

Hell or High Wind

Chapter 9

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The skies stretched above him, the clear blue covering the earth like a canopy, tethered to the ground by invisible forces, it seemed, at the horizon. Not a cloud marred its crystal surface, its color that which the painter envied. It was truly a show of beautiful majesty, a occurrence of something at once so utterly breathtaking yet simplistic. It was the kind of sky that made everything, bird, animal, and man alike wish fervently to take to flight.

Cid, of course, was never one for simply wishing. Why only dream when the tools to do were so clearly laid out before him? Well, laid out in his father's garage. The old man would never notice the missing hammers, saws, and nails; a mess such as that work room invited inconspicuous disappearances. The wood and metal were easy enough to borrow from the supply hangar. Cid, after all, had all intentions of returning what he had used, bent, smashed, or no. His father never paid great attention to detail. A dented slab of steel would be overlooked, a missing one would not. He had learned that well enough through the years. Not being punished meant not getting caught. Not getting caught was the equivalent of putting back whatever he used, no matter what shape it was in.

A small grin twisted Cid's lips as he silently thanked whatever gods there be for his father's lazy eye. Well, not really lazy, as he considered it. More like prioritized. His father didn't care if he borrowed tools and materials every once in awhile, as much as his mother chastised him over his reckless behavior. His father almost prided himself on his son's ingenuity. He had an incredible sense for detail when it came to machinery. That he cared to inspect carefully for flaws and imperfection. Cid suspected his father was aware of his covert operations. But never once in his eighteen years had he been punished for spreading his wings.

His most recent venture laid now at his feet, resting upon the soft blanket of grass that faded to rocks as it neared the edge of the outcrop. The hang-glider bore all signs of what it was: a machine that had been thrown together at the last moment. Its wings were constructed of extremely thin nylon fastened hastily to stainless steel arms by screws that threatened to release its burden at every brush of wind. The harness was constructed from an old hammock and the blue straps of his book bag, and it looked less than safe. The whole design and construction had taken about a half an hour, borne from a moment of inspiration in the midst of a boring physics assignment. It was not a pretty product, but, according to Cid's calculations, it would serve its purpose.

Cid pulled a cigarette from his mouth, blowing a pillar of smoke out into the winds. He stood on a rocky outcrop not far from his home. Midgar appeared below him, nestled on a plain stretching to the ocean. The lights of the city were just becoming visible in the hues of twilight. Cid squinted into the breeze as it ripped around him, ruffling his disarrayed blond hair, caressing his skin beneath the cotton of his khaki work clothes. The dull rays of the metropolis glow seemed to reach out to him, drawing him to the busy life of the city, the crowded conditions and constant buzz of overwhelming noise. Eventually, he knew he would have to leave his home town and seek out a job in Midgar. All his attempts to fail high school had failed themselves, and he would be graduating in a few months along with the rest of his class. His last cling to the present freedom of his life was the hang-glider at his feet.

"Hey, Cid!" He turned at the sound of the cry and the accompanying thunder of feet up the hill. Hariel charged up the side, winded.

He stuck the cigarette back into his mouth. "'Bout time you got here," he declared, folding his arms across his chest. "It ain't my fault," his friend retorted, pushing the messy locks of red hair back from his high forehead. "Dad wouldn't let me go till I finished the damn physics homework. You're just lucky your old man doesn't care about your grades."

Cid bowed his head in a bit of anger, a bit of shame, and a lot of satisfaction. It was true his father hadn't cared too much about the letters that appeared on his report card every semester. Dad even calmed his mother as she perused the report. Throughout his school years, he had prided himself silently on his father's acceptance of his academic performance while other kids complained of punishment for low grades. However, now as graduation rolled ever closer, inevitable and unavoidable, he wished his father had paid attention to his son's lack of academic prowess. His denial for enrollment at Shinra's Air Academy was still fresh in his mind. It couldn't have been based solely on his high school transcript. Hariel, pushed by his father throughout school to constantly achieve, was also turned away. It made him feel a bit better. And it wasn't as if all his grades were bad; he did fine in physics and all math courses. Just everything else seemed to fall a little

short. What did the Air Academy care if he could spell anyway?

His train of thought was derailed as Hariel reached forward deftly and wrenched the cigarette from his mouth. He jerked back in shock. "This'll kill you, you know," Hariel said, dropping the smoke to the ground and crushing it with the slam of the heel of his leather boot. Cid rolled his eyes. "You'll be dead by the time you're thirty."

"Yeah. Right." Cid immediately reached into the inside pocket of his work suit and grabbed another cig. With the flash of a lighter it was smoldering, once again between his lips.

"You're freaking impossible," Hariel muttered. Cid only shrugged neutrally in response. The two companions were silent then, turning to watch the sunset splay color across the landscape. The breeze ripped about as they stood there, pondering the sky, pondering the city below, and which would hold their destiny. Two friends, constantly yearning to fly, yet held back by the indomitable forces of parents, reputations, and responsibilities. Hariel sighed. "Wind's strong today."

"Yeah." Cid jabbed his hands into his pockets and leaned forward as the wind whipped at him from behind.

Hariel wrinkled his brow as he regarded his friend. "Think it's too much to fly the glider?" he asked. He might have been a far mechanic and an average pilot, but Cid held the true talent in aeronautics. They both knew that. A good pilot could read the sky and interpret the clouds, to feel the pull of the wind and judge its strength and direction without the aid of modern sensory machinery. A good pilot could intuitively determine the weather. And, in that field at least, Cid excelled. Cid shook his head as he glanced at his craft, his creation, beneath him. "Nah. She's blowing hard up here but not enough to do a helluva lot."

That was the confirmation, the decision, and there the talk ended. Quickly Cid strapped himself into his glider. The weight of the apparatus was considerable but not extreme on his back. Still, its bulk caused him to haunch over some as he waddled more than walked to the edge of the outcrop. The thin arms spread the nylon, beating in the gusts, behind him like wings. Cid stood at the cusp, soil crumbling slightly beneath his boots as his toes reached over. Hariel grinned as Cid shot him a toothy smile, holding the cig between his thin lips. "Hell or high wind, right, buddy?" Cid nodded. "Hell or high wind. She's flying today." With that, he bent his knees and jumped from the outcrop. For the moment, it was as though he was suspended, standing still, tethered to the heavens by hope and anxiety. Then the glider dropped drastically. The cig was ripped from his lips by the whipping wind. Cid felt his heart leap into his throat as he continued to plummet. A cry of excitement tore from him. He closed his eyes and waited for the wind to pick him up.

It never did.

He hit the ground with a hard snap.

And he opened his eyes.

Oh, God, no. He recognized his surroundings immediately and shook his head in denial. He was back in his backyard again. It was the night Malachai had attacked, had ruined his wedding. Through the blackness surrounding him, Tifa's cries filled his ears. He ripped about and shook his head. "No," he murmured.

She knelt there in her black dress, her face dirty and streaked with tears. She cradled Cloud's lifeless body in her arms, swaying back forth listlessly. Her hands were covered in his blood. Cid stood paralyzed as she screamed, "Cloud! No! Please, don't leave me! Cloud!!"

Cid grabbed his head, covering his ears as if his hands had the ability to shut out her agonized wails. This isn't true! It didn't happen this way!

"You killed him, Cid." Cid opened his eyes and dropped his arms. Yuffie stared back at him, a hard glint in her eyes, her arms folded about her chest. "You murdered him."

He pleaded to her. "I didn't--"

Barret's voice cut over from behind him, causing him to rip around. "Ya know ya did, ya gutless bastard. He wouldn'ta died

if it weren't for you."

"That's not true! Shit, Barret, you were standin' right there!"

"Cloud didn't deserve to die for you, Cid." So startled that he almost tripped, Cid turned to look at Red. There was so much hatred in his eye. Cid was taken aback by the fiery gaze. "What made you so special?" Ice lined Red's normally benevolent tones. Cid shook his head. "Nothing does, Red. I ain't worth the dust on his feet."

"Damn straight," Reeve muttered, glaring at Cid. The world seemed to be spinning, black aside from the faces of his friends and Tifa holding Cloud. He felt like he was falling...

"You'll never be forgiven, Cid," Vincent declared softly, his hands pressed together, looking down.

"It wasn't my fault, goddamnit!"

"It was."

"You let him die, Cid!"

"I didn't!"

"You know you did." He turned at the sound of that voice. Shera stood behind him, her arms folded menacingly across her breasts. The white of her wedding dress was covered in blood. Her eyes were alive with hate and disgust. She had never looked at him in such a manner before, with murder lining her icy gaze. Cid felt his insides melt under her vengeful glare. "You bastard," she hissed. "How could you do this to your best friend?"

He fell to his knees before her and grabbed her dress. "Please, Shera, I didn't want-" She looked away. "You are no man. You are nothing."

"No!" he cried. But she only walked away.

And they all turned their backs on him.

Cid scrambled to his feet and ran to Tifa. He stumbled to his knees before her sobbing form. "Tifa," he gasped. She was so covered in blood, Cloud's blood, that the sight of her nearly made him gag. "Tifa, please!" Tears rolled down his cheeks. "You know I didn't want him to die! You know that I didn't want him to save me!"

"Oh, please, God," she wailed, oblivious to his words. "Don't do this to me! I need him! Please, God!"

Cid bowed his head and cried.

He felt a hand upon his shoulder. Gasping, he ripped around. Malachai smiled down at him, holding a gun to his forehead. "Hell or high wind, Cid."

Bang!

Cid fell back. There was no pain, no shock, no fear. This was what he deserved. Hell awaited him. He couldn't hear his heart beat his life away, couldn't hear it pump the blood from his body. That was gone. All that remained was Tifa crying. And Malachai laughing.

"Hell or high wind."

The laughing was the worst of it all.

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Yuffie ducked as the white flash of razor teeth whizzed past her, nearly talking her head with it in a great whoosh of wind.

Instinctively, she tucked herself low and rolled away, feeling the sickening stench and heat of a foul breath caress her skin. In the black of the night, the giant monstrosity of a creature that had intruded upon their small camp upon her watch blended in as though it was more shadow than flesh and bone. Only its hulking mass, the noise of a large beast it produced, and the persistent attacks told her what she faced was more realistic than a simple specter. All in all, the nightmarish roar that had sliced through her drowsy sleep and the shake and shudder of the ground under its massive feet had not been something to ignore or declare a dream and brush aside.

She gave a small yelp as a massive claw careened down at her, only the gleam of the talons in the moonlight alerting her of its approach. Shit! She pounced to the left, barely escaping a bloody, painful death. Yuffie's heart was thundering in her ears, panic pulsing through her, as she rolled to her knees and brought her Conformer to bare. The metal shined in the light of the stars, glistening with strength. With wide eyes, she looked up to the towering beast before her, standing a good twenty feet into the air. Black sinewy legs braced its massive chest as it stood there, its claws digging into and gouging the land below. Bright, blood red eyes looked down upon her with all the concern of a lion tantalizing a mouse before it made a meal of its catch. Heavy, loud breathing filled the once peaceful night air, the sound of air being sliced by the whip of its tail covering all other sound. Yuffie tore her quivering gaze from the creature before her and glanced at the weapon palmed so tightly in her hand. Silently, she quickly rattled off her materia supply in her head. It was quite a cache, and the Conformer itself coupled with her skills was not something to take lightly.

But she knew there was no way in hell she'd stand a chance against this.

"Cloud!" she called again, glancing to the young man's tent on her left. "Shit, Cloud, come on! I need your help!" There was no answer, no sounds of anybody rousing. What the hell is wrong with him?! Dammit, I need help!! "Cid! Barret! Goddamnit, will somebody help me here?!"

The beast charged again. Yuffie dove to her left, her heart leaping to her throat. Moving without thinking, she slashed with the Conformer in the direction of the shooting claw, hoping to at least injure her opponent. She felt a satisfying tear beneath her ninja star's edge, the handle yanking in her hand, and knew her strike had hit home. Unfortunately, she was not able to escape unscathed. The claw twisted forward, wrapping around the Conformer as it cut into the soft pad of the creature's paw and buried itself deep. One of the talons caught her shoulder and ripped a gash down her back, slicing through her flesh like a knife through butter. Yuffie cried out as she stumbled forward, hot pain choking her, warm blood immediately pouring down her side. At the same instant, the beast roared in agony, ripping its paw back from the ground.

Yuffie screamed as she was catapulted into the air, her fingers instinctively tightening about the hilt of her weapon. The Conformer was stuck in the vulnerable pad of the creature like a thorn. Numbing pain ran up and down Yuffie's entire right side in cold waves as her arm was yanked in the force, tearing the wound further. She wasn't about to let her prized weapon go, though, as the beast reared and flung her around violently, trying to dislodge the painful blade from its foot. Yuffie felt herself begin to black out, the blood loss, the pain, and her dizziness wracking her brain. In a last ditch effort, she managed to plant her feet against the pad of the beast. The world was blue beneath her, causing her stomach to twist and lurch at every glance. Squeezing her eyes shut, she gripped her weapon and pulled hard, pushing on the warm, soft flesh of the beast. With a squish, the blade came away bloody. Yuffie gave a scream as she began to plummet to the ground below. Barret slid forward on his knees, arms extended, as Yuffie tumbled into his embrace. He caught her with ease, thankful that she was so small and so light, and then quickly ducked as the beast, enraged, struck at him with its claw. "Shit!" he cried, barely dodging the attack. He kept the unconscious Yuffie tight against his chest as he scrambled away from the battle.

Tifa watched as Cloud charged out into the open, her cry that he should stop lost in the howl of whatever creature had attacked them. She gasped at the mere size of the demonic animal, its features lost in the black of the night. Cloud yanked the Ultima Weapon from its scabbard, the blade coming free with a burst of rainbow light and a clear ring. He brought the massive sword up defensively as he eyed their attacker with a mixture of awe, fear, and confusion. Tifa shook her head, her eyes wide, her blood cold. "Sweet mother."

"What the *&^% is this thing?" demanded Cid as he emerged from his tent, his Venus Gospel clenched tightly in his gloved fist. He, like Cloud, was naked to the waist, rumped and disheveled from being awoken so abruptly. The pilot had no time to utter much else besides a foul curse as the beast suddenly turned with the clamor and grace of a stampede. A snap that sounded all too much like a leather whip cracked against the night as its gigantic tail soared through the air. Cid dove to the ground and pressed his body tight against the cool grass as it plowed over him, demolishing his tent with a smash.

Tifa rushed to Cid, stuffing her hand into her Premium Heart. "Are you okay?" she shouted to him as he scrambled to his

knees. He could only nod, his face white, obviously shaken by the close call.

The reason for the creature's abrupt about face then became clear. Gunfire filled the night with the loud crack of ammunition leaving steel barrels. Vincent reloaded the Death Penalty, twisting the heavy gun carelessly about his hand before taking aim again at the beast. Silently, he unloaded round after round at it, firing mercilessly. As usual, he was cold and collected, not in the least bit disturbed by the hell spawn they faced. Rude stood to his left, breech loading his own shot gun before firing, his eyes narrowed behind the sunglasses he wore even at night. Elena fired again and again with the pop of a handgun, her fingers tight about its hilt. She was as composed as a Turk, given the situation. Inside, though, a terrible sense of déjà vu was chilling her.

Reno dodged the gaping jaws of the animal as he fired again and again. His shoulder ached mercilessly, numbing and slowing him considerably. Still, it was little more than a setback as he continued to launch round after round at the monster. He knew full well, though, that none of their bullets would inflict major damage.

Red XIII rushed up to Cloud, hearing the gunfire on the other side of the creature but unable to see what was going on through its bulk. Cloud glanced at him as he tightened his grip on his sword, his knuckles white. "What is it, Red?"

Nanaki only shook his head, breathless, as he turned to face their assailant. "I don't know," he answered shakily.

"Whatever it is," Cid said, gritting his teeth, "it's going down. Nothing moons Cid Highwind and gets away with it. Charge!"

"Wait, Cid!" Tifa cried, but it was too late, and her words went unheeded as the foolhardy pilot spurred into action, sprinting toward the gigantic monster. "Dammit! Cid!"

But Cid couldn't hear her in the wail of the monster and the thunder of his own heart, his breath charging into the night air. Gritting his teeth with the hard clench of his jaw, he tightened his grip about the Venus Gospel. The beast's black hide was targeted, rising about a meter and a half above his head. Fueled by his anger, Cid let out a cry as he jumped, bringing the spear back like a pole. The bright blade of the weapon glistened in moonlight for a heartbeat before jabbing deep into the side of the beast and stayed there.

If it felt anything at all, one could readily compare it with a pinprick.

"Oh, shit!" Cid cried in terror as the animal reared back, raising a massive claw, obviously planning to take a swipe at Vincent and the Turks beneath it. He was nearly crushed by the movement of heavy, suffocating fur as the portion he clung to moved back to the crevice where the animal's hind leg joined its body. The stench was awful, reeking of sweaty fur. Thankfully, before he was crushed, the Venus Gospel popped loose from the sheath of the creature's body. Cid fell with a thud to ground below, landing painfully flat on his back. The world blackened for a moment.

"Cid!" He opened his eyes again and shook his head to clear the pounding headache. Red ran up to him. "Cid, get up!"

As he saw one of the animal's paws falling down upon him with crushing force, he didn't need to be told twice. Shock and panic coursed through his veins as he rolled quickly from its path. Shit, shit, shit, shit! He could barely catch his breath as he scrambled to his feet, his spear still in his balled fist.

Cloud charged up beside them as fast as lightning, raising Ultima Weapon dangerously. With a grunt, the warrior sent the gigantic blade cutting through the air with a massive whoosh. It sliced into the fleeing paw of the creature, cutting through flesh, muscle, and bone with a crunch and a splurt of blood. The animal whipped back, jerking furiously, lifting its injured paw.

"Eat this, you bastard!!" The booming tones of Barret rose over the din. "Quake!" The loud whine and hiss of a spell being cast fill their ears, and, though he could not see the large man, Cid could envision the green light enveloping him. The air cracked with power as the illumination exploded.

The ground began to rock at once with the fury of a Titan, shuddering beneath their feet violently. Cid stumbled to keep his footing as the land below quivered and then shook outright, destroying his center of balance. "Goddamnit!" The ground screamed in protest as it ripped. Rocks, dirt, and grass were flung at piercing speeds into the air as the land tore, pulled

apart by the power of the spell. A giant fault ran beneath the feet of the animal, widening by the moment.

The beast howled in fury as it turned, tipped, and began to fall.

Cid looked up to see no doubt millions of pounds of flesh descending up him. "SHIT!!" He stood, paralyzed by the shock of it all. Thankfully, Cloud was not as inert as he for the young warrior forcefully grabbed Cid's arm with a grip seemingly capable of crushing iron. Cid gasped as he was yanked bodily back and thrown, skidding to the ground. It was no use. They'd never make it out in time!

What sounded like the crack of a whip caused Cid to jerk around. He was met by a tremendous force ramming into his face, neck, and chest, crushing against him with the impact of a cannon ball. The air rushed from his body, and he blacked out as his head was snapped back, blood rushing from his mouth.

"Cloud!" Tifa shouted as she fell to her knees from the tremor, looking frantically at the seen before her through the bangs over her eyes. Her heart stopped as she saw the animal's sinewy tail lash faster than the eye could see as the beast flailed. Quicker than anyone could prevent, it struck the fleeing Cloud and Cid with a heavy thud. One of them let out a scream as the force propelled them through the air. Hardly a heartbeat later, they both struck the ground, slid a moment and then came to a rest, nearly fifty feet away.

The impact of the beast's flank hitting the ground caused Tifa to stumble as she climbed to her feet. Heart thundering, she began to run to her fallen friends. A howl stopped her. "Tifa!!" She turned at the sound of her name, abandoning Cloud and Cid for the moment, as she recognized the voice.

"Oh, my God," she whispered, eyes wide, as a cold wash of fear and terror consumed her. "Red!"

Nanaki howled again as she fell to her knees beside him, the cry reverberating from deep within his chest, full of horror and agony. Tifa winced both at the sound of it and the sight before her. Red's lower body lay beneath the flank of the beast, crushed under the heavy weight of its flesh and bone. Red's eye was squeezed shut, his lips pulled from his teeth in pain, quivering, panting. His fore paws were braced on the ground, and he leaned back as far as he could, trying to pull his trapped hind quarters from the prison of the crushing mass. Tifa realized how lucky then Cloud and Cid had been to be hit by that tail. It had knocked them both from certain death underneath tons of sweaty fur and flesh. Red hadn't been so lucky. But she tore her mind from them and concentrated on her friend.

She pulled his head into her lap and calmed him. "Easy, Red!" she yelled as she held his shaking, thrashing body. "Pulling is only gonna make it worse!" His logic seemed to win over his pain and fear as he realized what she said was true. He stopped his struggles and weakly laid still, shivering. Tifa swallowed hard and looked up at the beast. She could feel the heat escape its skin, blanketing her in a sick field of warmth. Why the hell isn't it getting up?! There was no way they could free Red unless the massive creature righted itself. "Dammit, get up, you bastard!" She kicked it hard, as hard as she could from her kneeling position. Not a movement. "Barret!"

"Tifa!" Barret answered back from the other side of the animal. "Yo! It's asleep!" There was glee in his voice. "Let's get the hell outa here! I put it to sleep!"

Cold fear washed over her. Oh my God oh my God oh my God... "It feel asleep on Red! Get it up! It's crushing him!" she bellowed, feeling Red sag in her arms, weaker by the moment. "Hurry!"

"Shit!" came the response. The crack of gunfire was renewed.

Tifa felt tears brimming her eyes as she held Red. How were they ever going to wake something up that felt nothing of their attacks? "Hold on, Red," she whispered.

Reno fired the last of his rounds into the stomach of the beast, and then ejected the spent cartridge. His hand went to his belt for another magazine, but came up empty. "Shit! I'm outta ammo!"

Vincent ejected another shotgun round into the animal and then lowered the Death Penalty. He looked at Reno, and the Turk was more than slightly unnerved by the cool detachment, the utter composure, Vincent portrayed about the

situation. His friend's being crushed to death on the other side and he looks like he doesn't give a damn. "Bullets aren't doing enough damage," the former Turk declared.

"Gee, you don't say," Elena snapped sarcastically as she dropped her handgun to her side, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. "It didn't stop it before. Why should it now?"

Rude looked to Barret who still fired steadily away with the pop of a machine gun, his gun arm constantly raised. Silently, he lowered his own shotgun, realizing, also, that simple shooting was futile. The animal was simply too big.

Reno let out a loud curse of frustration and glanced at Barret ruefully from the corner of his eye, red hair falling haphazardly over his brow. The large man refused to give up, firing with a sense of guilt, of urgency and terror, panicked. The Turk could only imagine what was going through his head right now. It really wasn't Barret's fault, what was now happening. How was he to know that Red XIII had been in the path of the falling beast? Casting sleep on the animal had been logical to do. Still, perhaps it was borne from years of distrust and hatred, Reno found himself disgusted with Barret's actions.

Idly, he felt along his belt again, in search of another gun clip, this feeling of worthlessness disturbing, this notion of encountering an enemy that was unfazed by the Turks and their arsenal quite bothersome. No clips remained, but his fingers brushed against something all but forgotten. He let out a small "hmpf" as he produced his night-stick from beneath the folds of his rumpled suit jacket. "I'll just shock it to death," he mused softly, intending that no one hear his words.

Vincent looked up from beside him and his eyes narrowed in thought, obviously having heard Reno's words. The Turk had forgotten about Vincent's enhanced senses. "No, but we can shock it awake." The mysterious man closed his eyes and lowered his head. His arms raised. One of the green materia locked into his gun glowed to life. In a flash of neon green, bright tendrils leaked from the ball and circled about Vincent. They encased him with light enough to illuminate the darkest of night. "Bolt Three!" Vincent screamed above the whine of powering, elemental forces. The green light exploded. For a moment, it was still.

Then the air crackled. The smell of ozone drifted down upon them. Without warning, the sky burst. A flash so bright that Reno was forced guard his eyes followed. The world exploded with the bright flash of lightning as it furiously pummeled the creature from the heavens above. An inhuman, shrill cry was audible above the thunder as more electricity than any human could survive struck the sleeping beast. It was all over in an instance, the lightning fading back into the sky with a rumble. The clouds dispersed.

Reno lowered his arm and opened tearing eyes cautiously. The stench of burnt flesh and fur was so thick to the point of nauseating. But the lightning had done the trick. The animal was now back on its feet, moaning, foaming at the mouth. Black coils of smoke rose from the burnt flesh into the evening air. He glanced at Vincent and let out a slow breath, feeling his pounding heart slow. "Damn, man."

"Barret!" Tifa's voice cut through the noise. "Barret, help me!"

The large man took the beast's moment of disorientation to his advantage and sprinted beneath the animal, running between the legs. Reno watched until he could not anymore, the shadows obscuring the scene.

The beast shook its head as if to clear it. Then, with the thunderous shuffle of feet, the creature turned to face them. Its teeth were bared, gleaming wickedly in the moonlight, saliva dripping from open lips. Reno backed away instinctively. "Okay," he murmured. He glanced at the useless gun in his hand. "Now what?"

Vincent did not so much as glance at him as he loaded the Death Penalty with the quick flick of his wrist. Silently he fired again on the beast. Reno sighed tiredly. "Might as well throw rocks at it," he muttered as he caught the gun clip Elena tossed at him.

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"Cid."

It was so nice and quiet in the darkness. No cares. No concerns. The world was gone, or he was oblivious to it. In either case, Malachai, the Ancient, Shinra, his missing ship... it was so far away. Nothing hurt. Nothing was bothering him. He could sleep like this forever.

"Cid!" Somebody shook his shoulder, tearing him from the abyss of comfort. Stealing his darkness, his tranquility. For a moment, his semi-conscious mind floated back to earlier days, before Sephiroth and Shinra, before Malachai. His mother often ripped him from the serene happiness of sleep as he ignored the alarm on school days. And what would he say to that? Why, what any kid said, naturally.

"Just a few more minutes, Mom..."

"Come on, Cid! Snap out it!"

That didn't sound like his mother.

Cid's eyes flew open and he shot up from the ground. As he did, he was rewarded with a barrage of stinging pain from all over his body. His chest ached in agony, causing him to nearly fall flat on his face. His right arm wrapped around his injured side, his left coming forward immediately to brace himself. "Dammit! Not ribs again! &*%!"

He felt a strong hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Cloud kneeling beside him. The double-image of his friend slowly faded as the pounding in his head lessened to a dull throb. "What's happening?" he asked. Cloud shook his head. "I dunno. But it isn't good." A howl from the beast seemed to concur with that analysis.

Cid turned over and surveyed his wounds quickly. Aside from far too many bruises and scratches to count, the only major injury were the ribs. And it wasn't as if he hadn't dealt with that before. "I'm still in one piece." It was a miracle in itself that they had both survived that flight relatively uninjured. They were nearly fifty feet away from the monster. If it were not for the waves of thick, tall grass cushioning their fall, they would not have been so lucky.

Cloud nodded and stood up quickly. He extended a hand down to Cid and helped him to his feet. He knelt down again and scooped up the Ultima Weapon effortlessly. Cid glanced around, looking for the Venus Gospel. By the glint of the blade in the moon, he located his spear and picked it up from the ground. Not a dent. "Come on," Cloud said, and he took off in a run back to the battle.

Cid started to follow, but a wave of dizziness sent him to his knees. The already scraped skin cried out in stiff protest to such treatment. Cid winced and grabbed his head. "Shit. What a ride." Using the Venus Gospel as means to push himself up, he regained his balance and trailed Cloud at a full sprint.

Breathing hard, he reached the sight a moment later. A heavy odor of ozone mixed in with singed fur assaulted him, causing him to nearly gag. "Roasted animal," he muttered. He looked up at their opponent, still seemingly unscathed by their attacks, terrorizing, at the moment, the Turks on the opposite side. All this, and the thing was still kicking. The Highwind could take this son of a bitch done easy, Cid mused. He suddenly felt a desperate need to just get on his PHS and call up to his ship, instructing them to fire down with the concussion missiles. How easy would that be.

"Damn it!" Cloud shouted as that whip-like tail nearly took him down again. With an easy back-flip, he avoided it. "Look out, Cid!"

The pilot broke out of his trance just in time to see the all-too familiar approach of the monstrous tail. Moving without thinking, he ducked and rolled sideways. His chest ached dully with pain as he did so, but he ignored the pull of his muscles on his injured ribs.

The beast was content with wagging its tail, like a cat tantalizing a mouse before killing it and enjoying it immensely. As the tail rocketed back toward them, Cloud raised the Ultima Weapon, shifting into an easy battle stance. He made a massive swing as it neared, his face tight with concentration, the sword arcing down with a flash of rainbow light. It sliced through the tail like a knife through butter, the added motion of the appendage only adding to the energy of the blow. With a burst of blood that drenched them both, the tail fell limply away. The creature screamed a cry that rattled the Planet, tipping its head back in agony. The stump of the tail pulled away as it turned.

The beast ripped around to face them, but Cloud was already in motion, darting beneath it. "Come on, Cid!" he shouted. The old pilot didn't need to be reminded. He ran after Cloud, raising the Venus Gospel. Sprinting under the belly of the beast, not caring about the pain in his side, he raised the spear and jabbed it into its soft underside. The blade sunk in and cut along through the flesh, splitting like a scalpel during surgery. Cloud did likewise, tearing into its body as he ran, grunting with the effort of pulling his sword through the guts of the creature. It screamed again as they emerged on the other side. Cloud rolled away and came up to his knees. He let out a sharp breath, animal blood dripping from his lip. Reno regarded him coldly. "Nice look, Strife."

"Hey, &^%\$ you, Reno," Cid retorted, wiping away the blood from eyes. The stuff was disgusting, sticky and adhering to this skin. It was like being covered in warm, reeking mud.

Cloud glanced around the group, slightly frantic. "Where's Tifa?"

Vincent stepped up, loading his Death Penalty once more. "Nanaki is hurt badly. She and Barret are caring for him." Cloud's face fell, and his grip tightened on his sword.

"Watch it!" Elena screamed. All turned to see a huge paw racing down at them. A chorus of cursing began as all scrambled to get out of its path. Vincent was not as lucky and was knocked violently to the side, crashing into one of the tents. Nobody had the time to do much else but stand, though, as the snapping jaws of the creature bore down on them.

Reno climbed to his feet and was rewarded with the ad hoc stitching of his shoulder wound tore and the wound burst open. He collapsed down onto his knees as hot pain devoured him, grasping his injured shoulder. The world began to cave in, his vision fading.

Cloud watched as the Turk fell, holding his wound. The jaws careened down on him, threatening to make a meal of the injured man. Cloud acted quickly and leaped forward, dropping his sword to make his movements quicker. With as much grace as a stampede of elephants he rammed into Reno, taking them both down safely to the left, barely avoiding the razor teeth of the creature.

Reno laid still for a moment, shocked. Cloud untangled himself from the Turk and stood quickly breathing heavily. Reno turned over awkwardly and grabbed the hand Cloud offered. Easily, he pulled the Turk to his feet. "You can thank me later," Cloud said, not without a hint of anger lacing his tone. He retrieved his sword quickly. Reno watched as he jogged to the smashed tent Vincent had smashed into, confused, surprised, and shamed.

Cid was already at the tent, pulling the canvas away quickly in search of their comrade. Finally, they found him, twisted in the mess of poles, covering, and supplies.

"You alright, Vince?" Cid asked as the man sat up gingerly. For the first time since they had met in that cavern buried beneath the Nibelheim mansion, Cid witnessed Vincent display a clear cut sign of discomfort. He winced and cradled his right arm gingerly with his claw. Cid was almost taken aback by this.

Vincent shook his head and said, "My right arm is broken."

Cloud nodded and put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll get Tifa over here." A cry interrupted Cloud's words and he ripped around to witness the animal take down Rude with the swipe of his claw, sending the Turk into another tent. He cursed softly. "We gotta take this thing down. It's picking us off one by one!"

"Cloud, we could hack at this thing all damn day long and not even scratch it," Cid remonstrated. "We gotta make a run for it." "Where?" Cloud demanded, opening a hand to the fields around them. They were out in the open. No mountains or hills or trees...

"No cover, anywhere."

Cid's face fell. "Okay," he said. "Then what?"

The young warrior bit his lower lip. His eyes were clouded for a moment and he stared idly at the ground, deep in thought, trying to come up with some kind of plan. It was a leader's responsibility, after all, to ensure the safety of his team above all. A moment later, his face brightened. Bending down on one knee, he scooped something up from the remains of the

tent.

"You got a plan, Cloud?" Cid inquired, not missing the small smile and the change in his friend's demeanor. The young man nodded. "Distract it, Cid!" Then he took off in the direction of the beast.

Confused, Cid stood and followed. "Sit tight, Vince!" He ran after Cloud, hoping to have a hint as to what was going on. But Cloud was already gone, hidden in the shadows, seeming to have disappeared. He looked up at the monster batting at the two remaining Turks. "Okay," he muttered. "Now what?"

Reno saw nothing better to do. He picked up Rude's fallen shotgun and hammered away at the beast. Deep down inside, he knew it was useless, futile. They would never kill this nightmare with simple guns and bullets. But Rude was unconscious, laying helpless in the mess of the tent. He couldn't leave his friend unguarded.

Narrowly missing a blow from one of the talons that would have meant his death, Reno dove to the side and unloaded another round into the beast. Nothing. It didn't even slow it down. He let out a cry of frustration. "We can't even hit the damn thing!" he bellowed, scrambling to his feet.

Elena shook her head and fired at it again and again. She had to be running out of ammo. One could only carry so much. Reno checked the shotgun. Three rounds left. That was it. And it wasn't like they would do much damage. It wasn't like they'd amount to much, anyway. God, it was hopeless and Reno was tired of it.

"Where the hell is AVALANCHE?" he demanded rhetorically, not expecting any sort of response. He was surprised when he got one.

"Over here, you bloated, piece of shit!" Reno ripped around at the sound of Cid's voice, and for a moment, he almost thought it was he to whom Cid was referring. The sound of accompanying gunfire told him otherwise though.

Barret had joined the old pilot, returning from helping Tifa with Red and Yuffie. His gun arm was pumping out round after round of munitions, flashes of light lining the barrels of his weapon. Cid himself was now handling the massive Death Penalty. The gun was resting awkwardly in his hands as he fired, struggling to keep his balance. He handled it with about as much grace as one with no experience in guns was expected to, with little poise and aimed poorly. Still, he got the message across. "Yeah, you, you %*&^, low-down, butt-lickin' bastard!"

The beast roared to face this taunt. "What the hell are they doin'?" Reno breathed softly, lowering his gun.

Cloud waited until the monster was fully engrossed with Cid before making a move. Breathing heavily, his heart thundering in his ears, he emerged from behind one of the tents and ran as fast as he could, holding the Ultima Weapon with both hands. Pushing himself beyond his limits, he skid between the hind legs of the beast. Blood from the severed tail dripped upon him as he fell to his knees beneath the rising and falling belly, ripping his pants further at the knees. The creature hadn't seen him.

He took a deep breath as he stumbled forward a bit, looking frantically for the holes Cid and he had sliced into the animal's flesh. At the time it had been just to injure and irritate the animal. Now they served a far more useful purpose.

Finally, his scanning eyes located the torn flesh, which blended so easily with the black fur and the shadows beneath the beast. Cloud scrambled beneath it, bringing up the Ultima in his right hand, and looked up. Blood dripped down on him in great quantities, as it ran down the length of the gash. He would only get one chance at this. It had to work.

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he raised his sword and with all his strength plunged it into the already ripped flesh. Just as he had hoped, the beast reared, only tearing the wound more. He retracted his sword and jabbed it in again, this time parallel to the skin, cutting clean through the muscle and fat. Pulling the Ultima Weapon free, he lifted the concussion grenade he had pull from the wreckage of the supply tent to his mouth and yanked the pin out with his teeth. Not allowing himself a single thought, he reached up inside the path he had cut himself with the grenade pawned tightly in his left fist.

He couldn't suppress a grimace as he felt the warm mush inside, reaching in as far as he could. The slippery muscle and

flesh provided little traction and he was more than afraid that the grenade would not stay inside. However, he had little time to worry about it as he pushed it in as far as he could and ripped out his arm. The beast had felt his movements and was beginning to turn. And the grenade was ticking down.

Lifting his sword once again, he charged out from underneath the beast. "Everybody, get down!!" he screamed at the top of his lungs.

He had no time to make sure they had heard him, though, as the animal exploded behind him. His sight was washed with blood as the wave of innards struck him, propelling him from his feet and away from the creature. He hit the ground again a moment later, tucked into a ball, and slammed into something hard.

The creature screamed.

The world blackened.