

Honor's Contempt

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Cloud was surprised at how things could suddenly go from bad to worse.

There were few things left in life he could categorize as "worse". Having been to the ends of the Planet and faced the most horrific demons the Planet could come up with, he thought he was pretty well versed in what was "bad" and "worse". Right now, he could definitely say that he was looking at "worse".

He didn't know how long it was that they had been fighting. All he knew was that it had been long enough for the Shinra to push them back into the forest surrounding Gongaga. Fighting within the confines of the trees was nearly impossible. He had lost track of everyone, including his enemies. For a brief moment, he was afraid that the fight was over and he had missed it, that maybe he had failed again by not being there to stop the Shinra from taking over the little town of Gongaga. This was one of the few things left that he could give to Zack, and he was failing. Again.

He found that happened a lot.

Pushing those thoughts from his mind, he hefted the Ultima Weapon in one hand as he bounded through the brush and between the trees. At least he knew where he was. There were about a hundred meters between him and the path leading to the reactor. That was where the Shinra would triangulate and attack. They didn't need the town; they wanted the reactor. There were only two Mako Reactors left in the Planet that would function. They had both been secured. Cid and his Highwind were sitting over Fort Condor lobbing bombs at the Shinra that came to close while Barret and his shippers from North Corel had taken the Nibelheim reactor. Seeming how the reactors in Midgar had been completely obliterated, Gongaga was the only place left. The Shinra would not get this reactor, he would see to that. They would have to kill him and all his friends. Unfortunately, they didn't seem to have a problem with doing just that.

Cloud burst from the undergrowth and jumped onto the path, kicking a branch from his boot. He tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword, ready for anything. There was no one there. Was he late? Had he failed again, missed the Shinra? He found the prospects of that happening as rather unlikely but just cruel enough to be true. Maybe he was early. Could there be a horde of soldiers just down that path ready to gut him for a gil?

He had this unnerving feeling that he was about to find out.

Instinct made him turn around quickly, a foreign noise that stuck out in the sounds of faraway battle forcing him into action, something he knew he had heard before as though it was a tinkling of music that played when the villain entered a scene at the theater. He heard it and didn't like what his ears told him, so he turned and didn't like what he saw any more. For a moment, it seemed as though the world had slowed down from the fast pace of battle to watch this confrontation unfold. Only his own ragged breathing and the thundering of his heart in his ears measured any time that passed. They were locked in a staring contest, sharing a glare that can only be seen between old enemies that consider each other nuisances while recognizing skill, a certain look of hatred and respect melded so close together that it is nearly impossible to distinguish between the two. Aquamarine and blue. They had shared this look so many times before.

Reno's eyes narrowed.

Cloud knew what was coming, but he also knew that he was too slow to stop it. Light flitted around Reno as he sprung into action, raising a hand in the air as he released the magic inside the tiny sphere of power he held in his hand. Confuse. Cloud wanted to jump out of the way of the magic, wanted the spell to fizzle. He knew from experience that such actions were impossible. Reno always hit his mark.

The light exploded around Cloud, dazzling him with its brilliance. The need to just watch the beautiful array of sparkling light tugged at him relentlessly. Self-discipline kicked in, though, as well as years of training. Reno could skewer him in a minute if he left himself become immersed in the disorientating wall of liquid color. He could and would beat this. All he needed to do was focus.

He could do that much. Zack deserved it.

Cloud squinted against the light, forcing his eyes to look to his surroundings beyond it. He staggered backward. He couldn't find anything. He blinked a few times, but he wasn't entirely sure whether or not his eyes were open. He thought they were, but he would have been able to see the gray green trees beyond the colors. All the pretty blues and purples and reds and yellows. It was a grand rainbow like the kind he always saw through the mountains in Nibelheim. It was like the Mako springs that twinkled in the caves his mother told him never to visit. He could dance in these colors forever, live in the warm nostalgia that they brought, knowing that he could be home without ever having to return to the horrible place he had once lived. So beautiful like a thousand little stars being born and dying within an immense nebulous cloud. He wanted to stay within its depths forever and knew that he could.

That was until a horrible pain cut through the colors and jolted him back to reality.

Years of hard core experience took over his actions, and, before he had even shaken off the disorientation of the spell, he was swinging his sword around in the direction he assumed the attack had come. The blade sliced through the air with an audible whistle, connecting with nothing.

Reno ducked under the mighty Ultima Weapon, and he had more than a few choice words on the tip of his tongue when that blade nearly took off his head. Instead of uttering them, he took advantage of Cloud's sloppy attack with one of his own. As soon as the sword sailed past him, he stood, swinging his own weapon up and catching Cloud's jaw with a satisfying thunk. His finger quickly pressed down on the trigger of the nightstick, sending a burst of electricity through Cloud. That oughtta wake him up.

Cloud's teeth clacked together, inadvertently biting into his tongue. The iron taste of blood filled his mouth as the force of the blow sent him flying backwards. And then, he felt the horrible burning that took over his nerves, cascading through his body as though it was a part of him that flowed through his blood. When that struck him, he felt as though he had died, that his heart had stopped beating, that his lungs had stopped breathing. But the pain was still there, though it was fading. For a moment, he thought that he had died. The tingling sensation that was slowly coming over his limbs told him otherwise.

As Cloud regained his bearings, he thought for sure that Reno would finish him off there, and it would be over, ending with his final failure. Reno, however, seemed to be content with letting him get back to his feet and recover his sword, watching coolly from across the path. Cloud frowned as he got to his feet, flexing his hand slowly before snatching the hilt of his sword. That was the last time he was going to let the stupid nightstick hit him.

With a challenging cry, Cloud launched himself into action, racing toward Reno, fury etched in his features. He felt as though he was the bull who had been pricked with the needle and irked to just the point where its anger blinded it and fed its actions. He was so sick of Shinra and Reno and all the other Turks. He just wanted them all to go away and, hopefully, die.

Reno paused, the thought of fleeing flitting across his mind. He wasn't too fond of that idea; he never had been. He was no coward. He may have been many things, most of them criminal or degenerate in nature, but he was not a coward. He did not run from things whether they were flesh and blood or less tangible. Even if he was one to run from something, it was too late to do so anyway. Cloud would overrun him in moments. For while he was no aficionado of running away from a fight, he was even less so for running in dress shoes. So, he braced himself and waited for Cloud to run him over. It wasn't one of his brighter moments in life.

Cloud rammed into him, thinking to skewer Reno on the Ultima Weapon. The Turk twisted aside, and the blade grazed his side, slicing into the thin cloth of his suit and into his flesh. Warm blood rushed from the wound as Cloud tackled him, driving him into the hard packed dirt of the path. The breath left Reno's lungs as he was crushed under Cloud's weight, and pain flared through his torso. He ignored that, using the force of Cloud's lunge to flip him onto his back. Neither moved for awhile, each regaining his breath.

"Damn, Strife," Reno gasped, holding the wound in his side. "We're getting too old for this."

Cloud sighed, pushing himself to his feet and dusting the dirt off of his pants. The world spun once around him in a nauseating circle before coming to a halt. Reno had also stood, wiping a bloody hand on his slacks. Cloud frowned. "Well, don't start something that you can't finish," he replied.

Reno straightened. "Now, now, Strife. Nobody said that I wasn't going to finish this, you know. Maybe I just think you have an unfair advantage over me with that huge sword."

Cloud laughed bitterly. "That's a lame excuse. Maybe I think that nightstick is a little unfair."

Reno shrugged in response. "We could always not use weapons. Might be fun."

"Might be," Cloud agreed.

The Turk moved forward, discarding his nightstick and offering Cloud his hand. "Deal?"

"How do I know you won't go back on your word?" he asked, watching Reno suspiciously. "Seeming how you don't seem to have any set of morals that I can see, you are more than likely predisposed to breaking promises and lying through your teeth."

"Ah, Strife, you're no saint," Reno declared. "Your word is about as good as mine. A mercenary honors all business transactions. So does a Turk. Just pure business, Strife."

Cloud ground his teeth. He hated being called that. Every time Reno said the name, he felt as though he couldn't trust the man any more than he could trust a petty thief. It ground on his nerves, and he was sure Reno knew that, too. It was probably the only reason Reno used the name. Had it been someone else, Cloud would tell him to shut his mouth. However, he knew that any complaint he voiced would only land on deaf ears.

He engulfed Reno's hand with his one, a grim smile on his face. "Deal."

Reno smiled back in response. The smile disappeared quickly, though, as he shot into action, pulling Cloud toward him in a vicious yank. Cloud was caught off balance and stumbled forward, unable to catch himself. Reno stepped aside, grabbing Cloud's forearm as he staggered past. Reno ignored the pain flaring in his side as he brought his leg around to kick the back of Cloud's head. The wound tore as Reno slammed Cloud's body to the ground, still holding the arm as it twisted and cracked from the force. Cloud let loose a strangled cry as the bone broke, and Reno released the arm, staggering back a few steps as the fire in his side overcame him.

Cloud tottered as he got to his feet, cradling his broken arm in his good one, trying hard to ignore the flaring pain that grew with every movement he made. His head was pounding as he forced himself to survey the situation. Reno was better trained and more seasoned in hand to hand combat than he was. He had had only preliminary training during his time with the Shinra. It was only enough to know how to beat a guy bloody in a bar room brawl. He was severely outmatched.

He also knew that Reno was faster than he was. Not that he was slow, but Reno had spent his entire life learning to be ready. So, Cloud would only have to use his strength to his advantage. He knew he could simply overpower Reno. There was no doubt in his mind about that. To do it now, with one arm broken and a pounding headache, though, would take some time. He didn't have time.

Cloud frowned as he let his broken arm fall to his side, biting back the pain that came with the action. He hated broken bones. He pushed that from his mind as he walked toward Reno, silently wishing that the Turk would drop from blood loss before he had to fight anymore. That wish was quickly taken back. He wouldn't want to shame Zack, would he? He was fighting for Gongaga. The town was probably already taken by the Shinra. He would never know.

Cloud tried an experimental kick that was easily sidestepped by the Turk. He was already aware of Reno's weaknesses, an

advantage that most men would kill to have over their enemies. However, Reno knew all about him, too. It all equaled out.

He attacked twice more, leading off with a punch that was ducked which was followed by another kick that was blocked. Cloud paused, watching Reno, waiting for any sign that the Turk was going to attack him. There was none. He pursed his lips, his mind racing with thoughts. Reno was going to be defensive today, a slight change for someone Cloud had assumed was driven purely by aggression. It was somehow comforting to know that Reno had some sort of self-control.

Cloud turned back to the fight, using a variety of attacks he hoped would slow Reno down. Most of his attacks missed by some degree or were blocked. A few connected, one drawing blood. His attacks, however, were mainly ineffective, but that was all right. They were meant to tire Reno, and he would tire eventually. When he did, then Cloud could say that he hadn't failed, that he had beaten Reno in combat. Gongaga wouldn't fall if Reno was beaten. After all, when Shinra's best can be destroyed, the rest are easy pickings. But he'd have to beat Reno first.

Cloud charged at Reno once more, hoping to knock the lanky man over again. Reno saw what was coming and decided that he couldn't afford to suffer through similar results to what had happened before. He made an attempt to move out of the way, stepping to the side. Cloud saw what was happening and changed his tactic. He matched Reno's movements, grabbing the Turk by the shoulder and bringing his knee up into Reno's solar plexus.

Reno doubled over, gasping for breath as he slid to the ground. He was not about to let Cloud win, though. He swung out with his legs, swiping Cloud's feet out from under him and sending the blonde-haired man to the ground. Cloud was back on his feet quickly, though, despite a small twinge of pain in his left ankle. Reno pushed himself to his own feet, wincing as he straightened. He knew that that pause had probably decided the fight and thought that bracing for the final blow was worthless. He did so anyway, not that it helped any.

Cloud's fist rammed into his face, and pain flared through his head. He was vaguely aware that he was falling backward, though the stars dancing in front of his eyes took most of his attention. No one had ever punched him hard enough to be called a knockout, but he knew he was fighting to remain conscious. He would not let Cloud win. Turks did not lose; he did not lose. There wasn't one fight that he had lost. All the times he had been forced to walk away from battle, that wasn't losing. He didn't care if white agony tore through him with each breath he took, or if his own heart beat away all his blood while he fought. He would not lose.

Cloud straightened, glancing at the blood soaking through his glove from split knuckles. His other arm was still swinging limply at his side, and he knew that it was a bad break. Any movement he attempted with it was pure pain. He could only thank his lucky stars that Fate had looked out for him today, that he had been able to take down Reno, that he wasn't shamed by failing Zack once more. He wasn't a failure, at least not at the moment.

Reno groaned, pushing himself up as he slid through the dust and dirt. He wiped the blood flowing from his nose with one hand, though he only managed to smear it rather than get rid of it. Rubbing his head, he got shakily to his feet.

"Haven't you had enough?" Cloud asked, forcing a bravado into his voice that he didn't feel. Cloud wasn't sure if he had much more to give.

Reno blinked a few times and shook his head, though Cloud wasn't sure if it was a response or to simply clear his vision. "Nice punch," he muttered. "Holy shit."

Cloud didn't respond, watching Reno warily. His knuckles stung mercilessly, and he wondered exactly how hard Reno's head was. The Turk had never listened to any sort of reason. What kind of man was he, who had destroyed an entire plate for no reason at all except that a measly order had called for it? What kind of coward did that? He hid behind orders and coldness, pretending that life was some kind of game where the winners went home alive while the losers fought it out with God or the devil.

"You make me sick," Cloud declared, feeling an overwhelming hatred that he had never felt before. It was as though he was being eaten alive, inside out, by a rage so hot it made hell seem frozen over.

"You finally realize that. Well, Strife, if it's any consolation, I make myself sick sometimes, too," he replied, clearing his throat before spitting blood onto the road. There was no jest in his voice, no anger, no bitterness. It was simply something that had taken him his entire life to figure out and that he was willing to admit. "I despise you."

Cloud frowned. "Huh?"

Reno licked his lips. "You heard me. I despise you, Strife. You fight for this bloody Planet... who gives a shit? The world's going to hell, and it doesn't matter much if you squirm along the way. Just get with it, Strife. There isn't anything left on this rock worth living for much less dying for. You're willing to throw your life away for this? These rocks and trees and freakin' animals? So what? We're all gonna die, you know. You think our kids're gonna do any better with this world than we are?"

"At least they'll have a world."

Reno snorted as he turned. "Ah, bite me, Strife. I stopped giving a rat's ass a long time ago."

Cloud shook his head, watching the retreating back of the Turk. "You're such a coward, Reno."

Reno stopped walking, closing his eyes against the glare of the sun. He wished he could close his ears to the words that Cloud had spoken just as easily. He couldn't, and it was little solace that he didn't believe the words were true. He was not a coward. He didn't run from the truth like some other people he had met along the way in this pitiful existence. He met it face on. So what if he didn't like what he saw? It wasn't like you could change the world.

"You think that walking away from this is going to save you?" Cloud asked, shifting his weight from one aching ankle to another. "You think that you can hide behind the fact that we'll die sooner or later? So what, you say. So, you despise me. Coming from you, Reno, that means less than shit. You're not the type that wets his pants and runs from a battle, though. Oh, no. You never get to the fight. You can pretend all you want to, hide behind cold eyes and machismo or whatever. But, when it counts, you're not there, and that's all that counts. Everything's business as usual. You could change, and all you do is walk around in a world of isolation where you figure nothing can touch you if you think nothing does."

Reno frowned, reaching into his jacket. His hand closed around the cold metal of his gun, the last weapon he had against such men as Cloud Strife. "Thank you for that startling analysis, Strife," he said. "What are you? My shrink?"

"Who would want to sit around and dissect your black heart?" Cloud asked coldly. "Who would want to know how a fool like you ticks?"

Reno turned sharply, yanking the gun from his holster. With the quick movement came dizziness, and he almost blacked out, but he wouldn't let oblivion steal him from this victory. But, as he aimed the gun at his nemesis, he didn't feel victorious. It was as though there was an immense pain in his chest, as though he couldn't breathe, and he felt the burning sting of tears and sweat in his eyes. He wondered for a brief moment if he would be able to pull back on the trigger. He took a shaky breath.

Cloud shook his head, kicking the toe of his boot into the dusty ground. "You really are a coward," he declared, disgust ridden on his tongue.

Reno bit his lower lip, scrutinizing Cloud through narrowed eyes. He adjusted his grip on the gun, his face betraying nothing of what he was feeling. He had been trained that way. All his life, he had been shown how to hide any emotions that might be betrayed by a facial expression. It was too late to change. He figured he'd be dead soon, anyway. Why bother?

"You know something, Cloud," he replied. "I really don't care."