

Note-I am following the lead that several other writers have set and am pretending that there is no such thing as Full Cure, Regan, Cure 3, and even Cure 2. They just make things too easy. Keep that in mind as you read this chapter (and the rest of 'em too). Thanks.

Chapter 20: The End of a Confrontation

"Amaani seems to have a great fondness for kicking and stabbing."-Faye Texihera

Cloud grunted and swung the giant sword again, in a slice that would have cleaved Amaani in two if the woman hadn't leapt back and countered with a sword that Cloud had immediately recognized as the Masamune.

Numerous emotions raced through his mind almost too quickly for him to recognize. Fear, anger, hatred, confusion, curiosity. But he knew one thing for certain. He wanted this woman dead. He wanted to see her on the ground with either a large gaping hole somewhere or with no head.

Amaani's sword flashed as it flew toward Cloud's own head. He cursed in dismay, barely ducking to the side in time to escape the deadly blade. That swift move saved his life in more ways than one. Sharp pain registered as something plunged into his shoulder.

"Aah," he gasped, turning from Amaani for a split second to find a short sword sticking out of his arm.

Thinking him to be distracted, she moved forward, confident she had him this time. Her cockiness left her open to attack. Cloud whirled back around and reached through her guard with the Ragnarok. A deep slash was carved through her arm. Throwing him an outraged and incredulous look, she backed off to let some of her men attend to her wound.

Cloud found himself back to back with Elena as the blonde woman wrenched the sword out of his shoulder and stabbed a soldier through the heart with the other. The immediate threat gone, she turned her attention to his injury.

He winced as her deft hands probed the bleeding hole in his arm. "Sorry 'bout that," she said as she managed to rip a strip from her jacket. "One got past me." She wrapped the makeshift bandage around his arm tightly. Too tightly, in Cloud's opinion.

"I can't feel my arm," Cloud complained, moving the limb in experimental circles.

"Deal with it," Elena replied coldly. "You're just lucky that you moved at the last second. Otherwise this sword would be in your back and you wouldn't be here to whine to me right now." She glanced over his shoulder. "Hey, looks like recess is over, Spike. Your playmate is back."

"Someone's been hanging around Reno too much..." Cloud muttered under his breath as he spun to find that Amaani was close. Very close. He threw the Ragnarok up at the last minute, stopping the stroke of the Masamune inches from his head. Amaani pressed down on the blade, bringing the Ragnarok closer and closer to his head as he struggled. Her eerie silvery eyes glittered with victory.

Keller's voice rang out. "Milady! Milady! It's an emergency!" Amaani sighed in exasperation. Interesting how Keller's stutter always disappears in the face of an emergency. Throwing her entire weight against the sword, she flung Cloud to the ground. Then she spun to walk airily away, tossing out a backward kick when Cloud jumped up and came running after her. Her foot connected with his temple, and he lay still.

The report of a gunshot rang out far too close to her, and she whirled to find a bullet coming at her head. Without thinking, she held up the Masamune in the way that she had been taught, willing the ancient power to come to the blade.

The bullet bounced off the sword with a metallic clang. Dammit! She cursed mentally. Father told me not to reveal my true powers quite yet! Her head came up dangerously, eyes raking the chaos for the owner of the bullet. The white orbs met with a familiar pair of widened brown ones. Several yards away, hands fumbled hastily to reload the shotgun.

Amaani gave a surprised grin. It's the pilot, Maiden. The one who was flying the plane that took away the little bitch who caused all of this. She shrugged, eyes still locked with his. Ah well. He's already seen my powers. Perhaps I will give him a more...intimate demonstration.

One strong hand came up and closed into a fist. Maiden's head shot up as he dropped the shotgun and his hands flew to his neck to find nothing there. Yet Azrael knew he felt the dark pervasion of his senses, and he struggled to run. Hell, he struggled to move anything besides his head.

Amaani chuckled wickedly. Try to fly away now, little man.

The laughter and words echoed through Az's head, and he looked around wildly, feeling the cold tendrils of fear begin to creep into his brain. Amaani was far, far more powerful than they had realized.

Raising the Masamune, she held it toward him, point first. He gave a small spasm of pain as something that felt like a sword plunged into his shoulder. When he turned to look, there was no blade, yet the bleeding wound was there. His gaze went to Amaani who was standing, grinning wildly, still holding the Masamune out. She twisted the blade and the fire raking its way up and down his arm grew worse as more warm blood flowed down the limb.

"Oh Typhoon," he whispered, his face screwed up into a grimace of pain. He fought to pull his arm away from the invisible marauder, but it wouldn't obey him. Instead, he watched in shock as his arm twitched and trembled under the force of what Amaani was doing to him.

Oh, have no fear, human. The carnivorous smile on the white-haired woman's face widened. It only gets better from here.

Her arm holding the sword dropped gradually, and the cold, sharp bite of steel slid down deeply through his arm, leaving burning pain and bubbling blood in its wake.

Azrael lost the ability to think coherently as the fiery touch dominated everything. Cold stabbing blade; agonized moans that he didn't realize were coming from himself at first. Dropping to his knees, he couldn't hold it back any more as the brutal invisible weapon ripped through muscles, skin, bone. He threw back his head and screamed.

Amaani was so caught up in toying with the pilot that she didn't notice what was going on around her. Something crashed into her from behind, shouting angrily, "Let him go!" Amaani went down, nearly on top of her assailant.

Her sword waved wildly as she fell, and Azrael cried out again as it slashed across his face, leaving a line from the outer tip of one eyebrow across his nose to the jawbone on the other side of his face. It was a distinguishable line for just a moment, then it began to bleed, curtains of crimson liquid washing down his face, into his eyes; the coppery taste in his mouth. But as Amaani's concentration was broken, her hold on him broke as well, and he crumpled to the icy ground.

Rolling to one side swiftly, Amaani was almost immediately back on her feet and standing over a slight blonde woman. One of the several people that she had chased out of Costa del Sol, if she remembered correctly.

"You dare to defy me?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Elena growled deep in her throat and began to stand, but Amaani's boot caught her flat in the face, knocking her back down. Trickle of blood started from her nose and the corners of her mouth as she lay still. Amaani raised the Masamune high, over the unconscious form--

"MILADY!" Keller's urgent shout came.

Sighing in annoyance, Amaani left Elena in a heap on the ground and moved to where Keller was waiting on the fringe of the battle.

"What, Keller?!" Her voice whipped and cracked in fury.

Keller winced, but pushed ahead. "Milady, you had better hear this." He motioned to a soldier who had been standing safely behind him.

The soldier--obviously the radio operator of one of the squads--came forward and held the small, high-tech radio out to her.

Frowning, she listened to the tinny female voice. "This is Rocket Town calling anyone who will assist. We are under attack by a large hostile force. Help is urgently needed and requested, over."

She turned to Keller as the message began to replay, one eyebrow raised in question.

"It's b...b...been re...re...re.... rep...repeating-" He looked pleased that he had gotten the word out, but continued hurriedly at a look from Amaani. "like th...th..." Amaani glared. Keller forced the word out, gulping. "that f...for several m...minutes. S...so f...fa...far there h...ha...ha...have been n...no r...resp-"

Suddenly, another voice, now male, came through. "This is Shinra HQ at Midgar calling Rocket Town. Rocket Town, come in, over."

"This is Rocket Town, over!" was the immediate response.

"Rocket Town, help is on the way. Several flying transports are going to be there within several minutes, over."

The woman sounded ecstatic. "Roger that, Shinra HQ!"

"Hold on there, Rocket Town. Hold on. This is Shinra HQ at Midgar, over and out." Amaani was still for a moment, head bowed, and Keller and the soldier wisely retreated several steps. Then she looked up, expression enraged. "Damn it!" Then, to Keller: "Where the hell did they get a radio powerful enough to break through the jamming!?"

She held up a hand to forestall an answer. "Rhetorical question. All right, we're moving out. Order the retreat. Then find me someone who is a member of the Highwind crew. We're going to bring them along with us and get our answers on the airship."

Keller nodded, then began to shout instructions.

Amaani began to stalk off toward the airship, but stopped in puzzlement. The leader of her Tanduri troops--Rahilah--was standing over beside Highwind, the man that she had been ordered to destroy. And she--and she-- Amaani's mouth dropped open. She was tearing the throat out of one of Amaani's soldiers!

"RAHILAH!" Her infuriated screech carried, and the gray-furred beast looked her way for about an instant before leaping at another soldier, claws outstretched.

Amaani stormed toward Rahilah, eyes flashing and Masamune held in her grip tightly. Suddenly, a crowd of her own men was there, engulfing her, carrying her along with them. "Let me go!" she screamed. "I order you! This is your lady! Let me GO!" But the soldiers, joined by another group, just became more tightly packed as they marched down the path and across the fields. The last glimpse she caught of her enemies was of Highwind leaning casually on his spear, his wife

standing beside him, Rahilah calmly cleaning her claws, another of the humans that she had chased out of Costa del Sol coming to speak to them.

"Damn you!" she shrieked, losing all semblance of self-control. "You mortals are going to lose next time! You'll wish you'd never been born by the time I'm through with you!" And her soldiers inadvertently carried her away.

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Cid vaguely thought he heard Amaani yelling something, but he couldn't be certain. Suddenly aware of a presence behind him, he whirled to find Rude standing there.

He stared the other man down for a moment, then nodded to him in respect and said gruffly, "Rude."

He received a nod in return. "Highwind."

"Was it my imagination or did I really talk to Az?" Cid asked the bald man.

A faint smile appeared. "No, Maiden's here."

Cid blinked, turning to look all the way around them. "Where, is the question."

Shera frowned. "This doesn't seem right. Why are they leaving?"

A voice from behind them made them all jump. "I know why!" They turned to find a flushed and grinning Faye.

Cid blinked again. "You're not from Rocket Town, so I hope you don't mind if I ask. Who the hell are you and what is going on?!"

She laughed and proffered her hand. "Faye Texihera."

After a brief hesitation, Cid took it and shook it. "Cid Highwind."

"Cid, Faye is the friend that I left the kids with," offered Shera.

Cid looked at the short woman in a new light. "Thanks. But if you're here, where are they now?"

"I left them with-" She stopped suddenly, her gaze alighting on Rahilah, who had been sitting quietly beside Shera this whole time. "What...Umm, did you realize that one of those lion things is standing right there?"

Shera gave a small smile. "Yes, I did. Her name is Rahilah."

"Pleased to meet you," rumbled Rahilah.

Faye jumped, while Rude looked mildly surprised.

"It...uh, you talk?" asked Faye.

Rahilah's mouth opened in a grin, sun glinting off of the sharp, serrated teeth. "Yes, I do."

"Back to where you took the kids?" asked Shera.

Looking slightly rattled, Faye elaborated on what she had begun to say. "I left them with the group of young kids and older people that you sent off to hide. I figured you wouldn't want them to see this." 'This' was demonstrated with a wide sweep of her hand, pointing to the town square, overrun with bodies, gore, and blood. Then the woman mystified Cid even more by turning to Rude and asking, "Where are Elena, Azrael, and Strife?" She looked worried.

Rude gave a small shrug. "...Last saw Elena pulling a sword out of Strife's arm."

"What about the pilot?" pressed Faye.

"We saw him not all that long ago," Cid broke in, still puzzled about what was going on and how these people knew Az.

"Good. He's probably all right then," Faye said. Then she turned back to Rude. "Could you show me where you saw Elena and Strife last?" Her expression was oddly intent. He gave her an odd look. "Why?"

"Because I could have sworn that I saw a blonde woman tackle Amaani..." Faye trailed off.

Rude's eyes widened. He moved across the square, long legs striding quickly, stepping over bodies in various grotesque positions. Moans and cries for help greeted them, and Cid, Shera, and Rahilah stopped following after a moment, sidetracked. Faye trotted after him.

Rude stopped, and Faye nearly crashed into his back. "I saw them here." Eyes roving, Faye stared at the piles of bodies, looking for their friend.

She was so intent on her task that she didn't notice for a moment that Rude had moved, and was crouching down. Faye hurriedly scrambled to his side, suppressing outcries of disgust at the corpses. I'm only a secretary, dammit! I shouldn't have to deal with this shit!

He was bent over the still form of Elena, fingers held to her neck. He looked up as Faye approached. "Pulse."

Faye closed her eyes in relief and she leaned down next to Rude.

A footstep from behind made them both whirl, Rude's gun out and pointed at the threat without conscious thought.

Cloud swayed unsteadily on his feet, holding one hand up in defense as he used the other to sheath the Ragnarok on his back. "Mighty quick to point that thing, aren't you?"

Rude replaced the gun and turned back to Elena, ignoring the swordsman. Faye slapped the unconscious woman's cheek gently. "Hey Elena, wake up!"

"That's not going to wo-" Cloud began, then stopped as the blonde woman gave a faint groan and her blue eyes opened slowly.

She stared up at them, looking puzzled. "Am I dead?" was the first thing out of her mouth.

"Hey, the sleeping beauty awakes," came Cloud's voice from behind them.

Elena rolled her still slightly unfocused eyes. "I can't be. He's here." The two had discovered a mutual dislike for each other in the helicopter on the way to Rocket Town.

"Why would you think you're dead?" asked Faye, brushing a lock of curly brown hair out of her face.

"Because when the last thing you remember seeing is Amaani's boot and her raising the Masamune, you wouldn't expect to be alive," replied Elena wryly, pushing herself up to a sitting position and wincing at the stabbing pain that went through her head.

"S'funny, that's one of the last things I remember too," said Cloud, hand going to the bump on his head as the sun came out from behind the clouds and a shaft of light hit his Mako blue eyes.

Faye helped to haul Elena up to a standing position. "Amaani seems to have a great fondness for kicking and stabbing."

Elena's hands went out as she fought for balance, and for a minute it looked like she would fall, but she stayed on her feet. She looked around, frowning. "Did we beat them?"

"They ran!" replied Faye jubilantly.

Rude frowned. "But why?"

Elena broke in. "Did you guys get Azrael yet?"

The other three exchanged glances. " 'Get Azrael'?" asked Faye.

"Yeah. Amaani was doing this really weird thing with her sword and her hand, and she was slicing him up really bad," came the answer. "I thought that you guys would've already found him.

"What do you mean by 'really bad' and 'really weird'?" asked Faye guardedly.

"Uh, I hate to be the one to point it out, but if he was hurt badly, then you could be standing here wasting a lot of time as he bleeds to death," interrupted Cloud.

"He's right," Rude said to Elena.

"I saw him right-Whoop!" After taking about three uncertain steps, the blonde Turk's legs buckled under her.

Cloud, being the closest, grabbed her, setting her back on her feet.

Elena had the grace to look abashed. "Oops. B-" She fell again, and Cloud caught her.

"You're just going to fall again," he told her. Before she had time to protest, he swept her up and into his arms. "Now where was he when you saw him?"

"That way, faithful steed!" she said, pointing.

Shooting her a dour look, Cloud went off in the direction that she indicated, Rude and Faye following.

The two former enemies carried on a running argument as they went.

"Don't expect me to carry you everywhere now," said Cloud, grinning at her. Apparently, the battle had brought him out of the sullen mood that he had been in since they had met up with him.

Eyes crackling angrily, she snapped, "I wouldn't want you to. I can take care of myself, thank you very much! I'm not the kind of woman who needs to be protected, you know!"

Cloud retorted, "I've never thought you were, but I do think that you're the kind of woman who would." He stopped suddenly as he stumbled over something, nearly dropping Elena.

"Hey, watch it!" she yelled. But he was bending down, paying no attention to her.

"Since my hands are kind've full, mind picking that up?" he asked, pointing to the long gun that he had tripped on.

"Why would you want a ri--Oh." Elena snatched up the weapon, stating the obvious. "It's Maiden's shotgun." Rude and Faye came up behind them, and Elena passed the gun off to Faye, who examined it along with Rude.

Cloud nodded. "Exactly. Which means he should be right around here somewhere."

Elena, eyes scanning the various corpses, suddenly caught sight of a familiar shock of brown hair. "There! There! There!" she exclaimed, pointing.

Rude and Faye dashed ahead of them, and by the time that Cloud and Elena got there, had already shifted the soldiers that had fallen on him to reveal that it was indeed Azrael. Brown eyes were closed, normally tan skin was gray, and his breath was coming in short, rapid gasps.

"Set Elena down, Strife," ordered Rude.

To Elena's surprise, Cloud obeyed instantly, placing her gently beside the pilot's still body.

She found that they were all looking at her to do something.

Her brain worked furiously for a moment, then she went into action. Pulling her jacket off, she handed it to Faye. "Find some water and soak it." Faye nodded and took off running.

Turning her attention back to Azrael, she shook her head. "I'd say he's suffering from loss of blood and shock, but the face wound isn't quite bad enough to cause either of those effects..."

"Elena..." Rude pointed to one sleeve. Scrutinizing it, Elena nodded grimly. The entire jacket sleeve was saturated in blood, fresh blood by the look of it.

"Help me," she said to the two men. Catching her meaning, they lifted the unresponsive pilot up as she tugged off the jacket, folding it, and placing it behind his head as a makeshift pillow as they set him back down.

He was wearing short sleeves underneath, so the ugly wound was there for all to see. Elena winced. "Looks like she stabbed him right...here..." Her fingers rolled back a sleeve to expose the large bleeding hole in his shoulder. "And twisted the blade. Then she went right down his arm to his wrist."

"Ouch," Cloud murmured from behind her as Rude muttered, "..."

"Do either of you have any Restore materia?" she asked, grimacing as she looked at the extent of the damage in his arm.

Rude looked to Cloud, who shook his head. "Nope."

"I need it. Bad. Or he's gonna die right here and now," was Elena's response.

"Elena! Here's your jacket!" Faye shouted, running to them, waving the wet article of clothing. She tossed it to Elena, who

began wiping at Azrael's face with it. The blood that had been caked there came off, and the line of where the Masamune had struck was visible.

"There. I can at least see the injury now..." muttered Elena. She looked up to Rude and Cloud. "Find Highwind. We've fought him before; I know for a fact that he has Restore materia." The two men were gone almost immediately.

Faye, looking between their retreating figures and the bodies heaped around Elena and her charge, made a gagging noise. "Umm, Elena? I think I'm gonna go with Rude and Cloud..." She began moving off in the direction that they had taken.

"Hold up!" was the response that she got from the blonde woman.

Faye, features tightening in dismay, stopped. "What is it, Elena?"

"Can I have your coat?" she asked.

Faye yanked it off and threw it at Elena. "Here. It's yours!" Looking decidedly green, she ran after Rude and Cloud.

Elena returned her attention to Azrael, noting with concern that his skin had gone from the unhealthy gray pallor to a dead-white tinge. "Don't die on me now," she muttered, tying the coat that Faye had tossed her tightly around his arm to help staunch the blood flow.

"I have no intention of doing so," came the weak answer, a smile forming on dry, cracked lips.

Uttering a vicious oath, she fell backward in surprise. "You're awake?!"

"I'm talking to you," he said as if that explained it. "So, and tell me the truth here, how bad is it, doc?" He affected a teasing air, but she could sense the serious question behind it.

"Well, if your friend Highwind would hurry up with that Restore materia, and we can get some real medical supplies, you'll be good to go within a few days. That's taking for granted that you don't overexert yourself and get plenty of rest."

His jovial, sunken-in face held dismay. "A few days?!"

She grinned. "Yup."

He took on a whining tone. "But doc-"

"Is that my new nickname?" she asked, one eyebrow raised.

The mischievous smirk reappeared. "It seems so. Now, about those few days, I-"

Elena cut him off, for one thing not wanting to argue, and for another, was insanely curious. "How did Amaani do this to you?" she asked, wiping at his face again to clear it of blood.

He shuddered, and his face turned dark. "I don't really know. I shot at her, she looked at me, raised that giant meat cleaver, and before I knew it, she was stabbing me without actually stabbing me."

"She's way more powerful than we thought," Elena responded, biting on her lip.

For once in a bad mood, Azrael snapped at her. "No shit."

She just grinned at him infuriatingly. "Down boy."

He looked away for a moment, then mumbled, "Sorry."

Elena shrugged. "S'okay."

His voice returned to its bantering tone. "Now, about those few days of rest an' whatnot, I-" A cough cut off whatever he was going to say, and tiny flecks of blood appeared on his hand, testament to when his face had bleed heavily and it had seeped into his mouth.

This small reminder of how injured he was galvanized Elena. "No," she said strongly. "Now I know how you love to talk, but it wastes energy, something that you need badly. So lie back and shut up!"

The corners of his mouth crinkled in amusement. "Bossy, aren't we?"

"I prefer to think of myself as forceful," was her answer.

Brown eyes sparkled with mischief. "I like forceful women." Then he pretended to cringe as Elena raised a fist threateningly. "Okay, okay, I get the point. I'll shut up now."

He went silent as she mopped at his face with the wet jacket again to clear away the blood still coursing its way down his cheeks.

Shouts and footsteps broke the calm solitude that had come between them, and Elena looked up to find Rude, Faye, Cloud, Cid, Shera, and a big gray...furball running toward them.

She poked the pilot. "Hey Azrael." There was no response. "Azrael?!" Alarmed, she shook him. He groaned slightly but didn't answer. Relieved, she saw that he was still breathing. "Gone again..." she murmured.

The six newcomers halted, unconsciously forming in a circle around the fallen man and the woman crouched by his side. "How is he? "Is he still alive?" "He looks dead to me." "What was he doing here in the first place?" A barrage of questions came, words tumbling out and voices warring.

"SHUT UP!" Elena shouted, blue eyes flashing furiously. They all went quiet, staring at her. She smiled briefly. "Ah, much better. Yes, he's alive, he's out cold from shock and loss of blood, and there'll be a time for explanations later!" she snapped. "Now, would whoever has the Restore materia please heal him?"

Cid stepped forward, the Venus Gospel held loosely in one hand. You saved my kids, Az. Now lemme do the same for you. "Cure."

They all observed eagerly as the emerald light died away, fading into nothingness. Elena did as well, watching for the reassuring rise and fall of his chest, and after a moment, her head came up quickly. There was no reassuring rise and fall of his chest. Scrambling closer to him, she placed several delicate-looking fingers on the side of his neck, inwardly worrying at how icy cold his skin was. To her relief, she felt a pulse, but it was weak and erratic. He was breathing so shallowly that she wasn't even seeing him move.

Her face came up to Cid's, her expression alarmed. "Again." The blond man caught her meaning immediately, and the familiar green light surrounded Azrael once more. Feeling for a pulse again, Elena's face curved into a smile. It was stronger, and his flesh wasn't nearly as cold. The blonde ex-Turk finished examining his wounds, and they all crowded in close, waiting for a verdict. She looked up to their expectant faces. Interesting how this one man had brought them all together. "His wounds have closed a tiny bit and stopped bleeding heavily, and he's also breathing more regularly. I think we can risk moving him."

"Bring him to our house," Shera said immediately. "It's closest."

Cid bent to help pick Azrael up, but at a sudden surge of pain from his ribs, decided that maybe it wasn't such a great idea after all and to let someone else do the heavy lifting.

Not surprisingly, Rude did the right thing and stepped forward to grab Azrael's head and shoulders. But Elena was very surprised to see Cloud take the brown-haired man's feet. Besides fighting with her, Cloud had been very quiet and sullen for the entire day that they had been together, and she had expected him to just stand by and watch.

"Damn, he's heavy for such a skinny guy," complained Cloud.

Rude grunted in agreement.

"This way," Shera told them, leading the way with Rahilah--who hadn't said a word throughout the entire thing--at her heels.

Elena walked between Rude and Cloud, making sure that they didn't jostle and bump Azrael too much.

Faye trailed the strange procession at the rear, face turning a greenish hue and hand clapped over her mouth. Highwind trudged along beside her.

Elena had to pity Faye; she had never been exposed to anything like this before. Even with that indomitable spirit that the brunette possessed, it had to be taking all of her determination and self-control not to break down. But as Elena looked back, Faye began to look a little bit better as she and Highwind struck up a conversation and it preoccupied her. As Elena caught snatches of their voices, she figured out that Faye was filling Highwind in on what was going on.

Suddenly, she walked into something hard and was knocked to the ground. Rubbing her head and looking up, she saw that she had run into the wall of the house.

"You coming in, Elena?" Cloud called out from the doorway with a huge grin on his face.

Glaring, she stormed into the house, the wind doing what she longed to and slamming the door shut.