

Hell or High Wind

Chapter 7

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"Well, we're here. Now what?"

Cid glanced at Yuffie as she folded her arms over her chest and put all her weight onto her left leg. The pout and irritation in her voice made his stomach turn. After a day boat ride in close quarters, even her annoying mannerisms that he had managed to tolerate before peeved him beyond end. Turning, he glanced about the scene around him.

Costa Del Sol was alive with all the energy and life that a bustling port and party town was expected to contain. The docks were crowded with vacationers and sailors alike, the heavy tangle of people congesting the gangways. Luggage was being hauled, in most cases rather haphazardly, back and forth by paid busboys. The stench of salt water, fish, sand, and pungent foods filled the air, creating an almost nauseatingly pleasurable aroma. The call of overhead gulls was nearly muted by the clamor of feet and voices and the boom of stereos that were carried precariously upon the shoulders of passing pink-haired punks. There was little to no order about the craze of the docks, and pick-pockets were using the chaos to their favor, ripping off unsuspecting and none the wiser visitors with all the stealth of a well versed thief. Cid subconsciously patted his wallet in the back pocket of his pants to assure himself it was still where it belonged. The dock was a nightmare of confusion. And then there was the actual town to look forward to.

Reno slipped his shades down over his eyes with the deft movement of his wrist. His hands then buried themselves into his pockets. He took a deep breath of the heavy, humid coast air and exhaled loudly, his lips twisted in a sloppy grin. "Ah. My kinda town."

Barret shook his head, folding his muscular arms about his chest. "Shit."

Tifa side-stepped quickly as some children nearly plowed into her, yelling and chasing after a dog. She looked up into the throng of people before her. She felt a tired sense of depression cool her. Shaking her head, she asked incredulously, "How are we gonna find her in this mess?"

"With a lot of patience," Red answered, sitting at her feet and momentarily scratching his left ear.

"And a lot of time," Vincent added quietly. His red eyes flicked over the passing people, quickly analyzing them. How he was able to pick one person from the maelstrom of flashing limbs and clothes was beyond Cid. Then he remembered hearing the mysterious man once say how his senses had been inadvertently enhanced by Hojo's experiments. Silently, Cid found himself envying Vincent and all his abilities that, in this particular case, were quite a prize to be had.

Elena scoffed bitterly from beside Reno. "We don't have a lot of time," she remarked bluntly, clearly unhappy with the situation before her.

"Then why the hell are we standing here?" Cid demanded, pulling a cigarette from his pack and jabbing it between his lips. Quickly, he fired it up and began puffing on it, discontented.

"Right," Cloud said then, stepping forward a bit. "We'll split up and meet back here in an hour. We'll have a better chance of finding this girl if we have more than one party looking for her."

"Good call, spike," Reno commented, nodding his head in mock approval. Cloud's face darkened, his eyes narrowing dangerously. Hands clenched into fists at his side. Reno seemed to ignore Cloud's reaction as he turned to Elena and Rude, the latter's head gleaming almost to the point of blinding in the bright sun. "Come on, Turks." Together the three pushed through the crowd of people and ambled up the gangway to the street.

"You assholes better show!" Barret bellowed after them as they rapidly disappeared in the concourse. He darkly turned away and back to the group. "Those Turks ain't good fer nothin'."

A round of grunts and nods came from AVALANCHE as they stood there. Cloud dropped his hands to his hips. "Well, Tifa, Cid, you come with me. Barret, take Yuffie. Red, you go with Vincent. Good?"

Barret wrinkled his nose and glanced at the ninja girl. She stuck her tongue out at him. Cloud rolled his eyes and gave a small smile. "Alright then. Back here, in an hour. If anything happens, call." He turned away then, Tifa with him.

"Cloud." Their leader swerved to face Vincent at the sound of his name. The caped man regarded Cloud evenly. "I'd like to take a look on my own, if you don't mind."

The other stared at him blankly for a moment or so, and then shrugged neutrally. "Sure, Vincent. Go ahead."

Vincent gave a small nod at his words and then walked away on light footfalls. His claw gleamed wickedly in the sunlight giving them one last means of finding him in the crowd before he, too, was gone.

Silently, Cloud began down the dock, away from the Shinra boat that had brought them across the ocean. Tifa gave a warm smile to the others before following her lover. Cid blew a cloud of smoke, then declared, "See you guys in an hour." After he followed his friends.

The three remaining of the group watched their friends fade into the bustle. Then they, too, headed off to begin their search.

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Forty-five minutes later, Cid was getting pissed. Nothing. Not a single clue. All they had spoken with had had no recollection of ever seeing a girl of the description they gave. And they had spoken with a great deal of people. The craze on the street, they found, was great deal more amplified than that of the docks. This was due to, as they discovered very early on, one of Costa Del Sol's many fiestas. Why this town had to have a rocking party every night was beyond Cid. What could they possibly have that was worth celebrating so often? All he noticed was a lot of crazy people, dirty streets, enough noise to break his eardrums, and a rampant slew of would-be criminals feasting upon the hapless party-goers. Nothing too special or worthy of large party. The preparations for the get-together that night were well underway.

Decorations were being hung, strings of lights wrapped around palm trees, and bands were setting up their equipment. Cid dreaded the ear-piercing wails of singers and guitars alike that would soon be emanating from the large amplifiers that were being hooked up by roadies. As more and more time passed and he observed more and more of this party town, he realized what an undertaking this truly was. Most of the people he saw on the street were freaks. He could find no better terms for them. They sported hair dyed purples, pinks, red, oranges, and greens. They were pierced, tattooed, and, in most cases, half-naked. Even the most glaring was hardly noticeable in this crowd. It had been their hope that the Ancient girl would stand out like a sore thumb. How wrong they were became horribly and agonizingly apparent with each moment that passed.

What made it worse was that, apparently, the denizens and vacationers at Costa Del Sol adopted a rather apathetic, indifferent, "screw you" attitude when a large fiesta such as this loomed on the horizon. Getting the anxious party-goers to even acknowledge their presence as they asked about the Ancient girl was a task in itself. Most of them just blew the small group off, saying that they didn't know and didn't care. Cid was barely suppressing the need to ram the Venus Gospel, which he clenched tightly in his hand, up their asses. How much time would it have actually taken these people to consider their question fairly and try to help? Honestly? Cid had never been so disgusted in his entire life.

It pained him to think that, had this all not happened, he and Shera could have actually been here, on their honeymoon. What a mistake that would have been. Thankfully, in that respect, it had not been so. She was safe from this ruckus back at Midgar with Marlene and Reeve. Although she had wanted desperately to join him on this trip, he would not hear of it. Still wanting to be of some use, though, she had begun to look at the Ancient's ship, which had been moved into one of the Shinra's labs. There, no doubt, her infinite expertise with machinery would quickly discover the secrets of that ship. Cid had no doubts that she would discover what made it go; if anyone could do it, Shera could.

He actually found himself chuckling good-naturedly as he followed Tifa and Cloud out of another rejected store. How miserable she would have been had they come to Costa Del Sol. Had this not happened. They would have both been miserable. Funny how fate works.

"Damn bastard," Cloud grumbled. He shook his head in contained fury as he stopped at a bench. Tiredly, he collapsed upon it.

Tifa sat, far more gracefully, beside him. Gently, she stroked his knee. Cloud hung his head back over the edge of the wooden bench, staring up at the bright blue skies over head. He gave a heavy sigh.

Cid stood before the two of them, smoking another cigarette. "What the hell is wrong with these people?" he wondered rhetorically.

Tifa looked up and shook her head. "I don't know." She narrowed her eyes in disgust. "I always thought this place was such a nice area. You know, pretty and clean and the people are friendly. What a joke."

There was a moment of silence between them. Cid watched with little interest as a man pushed a cart full of acrid smelling pretzels roasting on hot charcoal. He felt his stomach twist at the mere smell of it as it passed by.

"So what do we do now?" Tifa asked, more directly at Cloud. She absently ran her thumb over his left knee.

Cloud gave a small groan as he leaned back up, wincing. "I don't know," he answered, his voice strained, his hand going to his forehead. He rubbed his head gingerly. "Hope the others had more luck?"

Cid turned away, darkly crossing his arms over his chest. "Somehow," he grumbled, "I doubt that."

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"Hey, up yours, dickweed!"

The door slammed loudly behind Barret as he was propelled by a couple of lackeys from the inn. For short guys, they had a surprising amount of strength. Shoved from the door, he lost his footing in shock, tripped, and landed hard on his rear. The strength of push continued to move him forward a few feet, until he finally came to a rest, on his back, the world spinning in dizzy circles around him.

A figure loomed over him, blotting out the sun. "I take it that went well," Yuffie commented dryly, staring down at him with a tired irritation plastered all over her young face.

Barret slowly leaned up as the dust and sand settled around him. His surroundings finally took one position as opposed to multiple. Grasping his head, he cursed so vulgarly that even the young ninja winced. Thankfully, as he got to his feet, he realized nothing was broken and that he had escaped that little fiasco with nothing more than a few scrapes and bruises. Not to mention his damaged ego. In spite of himself, he felt himself blushing in embarrassment as the few people who had stopped to watch the scene moved on.

"Well, my ass," Barret muttered, brushing the dust and dirt from his clothes.

"You landed on your ass," Yuffie commented, looking up at him. He was huge, hulking man compared to her trim, petite sixteen year old frame, yet she regarded him without worry and spoke so candidly with the gall and bravado expectant of one of equal stature. Barret found that more than slightly annoying.

Red appeared then, strolling from the next door materia shop. The dilapidated building seemed to shake far too greatly with the closing of the wooden door behind them. The beast made his way quickly toward his companions. The sight of the fire red creature trotting along the streets of Costa Del Sol attracted more than a few glances. "Anything?" he asked, a wistful note in his voice.

Yuffie sniffed and shook her head. "Barret went in there and they 'threw' him out." She gave an irk of a grin. "Guess his many charms did not woo the happy people of Costa Del Sol."

"Yeah, well next time you can haul yo butt in there and talk ta 'em!" he shouted as he turned away from her. Yuffie rolled her eyes and followed after the large man. Red shook his head in dismay before resignedly trailing. Barret stalked

purposefully into the crowd, glaring everybody down, searching for this girl with the fire of anger. Of all the better things to be doing right then... He glanced down at his watch. "Shit! We only got fifteen minutes left." He turned to Yuffie, taking in her helpless gaze. He heaved a heavy sigh. "I hate to put my faith into those damn Turks, but at least they know what they're looking fer."

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"Damn it, Reno, what the hell are we looking for?" Elena asked tiredly.

Reno bit the inside of his cheek to keep from yelling at her. Constant badgering. Constant bickering. As much as he liked the young woman, at times Elena could be down right irritating. Especially when she was forced into doing something she didn't exactly care for. Elena could make any menial task into hell if she so chose. And she was doing a damn good job of that now.

The three Turks walked the length of the Costa Del Sol beach slowly, watching the people about for signs of the girl. Reno analyzed each woman he saw carefully, hoping for the beautiful glint of her purple eyes to look back, hoping to see that wild mane of green hair whipping in the wind. But every girl came up short. They weren't her. None of them. And that bothered him more than Elena's fervent whining.

The beach was, of course, packed that day. The sun baked the sand and the cool ocean water provided the perfect escape for people of all ages. Simply making their way through the masses was difficult, dodging games of frisbee and volleyball, side-stepping picnics, narrowly avoiding wet swimmers and surfers. And the Turks stood out rather bluntly in their pristine blue suits amongst the half-naked, tanned swimmers. The sun was merciless overhead. Reno felt sweat collecting at his hairline. There was sand grinding in his shoes, making every step an overwhelming vexation. He was hot, dirty, and annoyed. If not for the sake of finding her, he would have long resigned from this torturous task forty-five minutes ago.

Finally, they reached the end of the beach and stepped onto the heated asphalt of the road. Reno stared back out over the crowds, his one last hope that the girl was hiding in the people fading as he turned away, empty-handed. Elena shook her shoes free, disgust written all over her young face. "Damn it," she groaned. "I got enough sand in my shoes to fill a hundred litter boxes." She looked up to see the reaction of her comrades as she shook a small pile of sand free from her shoes, and was more than surprised to see them walking away, back in the direction of town. "Hey, wait up!" she called, jabbing her foot back into her shoe quickly and crouching to tie the loose laces.

Reno ignored Elena as he continued along the pathway, the hot asphalt shining in the glaring rays of the sun, soft beneath his stride. Rude walked steadily beside him, watching him, seemingly, with one eye, while the other scanned the beach yet again. "You are really intent upon finding this woman," he remarked. His tone was without heat or question, just a simple statement of fact.

Reno stopped at a bench and jabbed his hands into the pockets of his suit pants yet again. "Yeah," he murmured as he watched the swimmers, surfers, sun-bathers, and athletes have a good time in the sun. It was difficult to ignore their pleasure, laughter, and delight and concentrate on the task at hand.

Rude wiped a hand across his brow as he looked out the bright blue waters of the ocean, his eyes trailing to the area where the water licked the sky in a mesh of wispy clouds and glaring azure. "Don't worry," he rumbled, his deep voice resonating in Reno's ears. "The Turks can find anybody."

Reno glanced at him then, surprised by his abrupt and very uncharacteristic reassurance. He stared at the older man for a moment, waiting for some sort of response to be apparent in his placid face. When nothing followed, he turned back to the beach, whisking away a stray lock of red hair from his face. Elena came up behind them then, huffing. "Bastards," she muttered.

Rude then glanced at his watch. "We should head back."

Elena brushed away a few beads of sweat from her cheeks as she looked to Rude, squinting in the sunlight. "Who cares if we're late?" she asked, raising her arms in a shrug.

Reno turned to her, his eyes narrowed sharply behind the protective tint of his sunglasses. "I care." Elena sighed tiredly, shaking her head in disgust. Reno jabbed a finger at her. "Look, Elena, I don't like those self-righteous little pricks any more than you do. But Strife's right; we need to work together on this. You know they're good at what they do. Hell, they took down Sephiroth. That's sayin' a lot. We need their help. And if cooperating is gonna get it and abiding by their crap, then that's what we gotta do. Got that?" The ice in Reno's voice left no room for question. Elena swallowed hard. Reno could be very intimidating when he chose. She knew better than to go up against him when his voice grew that firm tone.

Reno gave one last hopeful look to the crowds before turning heel and heading back to Costa Del Sol, his head high with all the decorum and pride of a Turk. Inside, though, his spirits hung low in disappointment.

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Hot, tired, and frustrated, the team reunited at the docks shortly thereafter. Barret, Yuffie, and Red were the first to arrive at their designated meeting spot. They watched with a fading glimmer of optimism as Cloud, Cid, and Tifa returned, glumly walking. There they stood in silence, both teams having prayed that the other could have provided the clues and thus success that they themselves lacked. When it became clear, neither half of AVALANCHE had had a fruitful endeavor, hope fell on the Turks. But that, too, fell to the same horrible and slashed fate as the three blue-clad Shinra employees could be seen weaving through the crowd. Not much was said when they reached the docks. It was clear from the silence nothing had been found. It was a particular reason why the failure of this first search hit so hard. No matter how utterly futile and hopeless a situation may seem, there is always that energy, that glint of expectancy of fast and easy results, that grows in the hearts of men. Having that initial spark stifled and put out as one does a smoldering ember always hurts the most of all failures.

Finally, as they stood there in silence, depressed and weary of the long battle that lay ahead of them, Elena found the will to speak. And as it often was, her tone was laced with scorn. "Who the hell are we waiting for?" she grumped, folding her arms over her chest and staring at the wooden dock below.

Cid took a long drag from his cigarette and slipped a hand inside his jacket to the scratch at his side. Damn wound. Although it was completely healed, gone from existence, it itched like hell. "Vince," he declared as he exhaled a long plume of smoke.

Barret coughed and waved his hand before his face as the toxic fumes floated too close to his face for his comfort. "Where is that pasty freak, anyway?"

Reno glanced at his watch then, tapping his foot impatiently. Even if Costa Del Sol had been no help, that didn't mean some place else there weren't clues. Waiting around for some one wasn't helping matters any. "It's ten past five." He looked up at Tifa. "This guy late a lot?" He didn't know why he bothered to ask; he knew the answer long before Tifa shook her head to the negative. No matter what Vincent was now, he had been a Turk. A long, long time ago, the mysterious and cold stranger was once a comrade. Reno didn't remember him much from that time. Vincent had been one of the commanders, a cold and distant figure with which Reno never had much contact. He had been a rookie at the time, too, too low on the food chain to be of much interest to anyone. And then Vincent had disappeared and been transformed into whatever man he was today. It didn't matter once. He had been a Turk, cold, calculating, punctual. A Turk was never late unless it was fashionable to be so. And it certainly wasn't right then.

"Maybe he's found something," Red added hopefully, yawning. He licked his lips and looked up to Tifa. "Maybe he's had some luck."

"God, I hope so."

"Do you hear that?"

All the team looked to Cloud as he suddenly perked up from whatever dark thoughts had been swirling about his head. His distant eyes suddenly gained a hard edge, narrowed and cold. The sudden change in demeanor caught everyone's attention, as he had been silent and withdrawn since the meeting. He stepped forward and raised a hand to shush an already quiet group. They all strained their ears, trying to tune out the chatter and clamor around them, fighting to locate whatever strange or out of place noise that had alerted their leader's attention.

Yuffie's face wrinkled in irritation and resentment as she turned away, folding her arms across her breast. "I don't hear anything," she grumbled.

Cid shushed her quickly. There was some noise, faint, but growing louder. He could definitely pick it out from the muted throb of sound around him. "What the hell is that?" he wondered, glancing to Cloud. At times like this he almost envied the young man. Like Vincent, Cloud also had heightened senses due to the Mako infusions he had been subjected to so many years back.

Red stood then. "Sounds like firecrackers."

Screams then tore through the dock, causing the entire group to jump. High-pitched and slicing through the day, they rang out through the area. And that popping noise got louder.

"That's gunfire!" Tifa cried, whipping around as the dock erupted into chaos. People began to shove wildly, pushing and screaming. Whatever delicate sense of order that had restrained the chaos of the dock shattered utterly as the crowd rushed to get away from whatever menace was firing upon them. Screams and anguished, fearful cries filled the air, replacing the chatter and music of before. There was a thunder of feet on the wooden planks. People were trampled, lost, pushed into the water with a splash. It all happened in a moment.

Then, before the group even had enough time to realize what was happening, the crash and boom of an explosion filled their eyes. All eyes looked up with a snap at the sound and widened at the site of the huge Shinra ship that had ferried them across the ocean merely an hour before ignited with the fury of the dropped bomb. Fire consumed it in the rage of the explosion, expanding in a hot ball of searing flames. The heat seared skin and singed hair and a wicked wind whipped them like rag dolls. The sound was deafening, overwhelming, consuming. Then, a heart beat later, the ship began to leer. Flaming debris rained down upon them as the huge liner tipped dangerously to the side, fires and twisted metal spewing from her bulk. Its burning shadow loomed over them as it fell closer and closer, threatening to sunder and crush them in a breath.

"Shit!" Cid screamed as he grabbed Yuffie beside him and began a full-fledged sprint down the docks, running away from the tipping ship. In a heartbeat, the rest followed his example, realizing in that split second to remain there would be to welcome death. Cloud pushed Tifa in front of him and, despite her yelp, propelled her down the wooden planks, rushing to get out from beneath the looming ship. With a mighty cry, Barret leaped from the gangway onto the street, melding into the stampede of the crowds. Red trailed barely a second behind. The whine of bending metal filled their ears.

Reno let out a strangled cry as a burning piece of steel cracked him in the shoulder. Pain washed over him, so intense and furious, that his body numbed. He didn't feel the force of the impact through him back across dock behind him. The crack of his body against those of the panicked people was gone in the white agony of his shoulder. The explosion thundered to silence as he fell to the ground with a dull thud, the heat faded to cold, and the light blackened to darkness.

"Reno!" Elena called, but her voice was lost in the furious storm of voices. She watched his body in horror as it became indistinguishable in a mess of running people.

"Get down!" Rude ordered, grabbing her arm and yanking her far from gently to the hot planks of the dock. Fiery debris whizzed overhead, just missing the two crouching Turks. One victim behind them was not as fortunate to have seen it coming. The sharp edge of the burnt metal cut straight into his head, killing him instantly. Shrill screams filled the air as the pushing people knocked the body into the water.

Elena looked up, trying to calm her pounding heart. She succeeded for all of a second as she saw the huge ocean liner tumble to its side, crushing a smaller stock freighter to its right. The explosion of glass, metal, and wood answered the added pressure and weight of the megaton ship. Water rushed onto the dock as the smaller, demolished boat was pressed down into the harbor, displacing the salty liquid in great waves unto the people. That, however, did not stop the descent of the ship.

"Run, Tifa!" Cloud exclaimed as he pushed all the speed he could out of himself. His heart was booming, blood pumping between his ears. He glanced over his shoulder as the fires rained down on them, the ship looming ever closer. He could

see the people and crates fortunate enough to survive the explosion desperately trying to cling to the slick surface of the deck as it slid quickly out from under them. Cloud could feel the heat of the fire on the back of his neck. The ocean liner screamed as it crushed another smaller freighter, reducing it to nothing more than a compressed block of metal. It would destroy everything, annihilating all, obliterating the dock and everything on it. And in a few more seconds it would crush them... They would never make it in time. "Shit!" Moving without thinking, he grabbed Tifa's arm and pushed her off the edge of the dock. She gave a yelp as he threw them both into the warm waters lapping against the wooden dock. The green of the ocean encased them in its salty folds, distorting sound and sight. Without a moment of hesitation, Cloud tugged her, kicking powerfully under the water with all his might. He only rested when the light was gone above him. They both broke the surface under the dock, gasping the pounding feet above them consuming all sound. Darkness surrounded them. Cloud pushed Tifa up against a barnacle infested pillar, wrapping his arms around it and her securely. "Oh, God," she whispered. Then Cloud closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and braced for impact.

Cid tripped, stumbling and falling to his knees, as a huge wave drenched him. He struggled back to his feet before the crowd trampled him, coughing, soaked to the bone. Thankfully, the throng of people seemed to be thinning. Most were gone by now, the once overcrowded and teeming dock now nearly deserted. He winced and covered his ears at the unbearably loud explosion behind him, the screech of metal, wood, glass, and the crunch of bones filling his ears and squeezing his face into a tight grimace. He glanced over his shoulder, a soft stream of curses exiting slightly parted lips. That ship had fallen clear to the right, crushing all the smaller vessels beside it, taking half the dock into water. Countless, no doubt, had been crushed and splattered. All he could do was hope none of the others had been caught in it. And he couldn't even do that long.

A spray of bullets at his feet caused his head to snap around at scene before him at the end of the dock. Soldiers were exiting quickly from the helicopter pads where two choppers hummed steadily, feeding the situation with more and more bloodthirsty men. Quickly, he dodged to the left and dove behind one of the carts that had been selling those putrid pretzels of before, toppled in the street in the commotion. Bullets clinked off of the metallic, exposed belly of the cart. Cid winced with every thundering contact. He saw Yuffie not too far off battling with one soldier. Quickly, the ninja slashed him square across the chest with her Conformer. The body fell with a heavy thud and a scream to the deck. Cid took this distraction to his advantage and, bringing the Venus Gospel to bear, charged with a wild cry from behind the cart, leaping over the fallen apparatus. The gunman was caught by surprise in this rash action. Unfortunately for him it was too late to counter as Cid rammed the spear into his gut. Warm blood dirtied the silver blade as he yanked it loose, the body sliding to the ground.

Breathing heavily, Cid swung around at the sound of gunfire behind him. Barret was racing towards them, firing steadily at more soldiers that had seemingly appeared from nowhere and had taken up position between them. Cid followed the rope ladders that were their method of reaching the scene from the street to the skies above. And his stomach twisted in vile spite. "Malachai," he hissed.

There, venting soldiers from her deck, was the Highwind, hovering like a divine presence over the frightened denizens of Costa Del Sol. She obstructed the rays of the sun, leaving a darkened shadow over the battle ground below her. Cid stared in anger, his fists clenching tighter and tighter with each of his charged breaths. The approach of a group of soldiers and their gunfire drew his attention from his stolen craft. Hate fueling his fight now, Cid gripped the haft of the Venus Gospel so tightly his knuckles were white. He gritted his teeth and raised the weapon before him, at eye level, and delved into concentration. "Ultima!!" he cried to the heavens.

One of the materia orbs on his weapon began to emit an eerie neon glow. The same waves of green light enveloped him before collecting in a ball of bunched up electricity. With the fury of nature, the ball exploded in a tempest of green swirling clouds and fire, ripping the flesh from his offenders, reducing their bodies to ash. The wild display of raw anger continued for a moment more and then faded into a weak twinkle of greed sparkles. They, along with the particle remains of the soldiers, floated delicately to the dock.

Cid stumbled a bit at the slight strain casting the spell had put on his system, finding himself a bit winded. Red and Barret reached him, huffing. "Shit!" Barret exclaimed, raising his arm firing a steady flow of rounds on some approaching blue clad soldiers. "Where the hell are all these bastards comin' from?"

"The Highwind," Cid declared, shaking off his dizziness. Those rope ladders nearly fifty feet down the dock waved in the wind, tantalizing, beckoning him. Here was his chance. He glanced up at his ship longingly as more and more troops poured

from her berth. "Come on!" he shouted as he charged down the street.

"Cid! Cid!" shouted Red, watching as their friend ran in the direction of those ladders. Red looked up at Barret momentarily before yelling, "He can't possibly retake that ship alone!" And Red leapt into a heated gallop down after Cid.

"Aw, &^*#!" Barret answered resignedly as he, too, followed his friends. "Come on, ninja girl!"

Yuffie looked up as she brought the hard, glinting edge of the Conformer against the head of another soldier. Blood spewed from his mouth as he gagged, falling in a spasm to the ground below. Seeing Cid, Red, and Barret charge to the rope ladders extended from the Highwind above to the dock, she shook her head and sighed. "Damn fool old man!" she grumbled in ire before spurring herself into action, her nimble, long legs covering the distance in no time flat.

Red kicked a closing soldier soundly in the chest, his hind nails gouging into the soft torso skin of the man. He gave a wrangled yelp before following back, his gun dropping to the dock with a clutter. More and more enemies were seemingly appearing from no where, emerging from the allies, from the buildings... the assailants came onto them in a steady flow, like water rushing through a broken dam. They were severely outnumbered. Red clenched his jaw as another of the soldiers approached, raising his machine gun. Tightening his hind legs, he pounced upon the man with a ferocious snarl, his teeth barred. A terrified cry ripped from the man's throat as the force of the attack knocked him backed to the deck. His itchy finger yanked the trigger on his gun.

"Damn!" Barret yelled as he dove for the deck, covering his head with his hands, as the bullets rocketed overhead. They struck the wood around him with a steady thump. As the soldier hit the deck below, the spray of fire finally stopped.

Cid, apparently unaffected by the incident, grabbed one of the rungs of the ladder. "Cover me!" he bellowed as he secured his footing and began to climb.

Barret looked up from where he laid on the dock. "Cover you?! Dammit, Cid, what the hell you doin'?" His question was, however, unanswered by the pilot as the man continued steadily up the ladder. Perhaps, at the height Cid was reaching, Barret's voice was lost in the sounds of battle and wind. More likely, though, Cid had simply chosen to ignore the other man's words, his heart set on reaching his beloved Highwind and rescuing her.

More than slightly irritated, the large man turned back to a nearing assailant and rammed his fist into the man's face. There were too many of them, though. Cornered on all sides, Barret began firing at anything that moved, letting his instincts take over. He felt a warm wash of energy as Yuffie constructed a barrier around them. It would at least provide some protection. Barret wiped the sweat from his brow as more and more troops appeared. Silently, he prayed that Cid knew what he was doing.

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Reno moaned lowly as he slowly came around. The brightness of the sun against the blue of the sky wracked his sensitive eyes, causing an intense ache to spread about his forehead. Gingerly, he raised his right arm to rub his face but was met by a pain so tight it caused him to cry out. The feel of the fiery waves of agony emanating from his shoulder and washing his body brought him back to his situation.

The crack of gunfire caused him to sit up quickly, ignoring the sharp, numbing pain of his entire right side. Right then, he acutely felt every bruise and scrape he had sustained in that fall all over again. Locking it all away and forcing his dizziness and nausea down, he took in his surroundings with a quick flick his aquamarine eyes. He could see AVALANCHE down the dock a bit, battling a huge horde soldiers. The area surrounding him was demolished. The dock was wrecked and smashed, creaking precariously. Bodies were everywhere, shot, trampled, pegged by flying debris. Reno could see why as he looked to the ships. Indeed, that giant liner had toppled, crushing the two ships beside it, now lying on its side in the water. It was still burning, the stink of molten plastic, acrid smoke, and burnt flesh heavy upon the air. One of the masts of the giant liner had slice clear though the dock to the street. He gasped at the destruction. There was rubble everywhere, strewn about the area. Luggage, fruit, crates, clothes, boxes... it looked as though a tornado had swept through and leveled everything. The lower part of the dock had been struck by the giant ship and ripped upward. This was causing the part built at a higher elevation, where he now stood, to bend away from its pillars, the wood creaking and moaning in protest.

He didn't see Rude or Elena anywhere.

A pang of fear struck him coldly as he stood quickly. "Rude! Elena!" he yelled.

Creak.

Cold terror stunned him as he realized what was about to happen. A split second later, the dock burst beneath his feet. His sudden movements had disturbed the whole precarious balance of the wood on the pillars. It snapped violently from the supports that had fostered it for so many years, already weakened by water, rust, and decay before this incident. Reno cried out in shock as the apparatus tipped sharply to the left under his feet, sending him tumbling to his knees, before the whole surface slid out from under him to the water below.

Acting quickly, Reno managed to grab onto the edge of the broken wood as he slid by. The horrid motion ended with a jerk as he was yanked up by his arms, stopping his descent. He heard the large section of the dock hit the water with a splash. He cried out as pain spiraled down his arm, lacing about his chest. Gritting his teeth and closing his eyes, he hauled himself slowly up over the edge. More horrid creaking filled his ears as he slowly pushed his weight up from the abyss. Stinging discomfort filled him as his chest scraped against the splintered wood, his shoulder screaming with the effort. He looked up, his lips pulled back in strain, and saw to his horror that the planks in front of him were cracking, snapping with his weight. The boards he was on were about to go under, and they would take him with if he didn't get off them right then. Finally, panic churning in his stomach, he latched a foothold on the small planks and pushed himself up. Reno landed hard on his side on the dock, but was given no time to catch his breath as he scrambled to his feet. He made a running leap for the street, hit the pavement on his knees, and fell forward. He twisted around just in time to see the entire section of dock on which he had been laying tumble into the waters below.

Breathing heavily and feeling cold relief cleanse his adrenaline, Reno laid on his back and stared at the sky for a moment. That was close, he mused. Every part of his body ached, crying out for some sort of relief. However, in this situation, there was nothing to assuage his pain. He closed his eyes and swallowed hardly, trying to regain his composure. If he could just fall asleep right there...

A scream cut through the quiet, slicing into his ears with its shrill tones. Reno opened his eyes. His heart skipped a beat.

"Elena?" He pushed himself up with his left arm, his right wrapped around the bleeding cuts on his chest. The voice cried out again; it was definitely his friend. "Elena!" Frantically, he scanned the dock. She was nowhere to be seen.

A force suddenly rammed him from behind. Reno yelped as he tumbled forward, hitting the pavement hard, the breath rushing from his body. His chin smacked the pavement, his top teeth biting into his lower lip and drawing blood. His vision blurred with pain and dizziness, and for a moment, none of his senses registered anything. Then, the paralysis passed and he felt the cold barrel of a gun pressed against the back of his head. Somebody was pinning him to the ground, leaving him more immobile and helpless than his dizziness had rendered him. "Traitor," a voice hissed in his ear. "You don't work for Shinra anymore, ya damn Turk."

Bang!

The gunshot echoed through Reno's ears. He expected to feel pain, to see bright lights and taste blood. But none of those sensations struck him as he lay there. Something heavy fell on top of him, pressing him into the asphalt of the street. Reno opened his eyes. He was more than surprised to find himself still alive. Confused, he twisted around, to see what had happened.

The dead body of a soldier, dripping blood from his mouth from an obvious gunshot wound to the back of his head, had collapsed over him. He looked up in shock.

Elena and Rude stood there, the former with her smoking gun extended. She looked down at him, her face dirty and streaked with blood from a few cuts and an oozing nose, but still twisted in smug anger. "And once again I save your ass."

"Bullshit," he muttered, breathless, trying to salvage his cool. He gave her a twisted smile as he struggled to lean up, pushing the corpse from his slightly trembling body. "We're no where near to even for all the times I've saved you."

Rude leaned down and extended his hand. Reno grasped it and pulled himself to his feet, albeit slowly and gingerly. His two friends, aside from a few cuts and scrapes, seemed unhurt. Reno did not show how relieved he was at that as he drew his gun. The fingers of his right hand had gone numb, so he sufficed it to use his left. Thankfully, he was ambidextrous when it came to marksmanship. Both of the others noticed his wince and the seriousness of the wound on his shoulder, but neither spoke of it. To question a Turk of his ability to handle pain was to doubt it. "Come on," Reno said, heading towards the direction of the fight. "AVALANCHE needs our help."

"Oh, give me a break," Elena declared, raising her hands in helpless indignation before letting them slap against her thighs loudly. "We don't need to help them."

But her words were ignored as they headed to rejoin the battle.

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Cid glanced up, wincing as the wind slashed at his dry eyes. Quickly, he climbed the ladder, desperate to reach the bow of his ship. To touch her again. To feel her beneath her feet. The thought of it fueled his ascent. Nearly twenty feet below, he heard the fighting. It seemed so distant, though, as if the need to feel the Highwind overpowered his loyalty to the team. He could think of nothing else. One foot over the other, one hand over the last. Reaching the Highwind was all that was on his mind.

Malachai's smug face appeared as he looked up. The man leaned over the railing of the Highwind, looking down upon his rising nemesis as if he were nothing at all. Cid ground his teeth together and with newfound anger rushed up the ladder. It was all for naught, though. Malachai smiled arrogantly and pulled the rope ladder loose from the deck of the Highwind.

"You *&%#!" Cid shouted. And then he was falling. The air rushed around him, providing nothing for him to either slow or stop his descent. He barely had the chance to blink and draw a shocked breath before he hit the ground.

The dock was a lot softer than he thought.

"Goddamnit!" Barret yelled as Cid collided with him, sending them both to the ground in a tangled mess of arms and legs.

"Shit," the pilot moaned at once as they lay there in a heap, Cid sprawled on top of the larger man. Every part of his body wracked with the impact, the Highwind spinning nasty, nauseating circles overhead. His heart was pounding violently, his stomach in his throat. Overwhelmed by the suddenness of it all, Cid opened his eyes.

And was met with the gun of a soldier pointed at his forehead.

"Oh, shit," he grunted, struggling to free himself from Barret and his own disorientation.

The trooper cocked the hammer on his handgun with a click. "Move and you're dead," he declared through clenched teeth. His voice was muffled through the thick material of his helmet. "Hands up!"

Cid raised his arms slowly as he got to his knees, non-threateningly. After all, what choice did one have in this situation.

There was the sound of gun being fired. An instant later the soldier toppled forward, blood spewing from his open mouth and from an open chest wound. He fell to the deck with a dull thud. Cid jerked in surprise. He looked up just as Barret finally succeeded in untangling and righting himself.

Vincent raised the monstrous Death Penalty to eye level. He stood before them, unbloodied, unscathed by the battle. His long red cloak and raven hair waved in the wind. Cid looked him up and down in shock at his sudden appearance. "Damn it, man," Barret grumbled as he climbed to his feet. "'Bout time you showed up."

Yuffie jogged up to them, looking to the sky. "Shit!" she yelled, anger on her young face. "They're getting away!"

Cid ripped around fast enough to assault his neck and back with the sour sting of whiplash. He did not feel it, though, as he

watched the scene above. The Highwind's powerful engines whined to a start, and billowing flames exited from her rockets. A roar overcame them as she sped away, heading towards the horizon. Cid's jaw dropped at the sight of it. Gone. All trace of her, her familiar roar, her sleek stern, was gone with the order of a coward to retreat. Gone! No! "Aw, &*^%! No!" He stood quickly and raised a fist toward the fleeing ship. "Damn you, Malachai! Get back here! I'm not finished with you yet! Damn you!"

Another abrupt volley of gunfire caused the team to flinch and duck, taking whatever cover they could find. The last of the soldiers had grouped together and renewed their attack, having been abandoned by their comrades. With war cries muffled only by the crackle of the flames, the group advanced with a blood rage at AVALANCHE.

"I don't think so," Reno declared as he stopped his run. Gripping his gun tightly, he fired three quick shots, taking down two of the assailants. Elena drew her own weapon and killed another of the soldiers. Rude, his shotgun glinting wickedly in the sunlight, quickly unloaded a few rounds and took care of the rest.

And then everything was still for a moment.

Cid, breathing heavily, lowered the arms that had been protecting his face. The three Turks stood there, worse for the wear, but still alive. Barret, a bit ashen, whispered a curse before rising to his feet again. Yuffie shook her head before leaning down to wipe her bloodied Conformer on the body of a dead soldier. Red approached the three Turks. "Thank you," he said, winded.

Reno nodded curtly and holstered his gun. The dock was a mess of dead bodies and destruction. He glanced around, shaking his head. Looking to the team, he opened his mouth to say something, but a realization chilled him. Cocking an eyebrow, he remarked, "Where's Strife?"

Cid's blood ran cold and his eyes widened. He glanced down the dock to where the liner had crushed those ships... Crushed so many... "Oh, shit!" And he took off running down the planks. The others, quickly realizing what had happened, followed, panicked.

Cid's lungs burned as he dodged debris, forcing all the speed he could from himself, stretching past his limits. At that moment, he regretted every cigarette he had ever smoked. How could he have been so stupid? So selfish? To leave them all behind and go after the Highwind just because the opportunity had been right? Damn him! He leapt across the holes in the deck, bounding over the ripped areas, carefully but still quickly overcoming the tilted and dangerous sections. He could hear the group following, shouted the names of their missing companions. Oh, please, God...was all he could think. The words seemed to come in time with his running feet and pounding heart. Please, God! Please, God! Please, God!

Finally, he reached the area where Cloud and Tifa had disappeared. "Cloud!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs. Frantically, he ran to the crushed edge of dock, scanning the wreckage. Bodies lay beneath the hulk of the ship, crushed, mutilated. Cid nearly gagged in disgust and fear when he saw them, praying to God that they were neither Cloud nor Tifa. The others arrived, calling out the names of the missing comrades. There was no answer aside from the crackle of the fires, the creaking of the deserted, demolished dock, and the lapping whispers of the waves. They searched about frantically for a few moments, calling out, praying. The end of the dock was ahead. Nothing. Nobody aside from the few people who had come to watch the scene now that it was safe.

Cid collapsed to the dock, bracing his hands to his head. Grief swelled over him. He took a few shuddery breaths, trying to hold back his depression and pain. Tears blurred his vision as he stared, desolate, at the wooden planks below him. It was silent then, as they all lost hope. As they all realized what had happened. "Tifa..." whispered a crest-fallen Yuffie, her young face white. The emptiness consumed them. Nobody had the strength to speak in his grief.

A dull thud tore Cid from his thoughts. At first he ignored it, dismissing it as one of the many noises from the dying dock. But then it resounded again. He could feel the vibrations through the wood. And this time he heard voices. Faint. He honed his ears in on it.

"Now what do we-" Elena questioned furtively.

"Quiet!" Cid hissed, interrupting her. He narrowed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the woods. They were muffled but

he definitely could make them out. And he could identify the voice. "That's Cloud!" he shouted, joy washing over him, leaving his limbs weak and joints rubbery. The team looked on, confused and muddled. "They're under the dock! Hurry, help me get these damn boards up!!"

Although none of the others had heard what Cid had, their own love for their friends spurred them quickly into action, not doubting once the sincerity or legitimacy of what he described. Cid jammed the butt of the Venus Gospel in the crack between two of the boards and used it like crowbar to pry it up. Once it was loose, Barret moved in and, using his great strength, pulled the board up with the whine of bending nails.

And there they were.

Cloud coughed as a wave rushed over him. Tifa's limp body was in his arms. He looked up at them. "Take her!" he ordered, his voice hoarse and raspy. "Hurry! Take her!" Cid reached down and grabbed Tifa under her arms. Yuffie scrambled closer and helped Cid gently pull her onto the dock. Barret smashed another of the boards quickly by ramming his foot into it, sending splinters flying haphazardly. The extra room, though, improved their work in freeing their friends. Finally Tifa was rescued and lowered to the dock.

Cloud, water sputtering from his mouth, heaved himself up onto the surface above him. He shrugged off help from his friends and scrambled on all fours to Tifa's limp form. His face was ashen, his soggy hair dripping over his forehead. He coughed, utterly drenched. Panicked, he jabbed his fingers to Tifa's neck. It seemed to take forever, but he found her heartbeat, however weak. She wasn't breathing, though. Her chest was still. Slightly parted lips, once flushed with vibrant color, were a cold blue. Her face looked to be wax. "No, Tifa," Cloud pleaded, leaning down over her. He tipped her head back, squeezed her nose shut, and pulled her mouth open. Quickly, he leaned down and sealed her lips with his own, breathing into her. "Come on, breathe!" he cried when there was no response from her. He exhaled into her still, limp body again. She still did not begin to breathe on her own. The others watched, still, afraid that as they stared at her limp, soaked body on that dock that her life was slipping away. Tears mixed in with salt water dripped down Cloud's face. "You're not leaving me here, Tifa. Breathe!" he shouted in desperation before breathing into her mouth again. Cid closed his eyes and turned away.

A small gurgle. Then, she gagged, leaning up. Through violent coughing, she spit up a great deal of seawater. Her red eyes opened as she collapsed, heaving, breathing heavily, onto the dock. A cheer went up around the group as Tifa lay there, sucking in gulp after gulp of air. Cloud leaned over her, smiling. "Hey, baby," he whispered, stroking her cheek.

She looked at him with misty eyes. "Cloud?" she croaked. She sat up a bit as he pulled her into his embrace. She wrapped her arms around him and buried her head against his chest. He kissed her forehead. "It's alright," he assured softly. "We made it."

Cid collapsed backward onto the deck and closed his eyes. Slowly, he sighed in relief. His body was trembling. Twice, now. Twice he almost lost friends because he was stupid. Twice they had nearly sacrificed themselves for him. He wanted Shera badly, right then. He wanted her comfort, her soft scent and arms to make him feel better. Cid hadn't cried in a long time, but he felt he was about to then.

Reno turned away from the group. Silently he surveyed what was left of the dock. And he shook his head. A smile irked his thin lips. "Now that's what I call a party."