

Hell or High Wind

Chapter 8

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Cid held up his pack of cigarettes, watching with cold, disdainful eyes as water ran down the sides of the plastic before dripping silently to the grass below. Sighing wearily, he tossed the sodden, ruined smokes to the ground. "What a waste," he grumbled. He stared at the package with blank eyes for a moment, distant in thought and lost in memory, his need for nicotine forgotten in that instant. Then it passed and left him as hungry for a smoke and as cranky as ever. Angrily, he rammed the heel of his boot into the pack, smashing them into the dirt and grass below, and then grinding them in with the fury of a victim of arachnophobia squashing a spider. Smiling smally in satisfaction, he turned and walked back to the team.

After the assault on Costa Del Sol, the denizens of the party city had been all too kind, replenishing their ruined supplies and missing staples at absolutely no charge. It was all provided, of course, on their promise to leave and do so quickly. In the minds of the men and women who had witnessed the destruction of their entire harbor, the small group of strangers had caused the demolishing and ravishing of their peaceful coast. Their presence had obviously spurred the aggression and violation of their warm-water port. They were an immeasurable threat. The fear that their aerial attackers might return was all the more reason to get their targets as far away as possible.

Thus, carrying a generous load of food, armor, weapons, blankets, and tents atop four yellow, warking chocobos, the team had fled the decimated and ruined party of Costa Del Sol in search of their quarry.

Cid stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jacket, the material wet and rough beneath the pads of his fingers. Even now, about two hours after the attack, he was still damp, his clothes uncomfortable against his skin. Dusk was also falling about them, dimming the blue sky to a darker shade, stars slowly peeking their tiny lights from beneath the wisps of clouds. The setting of the sun had brought a cool wind racing about the plains stretching past Costa Del Sol and into the mainland. This did little to relieve his irritation, the air permeating his garments and caressing his skin as though he was naked. There was nothing worse than cold, wet clothes.

He reached the small camp the group had formed nearly an hour ago, glancing around with tired eyes, leaning heavily upon the Venus Gospel, the blade of the mighty weapon driven into the soft earth to provide support for his weight. The camp itself was nothing more than eight tents circled about a burning fire. In the cool, darkening air of dusk it spread about warmth, light, and security, stretching across their small area in which they presided and their souls as well. The aroma of burning wood mixed in with the pungent smells of the sea was heavy upon the cooling night air. AVALANCHE and the Turks were strewn about the fire, for the most part exhausted, watching the yellow and orange flame lapping at the air and spewing tendrils of smoke into the atmosphere above as it ate at the wood used as fuel.

Cid plopped to the ground tiredly beside Yuffie, folding his legs and heaving a loud sigh. He watched the fire for a moment, comforted and entranced by the popping and crackle, the sounds steady but without rhythm. Then he glanced to Yuffie, the girl's brown eyes clouded with thought as she softly munched on a red apple. She did not even look to him, completely attentive to whatever thoughts filled her head. Sighing again, Cid glanced around the rest of the camp. Barret was not too far away, one knee up with his elbow braced upon it. His eyes were narrowed in a contentious glare directed at Vincent. The other man sat across from him, cross-legged, head bowed. His long black hair flowed about him, darker than night. The Death Penalty was situated across his lap, his hands atop it. Even breathing was the only sound Vincent made, his eyes shut, his face cold and waxen. Somehow, Cid knew the mysterious man was not asleep. If Barret's malevolent glare bothered him, or if he noticed at all, although Cid was certain he would with such keen senses, he did not show it.

Cloud sat not far from Vincent, the massive Ultima Weapon idle in its scabbard beside him. Even lying in the grass, harmless, the sword still evoked a sense of danger, a gleam of power. Tifa sat between Cloud's spread legs, her back pressed to his chest. A heavy woolen blanket was wrapped about her shivering body and Cloud's strong arms enveloped her further. Her eyes were closed softly, her head buried beneath Cloud's chin, sleeping in the warmth of the blanket, the fire, and his embrace. Her face seemed a trifle bit pale in the bright, amber glow of the flames, but it was a vast improvement from before. After the attack, Tifa had been wracked with chills, coughing violently until her throat was raw and her lungs ached endlessly from the exertion. That, and the collective exhaustion of the team, influenced Cloud into choosing a suitable spot to make camp for the night.

Cloud met Cid's gaze, the fire licking glints into his eyes. Silently, Cloud's lips pulled into a small grin. Then he looked down at Tifa's sleeping form nestled against him. Gently the young man kissed her forehead. Cid observed his friend then turn back to watching the flames burn and dance. That smile had been only a friendly gesture, Cid knew. But a maelstrom of emotions threatened to overwhelm him as he watched Cloud hold Tifa. The first of which was, of course, shame. And guilt. And spite. How much more would friends have to suffer because of him? It was only two nights ago Tifa shared that same weak, friendly grin with him as she cradled Cloud's injured body. How many more times would he be the recipient of that smile? From Yuffie? From Red or Vincent or Barret? That small innocent grin that deep down inside was forced, that feigned innocence over accusation. How could Cloud not hold him responsible for what had happened to Tifa?

It was his damned idea to chase after the Highwind and try to win her back from Malachai while the young woman nearly drowned beneath the docks. Likewise, how could Tifa not blame him for that damned bolt that had ripped through her lover's body with a pulse of blood? How could they not hold him responsible? And how many others would be hurt because he valued his airship over his friends? Because he was reckless and thoughtless? Cid tried desperately not to sell himself short; he knew, where his conscience was weak, that it was not his fault. He could not have prevented Malachai from shooting Cloud or stealing the Highwind or placing the team once again in mortal danger. It was not because of him that they were once again chasing down a threat to life on the Planet. Shit, who the hell am I kidding? his mind asked darkly as he drew his knees up, crossed his arms over them, and braced his chin upon them. I deserve every bit of their anger, and I know it.

As Cid turned away from his thoughts in a last ditch effort to stifle his horrible conscience, he felt the tiniest bit of jealousy towards Cloud. What he wouldn't have given to hold Shera just as Cloud held Tifa right then.

"Ow! Dammit, Elena, that's my shoulder, not a piece of meat!"

Reno's voice caused Cid to look up at him, his thoughts interrupted. The Turk sat on a low boulder, his back straight as a board. The face that was so often loose with smug arrogance was now taut with a painful wince. He was naked to the waist, his suit jacket and white dress shirt on the ground beside him. Elena stood at his side, tending to the wound in his shoulder. Although Cloud, Tifa, and Red had insisted that the Turks use their Restore Materia to heal the bleeding injury that Reno had suffered, they had refused, declaring, in their conceited manner, that they "didn't need help to take care of their own". Thankfully, for Reno anyway, the wound was not as bad as it looked. The laceration had bled a great deal but was not very deep and had not hit the artery. Painful, but certainly not life-threatening. Elena had patched him up with the medical supplies they had acquired from one of the stores in Costa Del Sol.

"Stop whining, Reno," Elena admonished, applying a heavy white bandage to the wound after cleaning and dressing it. "Men are such wimps."

Reno blew an indignant sigh through his lips, ruffling the wild locks of red hair that fell over his brow. He lifted his arm as Elena instructed, grimacing only a bit as she wrapped gauze about his shoulder. The pilot's eyes drifted to Rude who stood not far away, his arms folded across his chest. The Turk's shotgun was hidden by the dark cloth of his jacket. Even in this dark, meager light, he wore his sunglasses over his eyes. He appeared cold, tall, and ominous, like a guard standing watch. Cid imagined the silent man felt concern for Reno even though he did not openly show or admit it. What kind of comrade, what kind of man would not? His suspicions remained uncertain though, for Rude had draped a cool mask of indifference and black glass over the windows to his soul.

Cid turned away from the Turks as he heard the soft patter of falling paws. Red approached and then sat beside him tiredly but not with a certain animal grace. Cid glanced to the creature, watching as Red opened his mouth widely in a yawn. After blinking a few times, he said, his voice warped with the coming of another yawn, "It's all clear. Nobody for miles." Red had been walking the perimeter of their small camp for the last few minutes, scouting for signs of possible dangers.

Silence fell over them again, an anxious, uncomfortable emptiness. It was plagued by heavy, distraught emotions and questions. Tension was laced into the cool night air. Barret continued to regard Vincent coldly, his expression laden with suspicion and hate. Cid was taken aback by the intensity of it for a moment, for some reason or another, not truly noticing the clear distrust and anger in Barret's gaze until then. He followed the concentrated, vicious glare to Vincent. And it clicked suddenly, the source for all this silent hostility becoming clear.

Barret folded his strong arms over his chest. "Where exactly were you while we were gettin' our asses kicked?" Everybody

looked up from his own thoughts, surprised at the question, more astonished at the tone with which it was asked. Barret had not said the name of to whom he was referring; the question's direction was clear.

Vincent opened his eyes slowly and looked up to meet Barret's gaze. Yet the red irises seemed oddly unfocused, fazed in the light of the fire. Barret's face softened a bit at Vincent's sangfroid. However, the red-caped man did not answer.

Reno slipped on his shirt again, gingerly putting his arms through the sleeves, before buttoning it up. He analyzed Vincent, watching with narrowed eyes. The mysterious ex-Turk acted perfectly still, his body unmoving even with the force of his breathing, silent and dark. It was chilling, inhuman almost, that the man could keep himself so utterly composed, so utterly quiescent. Never once had he seen Vincent fidget or flutter or mutter a word out of place. And he admired him for it. It must have taken an extreme amount of will to keep oneself so constantly under control. Reno had seen only one other do so and that had been the mighty Sephiroth, before he had lost his sanity. His mind drew a quick parallel between the two, declaring it a simple case of cause and effect. Still, he had only respect and curiosity for Vincent, which was a bit more than he could say for any other member of AVALANCHE.

Yuffie nibbled the last bit of flesh from her apple before tossing the core haphazardly into the night. Wiping her hands together, she leaned forward and said, almost snidely, "Yeah, really. What the hell were you doin', Vince?"

Cid turned back to Vincent, his mouth sealed. Though he felt no aggravation towards Vincent (hell, he had only just remembered Vincent's disappearance), he would be lying to himself if he had said he wasn't curious.

"We coulda used your help," Barret grumbled, turning away as he realized his harsh words weren't of any consequence to Vincent.

Silence fell over the camp again. Cid continued to regard Vincent, his mind in a wary state of curiosity, confusion, and cynicism. For some reason, he really wanted to know where Vincent had been that had prevented him from lending a hand in the fight. Barret was right; they very much would have benefited from his assistance. Tifa might not have nearly drowned, the Highwind could have been rescued... A fly buzzed his ear before landed nonchalantly on his leg, distracting him. Cid swatted at the unwelcome interloper, but was not quick enough and only succeeded in whacking his thigh, missing his victim entirely. "Damn it," he groaned.

"I found the girl."

Cid's head ripped up at the soft words the minute they left Vincent's mouth, shock coursing over his with a jolt of wet electricity. "What the *&%\$ did you just say?!" he demanded, staring at Vincent's placid, pale face intently.

Vincent met his gaze and repeated easily and with mellow tones, as though he was reporting the weather, "I saw the Ancient girl."

Cloud's brow was wrinkled in confusion and he sat up a bit. He opened his mouth to question Vincent, but Barret beat him to it. The large man jumped to his feet, murder in his eyes. "Why the hell didn't ya say something before, ya asshole?!"

Calmly Vincent lifted his face to meet Barret's gaze. "For that very reason," he declared in a stronger tone. Barret's face broke as he realized how loud his voice had been and how anybody within earshot would have no doubt tuned in on their conversation. He turned to Cloud. "We were too close to Costa Del Sol. I couldn't be sure of what spies or threats might be lurking in the town. The attack proved it was more than unsafe and insecure. I didn't want to chance Malachai hearing and giving him an unnecessary upper hand."

There was silence for a moment as those solemn, logical words sunk in, destroying any argument that could be made and supported as to Vincent's motives. Barret stared at him in disdain and fury for a moment, his chest heaving in ire. Then he sank to the ground. Even in the shadows of the night, the blush of embarrassment was evident on his dark cheeks. Silence reigned again before Cloud turned to Vincent. "What happened? What did you see?"

Vincent gave a small breath. "It was nothing more than chance, I suppose." He looked up into Cloud's bright blue eyes. "I was questioning one of the cart owners when I saw something very green out of the corner of my eye. I turned to look, but it was just fleeting, and was gone before I had the chance to take a step. On a hunch, I stepped out into the crowd and

looked around. After a few minutes, I thought for sure it had been my imagination and was about to give up when I saw it again." Vincent narrowed his eyes in memory. "This time, I got enough of a look to determine it was her, wearing a suit jacket and nothing more, a girl with long green hair. I followed after her as she rounded the back of one of the buildings through the alley. By the time I got there, she was already walking away from the town, heading out into the fields behind Costa Del Sol. I continued after her, but kept my distance. The last thing I wanted to do was frighten her away." Vincent shook his head and went on with his tale. "Then I heard the explosion, I was distracted and looked to the town. When I turned back, she was gone."

Elena seemed flabbergasted. She raised her arms in frustration. "That's it? Just gone?"

Vincent looked to the young woman. "I wish I had more to tell you."

Cid shook his head and pounded a fist into the earth beside him, crushing grass with the blow of anger. "Ah, &^*\$(! Goddamn it! We had both the damn girl and the Highwind right there and we let them both slip away! Shit!"

Red said to him in a soothing, non-invading voice, "Easy, Cid. We were outnumbered and facing an opponent from an advantageous aerial position. Even with Vincent's help, the odds of our victory over theirs were slim."

Realizing the logic behind Red's words with the heavy, exasperated sigh, Cid turned away, narrowing his eyes darkly. "It's not *&^%#\$@ fair," he fumed.

Reno was almost tempted to snap "life is very rarely fair" but he noticed Cid's trauma and stifled the snide, inconsiderate remark.

Another bout of emptiness befell them, each to his own thoughts. This new revelation simultaneously crushed and revived hopes and spirits. To think the Ancient had indeed been in Costa Del Sol and they had missed her, let her run away and prolonged this hellish quest drove the dagger of depression only deeper into their waning enthusiasm. Yet, the notion that she had been there and that they were at least on the right track brought a sense of satisfaction and hope to their moods. "Which direction was she heading?" Cloud asked after a long moment, looking up from the fire and settling his gaze on Vincent.

Cid couldn't have sworn to it, but he thought he saw Vincent's thin, colorless lips tug into a small grin. "This way," the mysterious man responded.

Elation bubbled through them. "So we're following her, then?" Yuffie chimed in. Vincent only nodded. The ninja girl grinned widely. "Heh. That's a relief."

Silence. A dulled sense of content completion befell them then, the night winds and hiss and crackle of the fires lulling them all from simple drowsiness to sleep. It became an understanding between them that it was time for bed, to rest up for the long and no doubt difficult journey facing them. Red yawned again. "Who wants first watch?"

Begrudgingly, individuals volunteered, particularly those that had not been injured or weakened physically by the day's events. Red would take the first guard duty, followed by Rude, and then Yuffie. Cid, glancing at the Turks as they headed to their tents, couldn't help but wonder if they would even bother to awaken AVALANCHE if danger should rear its ugly head. Too exhausted to even think much any more, he banished the notion, dusted off his pants, grabbed the Venus Gospel, and walked drunkenly to his own tent.

Cloud gently looped his arm under Tifa's knees, the other around her shoulders. As he lifted her from the ground, the blanket tip dragging, she, in the grasp of some dream, wrapped her arms about his neck. He plodded to the tent across from Cid's, stopping a moment. He looked back to his friend and shot him that same weak smile. "'Night, Cid."

Cid raised a hand to him. "You two behave yourselves in there," he remarked coyly. Cloud smiled again before unzipping the flap the tent and carrying Tifa inside. Cid watched the shadows against the brown material for a moment, and then turned to the sky. He noticed out of the corner of his eye Yuffie, Barret, and Vincent going to their separate lodgings. He gazed at Vincent strangely for a moment until the red lap of his red cloak faded in the shadows of his tent. Tired eyes returned to watching the winking stars in the black, night sky. They seemed to smile down upon him in that instance, wispy

remnants of clouds circling about. It was a truly beautiful night, perfect for smoke. Too bad he didn't have one measly cigarette on him. Imagine that, Cid Highwind without a cig. Damn the fool fates.

Cid took a deep breath of the cool night air and shook his head before stepping inside his own tent. He set his spear propped up against the back corner, the blade stuck in the ground. Thank God these were large tents, spacious. Moving without thinking, he kicked off his boots. His jacket and shirt came off next, followed by his trousers, all the garments landing in a damp heap on the ground. His blankets were cool and crisp, new. He slid into them, the sleeping bag soothing the tense knots in his back and neck. It felt so very good to be dry and comfortably sleepy. All the problems of before fled his mind. He couldn't conjure up enough energy to even remember what had bothered him. The last thoughts through his mind were of his wife and nicotine. That was the first time he had gone to bed without a smoke in twenty years.

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A low moan sliced through the serene peace of Tifa's mind, tearing her from her sleep. She opened her eyes slowly, the utter black of her surroundings stunning her. For a moment, cold panic claimed the young woman, racing through her blood. Then she realized what she was staring at was the blurry image of the moon through the top of her tent. With the flash of memory she became oriented with what had led her here, washing away her panic and terror.

Until she heard the groan again.

In a heartbeat, she recognized the voice. "Cloud," she whispered, her voice hoarse and strained. It cried out in pain, raw from all the coughing of the day before. She hardly noticed, though, as she listened intently for a response that never came. Harsh breathing coupled with low moans filled her ears. Tifa sat up straight in her sleeping bag, glancing around herself desperately, her heart pounding. "Cloud, what's-" She saw him, then, in the corner of the tent. From what she could see, he was on his knees, curled protectively into a ball, his arms about his abdomen. "Cloud!"

Swiftly, she rose from the bed, pushing away her exhaustion and stiffness in the blink of an eye. She reached him, placing her chilled hands against the warm skin of his back. He was shuddering violently beneath her touch. Tifa felt the blood drain from her face, her jaw dropping, as she ran her hands up to his shaking shoulders. "Cloud," she said loudly, watching as he writhed. "What's wrong?!" He only groaned, his voice tense with pain, in response. In the light of silvery moon, she could see his face. His skin was pale, incredibly so, his eyes squeezed shut into a hard, tight grimace, lips pulled back from his teeth. Sweat ran down his forehead, cheeks, and neck. "Cloud..." she whispered, astonished and terrified by the sight before her. For a fleeting moment, the thought of a nightmare passed in her mind. But she dismissed it quickly as he opened his eyes and looked to her.

"Tifa..." he groaned. "Oh, damn..." His eyes shut tightly again, but had been open long enough for her to see the agony in the deep, blue orbs, his pupils dilated. He cried out as some sort of spasm rocked him, falling weakly back into her. Tifa caught his flailing body, holding him tight as he quivered, his breath harsh and raspy through clenched teeth. Confusion and fear muddled her mind as she listened to his whimpers, her heart thundering blood between her ears. "God," he moaned, "it... hurts..."

"What hurts?" she asked, stroking his hair from his brow, shaking with terror. God, what was wrong with him? His forehead felt like fire to her, burning.

Cloud moaned weakly, clutching at his chest. "Make it... make it stop, Tifa!" he cried out, coughing. "I... I can't... breathe..."

How could she help him when she didn't know what was wrong? She needed assistance. Red, Cid, Barret, anybody! Panicked, she began to pull away from him. "Cloud, I'll get Red and Cid..."

"No," Cloud whispered, his face taut, distorted with hurt. Tears streamed down his cheeks, mixing with sweat. He grasped her tighter, the clamp of his large hand about her wrist causing her to wince. "No, Tifa... Don't leave me... Please stay - Ahhh!" The last of his words escalated into a yelp. Cloud grabbed his head, hands on his temples, tangled in his thick hair. The way he looked now... Tifa felt shivers run up and down her back and tears fill her eyes. She had only seen Cloud so agonized once before: when Sephiroth had been controlling his mind.

Tifa sat speechless, wanting so badly to run outside, to run and find somebody to help her... But she could not leave him.

She pulled Cloud's writhing body into her embrace, feeling the sheen of sweat covering his bare chest. Tifa closed her eyes, her hand sliding soothingly across his breast. She could feel the violent thunder of his heart under her fingers. "It's alright..." she said softly. "I won't leave you, Cloud. It's okay." But it wasn't all right. A thousand questions overwhelmed her, traumatized her to the point where she could not think so overly terrified. What if it was Sephiroth somehow doing this to him? God, how could that be? Maybe the Mako and the Jenova cells... Cloud, what's happening to you?!

He thrashed in her grip for a few more minutes, moaning, whimpering against whatever or whoever was ailing him. She caressed with delicate fingers his chest and arms, touching and soothing him wherever she could, wherever he'd let her. Her cool hands rubbed his forehead and then cupped his jaw as he tightened his muscles with another waves of hurt. A plaintive cry that shattered Tifa's resolve burst through his lips from deep within his throat. This seizure (Tifa knew of nothing else to call it) seemed less intense, though she could only judge by Cloud's reaction to it and might just have been that he was weakening. She hoped that wasn't so.

Finally, he calmed in her arms, tears leaking from his eyes. His face grew free and relaxed, his taut muscles loosening. Gradually his body became limp. His breathing slowed, rattling in his chest as he shakily inhaled and exhaled. He was still shuddering with little after-shocks. Tifa swallowed a lump in her throat as she held his face in her hands, her thumbs rubbing his cheeks. She knew not what to say, wanting desperately to talk to him but finding no strength to do so. Her mouth was so dry, it felt like she had swallowed a gallon of paint. The nausea claiming her made her feel light-headed. What could she do? What could she say? She was so confused and afraid. Breaking contact with him was the last thing she wanted to do. Gently, she held his body tighter against herself. Somehow in the pale light of the moon, her lips found his forehead, his cheek, and then his mouth. He did not kiss back, but she could feel the tremble of his lips between her own and taste his salty tears upon them. She didn't know what had happened. All that went through her mind was that something had nearly killed him and she had been helpless to stop it.

They remained like that for a few more moments, both too weak to move, drawing comfort from each other. Then he broke the kiss and slid out of her embrace. Gingerly Cloud sat up and grunted, holding his head in his hands and rubbing his brow. Tifa sat there, paralyzed with a bombardment of overwhelming sensations. Then, with a trembling hand, she reached for the lamp hanging from the central pole of the tent. Slender fingers turned the crank. The flame burst to life, filling the tent with gentle, but bright, illumination.

Tifa glanced back to Cloud and stopped cold. "Cloud," she said softly, gulping almost. He turned to look at her almost quizzically. "You're bleeding."

His face fractured in shock, fear, and confusion. He reached with shaking fingers to the side of his face. Running from his left ear down his neck and along his jaw was thick, red blood. He touched his tentatively and his fingers came away wet. Cloud stared at the blood covering his fingertips, his fingers trembling, his breath in gasps. Gagging, he collapsed forward, arms coming forward to brace himself.

Tifa immediately went to him, hands on his shoulders. She expected to see him heaving, vomiting. Instead he just knelt there shaking, eyes closed. "Tifa," he whispered. "What's happening to me?" The terror in his voice chilled her to the core. She could think of no words to comfort either of them. After all, all she had was the truth and what solace would uncertainty and fear bring him? She just wrapped her arms tightly about his middle and held him, resting her cheek on his back.

All was still for a moment. The fear was still alive in Tifa's heart, but was fading with weariness. The silence was oddly comforted.

It was also short-lived.

"Shit!" came a cry from outside. Cloud immediately looked up, his eyes narrowed. Tifa pulled away from him. They recognized the voice: Yuffie. The ground suddenly boomed beneath them, rattling the quaking for a mere second. Then again and again. Like giant feet striking the Planet. "Cloud! Shit, we're under attack!"