitting the floor below him with a thud and a yelp, his injured side screaming with agony. The pain was excruciating. He squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lower lip so hard he tasted blood in an effort to keep the cry in his throat. He staggered to his knees, his arm across his chest, cupping the warm blood as it left his body.

Breathing through clenched teeth, he looked up. Lightning flashed, illuminating the figure standing over him. Cid knew who it was without even having to see. "Malachai," he hissed.

A fist came from nowhere, connecting to his jaw with a thud. Bright lights danced before his eyes as he fell back against the cold stone floor, sprawling. Blood filled his mouth as he laid there, his chin throbbing, his head and side pounding. The cold wind cupped him, bringing a numbness to his wound.

Malachai laughed, towering over Cid, as the other attempted to pull himself to his knees. "Nice to see you again, Cid," he remarked, a tone of complete satisfaction in his voice.

"Go to hell," Cid gasped, spitting the blood from his mouth in the general direction of his foe. A boot rammed into his gut, sending him falling forward, his mouth gaping as the air was expelled from his lungs. He managed to catch himself, his arms trembling to hold his upper body erect. Cid coughed finally, blood dripping from his chin, struggling to get air. Finally, the paroxysm faded. He knelt there, gasping, his body trembling in pain. "Nice to know you still don't fight fair. Where the hell's my ship, you &^\$#*\$!"

Malachai clucked his tongue in mock sympathy. "You mean my ship. And she's some place you'll never find her." Cid could hear the clanking of shoes as Malachai began to pace before him. "But that's not what I came here to talk about, Cid."

"Oh?" Cid said, trying to clean the taste of blood from his mouth. His side was burning, as though on fire. He tried to keep the pain from his voice as he said to the darkness that concealed his enemy, "Enlighten me."

Malachai stopped pacing. "I came here to discuss the Ancient."

Cid's blood ran cold. Shit!! he thought in terror and panic. How could he know? Reeve said that it would be kept quiet! How could he know?! Instead of voicing his fears, he opted to say, "What Ancient?" He wasn't surprised when somebody's foot caught him under the ribs. He heard a sickening crunch and felt a tight pain in chest as he fell hard on his unwounded side. Ribs. Why did it have to be ribs? He winced as every breath he drew was now coupled with a hard pain that made his stomach and lungs ache.

Malachai went on as if nothing had happened. "The girl that crashed here last night. Save me the bullshit, Cid, I know you know what I'm talking about." There was silence filled by only thunder, the wail of the wind, and Cid's wheezing.

His face tight with a wince, Cid asked, "What do you want?"

Malachai approached again. Lightning streaked across them, illuminating the feral glint in his red eyes. "Nothing. I just want you to know that I'm going to find this girl, Cid. She's the key to powers beyond anybody's imaginings. The ability to talk to Planet. Imagine what that could bring me?" Cid didn't respond, knowing that disaster was about to befall their little search and destroy operation. "I'm gonna find her before you and your AVALANCHE. Do you know why?"

When Cid didn't answer immediately, some force rammed into the side of his head, knocking him to the floor with a bang of pain. He laid there for a moment, breathing heavily, hurt paralyzing him in a white blaze of agony. Finally, he regained his breathing enough to speak. "Why?"

He felt Malachai kneel before him, felt the sick bastard's breath on his face. "Because I have the Highwind." Cold realization hit Cid. He was right. With the rustle of cloth, Malachai stood again. Stood and began to gloat. "When I envisioned taking my ship back from you, it was for one purpose only. To regain what was rightfully mine. But now I see the utter ingenious of my timing. You can't possibly compete with me when I have the world's only airship!" Thunder cracked. Cid felt a rain drop strike his forehead. "And so, I win on both accounts."

There was silence. Cid strained his eyes and ears to detect some sound movement, but there was nothing. Then Malachai declared, "Hell or high wind. Remembering that old saying we made up?"

Unwilling to provoke another blow to his already battered body, Cid responded with, "Yeah." His heart was pounding in his ears. His vision began to blur with pain and fury.

"Well, there's some truth to it. I'll always fly, Cid. I always have and always will. You can stay on the ground," Malachai went on. Cid gritted his teeth in an effort to control his temper. "Hell or high wind has come, Cid. And it's over."

Footsteps again filled his ears, this time getting softer. A door opened. Cid stayed there, his body washed in pain, too hurt to get up and follow. "Oh," Malachai said at the door, "how's that blonde guy doing? You know, the one that saved your pitiful existence." Cid didn't answer. "Too bad he lived. Now I gotta kill him again as I take out each and every one of your friends, including your little maid. Then it'll just be you. He won't be there to take the fall. I missed once. I won't miss again."

The door slammed shut in time with a booming crack of thunder as the sky burst, leaving Cid bleeding on the balcony, drenched as the pounding rain assaulted him.