

Rude Awakening

Jeff Zimmerman

That face. The fat, sweaty, unshaven, uncleaned, disgusting face. It made him shudder more than anything in the entire world. There was nothing more that he wanted more than to be rid of the horrid face, glaring at him in the morning, all day, at night. It looked like, no, **was** a demon, trying to devour him, steal his soul.

“Get up you useless sonofabitch! Why in hell you still in bed? I aughta smack you! Tear out your sickly guts for not comin' home last night. Where the hell were you? Smokin' crack, ya useless sonofabitch!”

The fat man in overalls smacked his terrified six-year-old son straight across the face. The sound made by those unwashed ham-hands could probably be heard in Sector 3. Tears streamed down the shivering boy's red face. The fat man had him cornered by the cot in their on-room shack in the slums of Sector 6. His infrequently bathed body gave off the odor of week-old liquor stains and a faint stench of whorish perfume, the result of the abuse of a stolen permission-card to the Honey-Bee Inn. Struggling to evade another of the usual beatings, the youngster stammered,

“Daddy...!”

And was smacked yet again, harder, where a stream of blood then trickled down his cheek where the fat man's cheap tin junk-ring cut him.

“Shut the Hell up you stinking bastard! Don't ever talk again; ever! If I heard one more piping word out of your fowl, piss stained mouth, I'll kill your ass! I swear to God I will! Now get out! Just shut up and get the hell out of my life.”

The boy ran out of the shack as fast as his weak, beaten body could take him. He closed his eyes as he ran and tried to wipe the blood and tears from his face, but nothing on the wretched planet could get the face out of his mind. Get out! Leave me alone! The face mocked him, cursed at him, threatened him like it had his entire life. He couldn't talk, like the power of command from those bloated lips did more than strike fear into him. He was controlled, and yet free, and yet captive in front of the mental image of that face. Dirty, bloody face in his hands, he ran, past the playground, through the junk-filled path, and into the dimly-lit counters of the Wall Market.

In his ecstasy of fear, the little boy hadn't quite noticed the middle-aged man before him, and he collided head first into the muscular man's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Groping about for something to hold him, the child tried to see the unfortunate man through the sweat

and tears, but could only make out the blurry outline of a warrior's outfit. In a gesture of hopelessness, he sat on the dirt, waiting to be killed.

"OH! Hoo, well what have we here? Sorry, young man, but that's certainly not the way you go about charging someone in the stomach! Where're you headed in such a hurry?" The warrior bent down to examine the child at his feet more closely, then suddenly jumped in surprise, "Good God, he's bleeding like an angry volcano! Damn, somebody help! Someone!" Glancing, he caught sight of the man at the item shop dusting the sign outside his tent. Seizing the opportunity, he dragged the boy to the tent and grabbed the helpless employee by the collar.

"Listen, I've got a kid here that needs some serious curing, and I'm not ABOUT to go lookin' for some materia to do it. I'll need a potion, a rag, and some water, NOW!"

Now, this particular employee was quite excitable by nature, and this little incident caught him completely off guard. Sputtering, he stumbled into the far reaches of his tent, knocking off a number of plastic bottles in search of the restorative item. Finally, he grabbed the bottle marked "Hi-Potion" and handed it to the warrior.

"I'm sorry sir, but that'll cost you about ..mmph!!" His sentence was cut off by the calloused hand on his mouth as the warrior shut him up with one hand, and grabbed the potion with the other. Without any hesitation, he bit off the cap and immediately splashed the sparkling blue liquid in the still wordless boy's face. The cut instantly seemed to mend itself together, even as the large man had begun wiping the teary face with a rag. He tossed a small bag-full of gil to the shop owner and knelt down to the boy.

"OK, boy, you seem alright now, but you have to keep yourself protected! I can tell that was no accidental gash on your fore-head. Now, suppose you tell me your name."

The livid words rang through his head over and over again. He grasped his still aching head in his hands and crouched on the floor again, humming to himself but not daring to speak. The kind hearted warrior stood over him, as if understanding. Scratching his beard, he murmured, "Orphan, huh? I've seen this before. Listen kid, I ain't gonna take care of you; that something you're going to have to fix yourself. I don't usually do this for free, but maybe you can stick around and be my apprentice. I'll put some fight into ya. Call me Zangan. Now, what was your name again?" The boy just looked up at him, his lip trembling in a little pout.

"Listen, first you bump into me, and I've got a feeling you were running away from someone, not to somewhere, but it's still rude. THEN, you won't tell me your name after I fixed up that bump on your head. I think maybe I'll call you Rude until you've learned some manners, young man. Now how about we get out of this technological heck-hole Shinra calls Midgar?"

Zangan at the silent boy, Rude, left Midgar on Zangan's frilly black chocobo. The green hills beyond the horizon called to the warrior/vagabond and his companion. It seemed that no matter how hard Zangan tried, the boy Rude simply would not speak. Was he mute? No, that certainly could not be the case; he had heard the whimpering in Midgar, the child had a voice. As the years passed, Zangan learned to talk to Rude through body language. The slightest twitch, a

shift of the eyes, or an understated hand gesture told the old vagabond all he needed to know. Of course, as the years passed, Rude learned from the warrior, and it certainly does not require a voice to pound road-thieves into quivering beggars. With the sheer power of his fists, Rude learned how to defend himself, but no matter how many highwaymen he had disciplined, that fat, horrid face called to him, and he never spoke. He never once said a single word to Zangan or his many students, but still moaned and whimpered in his sleep. It hardly seemed that anything could cure his muteness, but he continued to live with Zangan, whom he considered his grandfather.

By the time Rude reached twenty, Zangan was still as vibrant and energy filled as ever, though his gray hair had dominated his bearded face, and the wrinkles sank just a bit deeper. The two life-long companions rode through the canyon of the Western Continent, observing the blood-red sun in the shimmering atmosphere. Zangan seemed very deep in thought, which concerned his adopted grandson. Rude gave him a questioning look.

Zangan caught this, and sighed, "There's someone I want you to meet today, Rudey. You're a man now, and I'm not sure I enjoy the idea of you growing old and lonely like me. Yes, there is someone I'd really like you to meet. She's a new student of mine, in Nibelheim."

A girl! Rude had not met many women in his life, being a traveler like his grandfather. He liked girls though, though he knew none of them would want him. He was dumb to them, an idiot boy who could not speak. Certainly, he fantasized, but never realistically. A girl in Nibelheim. Why would she be any different? What could possibly make her see through his rough exterior and dumb silence? Without much help, Rude brushed his hand through his deep, black hair, and rode on.

Nibelheim was a quiet town. The truck corroded with red rust at the entrance. The unkempt tiles in the square had a homey look to them, like the wooden well right in the center of it. Zangan took Rude aside.

"Now here we are Rude. You know the routine: look impressive. I want you to be helping me out a lot on this one. She's got a lot of spirit, I've heard," Zangan said, and winked naughtily at his mute grandson.

The 'routine' was simple. Rude brushed back his hair, straightened his clothes, and spread out his worn, tattered leather mantle as Zangan did the same with his cape. The old man strode importantly through town up to the door of the double-floored house and politely knocked on the door. Rude thought he saw something in the window as someone timidly creaked open the thick wooden door.

A kind-looking middle-aged woman stood there, examining her guests. "My, what have we here? A couple of good looking men to help out around the house?"

"Ah, no ma'am. I am known by most as Zangan, and this here is my grandson, Rude. You wished us to train your little girl, I take it?"

Her eyes widened as she recognized Zangan's description, and then she laughed, "Oh dear, excuse me! Yes, we're the ones. My little one here," she indicated the teenage girl sitting at the table, "just can't seem to stay out of trouble, or out of the mountains, for that matter. It seems I can't keep her from wandering through Mt. Nibel, short of using chains, but then I heard of you two. Can you help?"

"Why certainly, ma'am. We'll have her slaying dragons in no time."

The woman jumped, "What?! Now, no, now wait just a minute! That's no..mmph!"

Zangan clasped her mouth shut with his hand, just as he had done fourteen years ago. Rude found that that particular technique proved quite useful a number of times in communicating a point. "Now, you certainly don't expect us to KEEP her from that mountain, do you ma'am? I am a martial artist, and that's what I do. I expand the horizons of youngsters such as this," He nodded at the now attentive girl, "I don't restrict horizons. They don't learn that way. Now, you can have your lovely daughter here wander in the mountains without protection, or you can let me teach her to protect herself. Do we have a deal?" The woman nodded behind his firm grip, shivering in utter surprise, so Zangan took his hand off. "Good, now shall we discuss the price?" They then began, at some length, to argue about what was worth his service.

Meanwhile, Rude had managed to slip around the old man to join the girl at the table. Smiling, he tapped the edge of the table, and she looked up at him. The shock was like nothing he had felt before. Her smooth brown hair, her cheerful, innocent face, and beautiful eyes took him completely off guard. He almost tripped over himself, but caught himself clumsily and sat in a chair.

"Hello, Rude. I've heard about you. How are you?"

He smiled nervously, still shaken at the sight of her beauty.

"Oh, that's nice. So I guess you're gonna show me how to fight, huh? I've always wanted to be a fighter. I wanna show those boys what I can do." She giggled and made some punching motions with her hands. Rude quickly shook his head and made a sign of peace. He made punching motions as well, then shook his head again to negate them.

"Yes, I know. No unneeded violence. By the way, my name's Tifa. I hope we have fun together." And her smile made Rude smile too.

The next few months were some of the happiest of Rude's life. Tifa's mother agreed to let him sleep in the house, but Zangan, who bathed less than regularly, slept in the inn across the plaza. Together, they took Tifa into the mountains, teaching her scouting techniques, survival rules, and most importantly, how to fight. Soon, a fair pile of overused fight-dummies gathered near the side of Tifa's house, signs of rigorous training and determination. As time wore on, Tifa explored more and more of Mount Nibel, mapping in her mind the short-cuts and caves, and not

a single monster challenged her after the first few she easily pummeled. Rude monitored her progress with a kind of modest satisfaction, but was also restless as he fought with his emotion.

As he stayed with her and her family, he wanted desperately to say something, to tell her how he felt. But whenever he opened his mouth, that face stood in his path, blocking his way, yelling and screaming at him, threatening to tear his sanity to shreds. The years had not wiped away the past, only strengthened them. He was a slave to the face.

One morning in late winter, Rude lazily got dressed for a relaxing day. This was one of Tifa's scheduled off-days, but sometimes the two would explore the mountains some more, discovering its many secrets. As he turned in the upstairs hallways to knock on Tifa's door, he was startled to see her up already, standing in the doorway. About to give her his customary greeting smile, he hadn't noticed that she wore her favorite leather fighting-gloves, and was preparing to strike.

The blow came like a snake bite as she jabbed him in the shoulder, right in one of the pressure points Rude and Zangan had informed her about. The burning pain shot up Rude's arm and straight up his neck, seeming to eat away at the insides of his vulnerable shoulder. It was too much.

Rude's scream could have broken a window, had there been one near. Shuddering, he grabbed hold of his arm and turned against the wall, whimpering like a child. It was a very good hit. He flashed her an angry look of betrayal and hurt, but she just smiled triumphantly.

"So, you CAN talk. I knew you could; you hum in your sleep. You deceived me!"

Rude shook his head desperately, wanting to explain, but that face..

"I can't BELIEVE that I fell for it all these months. And to think I TRUSTED you. How could you?" Tears were brimming in her eyes, the smile was gone now. "I don't ever want to talk; no, LOOK at you again! You won't even talk anymore. You want to deceive me more."

Rude opened his mouth to talk.

"C'mon, talk. Explain before I tell my father."

Tears welled up in Rude's gap-mouthed face.

"That's it. Don't think you can get away with this, or Zangan either. I don't know why you pretended, but you're not my friend anymore!"

Rude collapsed in fear, wanting more than ever to say something, to explain, but he couldn't.

"Goodbye, Rude." Tifa turned around and ran down the stairs.

In Rude's mind, the face was laughing at him triumphantly. It had won the battle. Rude stared at Tifa running away, anger suddenly consuming his quivering body. He was a fighter! That fat,

putrid face had dominated a right! Never again would he lose a fight to the disgusting apparition before him. He had fought and killed many in his travels, and nothing more was going to stand in his way. The face, the one that haunted him from his youth was now a face of fear and patheticness. Rude's anger and hatred raging within him, he screamed,

"TIFAAA!"

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That night, Rude stayed in the Inn with Zangan. Zangan's face showed nothing except for a slight sadness. The two had eaten in silence. Not looking up from his dinner, Zangan finally spoke, "You're going to leave now, aren't you? I can't keep you here, not after this."

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"Midgar."

"I see you're packed." Zangan nodded his head toward the leather bag slumped in the doorway. "You don't have to go, you know. Tifa understands.."

"No. I can't stay." Rude had gotten up and walked towards his bags, expressionless. Like his face, his emotions were dormant, and his mind was asleep. Crouching, he picked up his bags, and left..

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Rude reached Midgar. It seemed off, coming here, almost as if it were destined. Truly, no one in their right mind would come to such a desolate place by choice. However, Rude had to escape; there was nothing left, and he had to make every possible attempt to never see Tifa again. He knew what he felt almost as if he were reading it from a book. He was angry, surely, that his grandfather had not told the truth. He was deeply depressed as well. He knew Tifa had been the closest he had come to loving someone. Hell, forget 'closest', he DID love her. And yet, now he could never see her again. He had traveled, not because of love, but because of necessity, to Midgar. While he did have a fair sum of money, he knew his 'vagabond' attire would not be accepted in the flashy, expensive zones of the upper plate. Curiously, he wondered whether the slums would supply clothing better than his own. Setting his chocobo free with yet another pang of loss, Rude strode into Midgar, his home-town.

Once inside the dirty, depressing slums, Rude set about changing his identity. No one could recognize him, and he knew that Zangan and he had made a name for themselves in their travels. "Zangan the Magnificent and Rude the Mute," others had called them, and indeed, it was good advertising. Unfortunately, now most everyone would know him by description. Leaning against one of the metal-sheet piles of Sector 5, he wondered what the cheapest disguise one could afford in the slums would be. Then it came to him.

While, to Rude, it was customary to fight with his fists, he did make a habit to carry a dagger or two wherever he went. Bending down, he slid the shiny blade from the strap on his ankle, and proceeded to shave. Two hours and several cuts later, Rude found a broken shard of mirror hidden in a junk-pile. Putting his knife away, he held the dusty glass in front of him, and saw another person. Surely, the various scabs from his impromptu makeover would head, but now he had a brand new shiny, bald head. Now, no one would recognize him, and he had to admit that the new look certainly fit him. Posing in his dirty leaver outfit in front of the mirror, he prepared to enter the city.

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"Agent #1 of the Shinra Manufacturing Department of Administrative Research, Rude."

"Your mission: There is an informant in the region of the Sector 6 slums. This informant has become bothersome, and has taken advantage of the wealth of Shinra. Deal with him as you see fit."

"Agent #2 of the Shinra Manufacturing Department of Administrative Research, Tseng."

"Your mission: Notify the one called Don Corneo that he's now the informant's replacement in Shinra Intelligence in the Sector 6 region. Force him to swear total allegiance, and pay him as you see fit for his services."

"Agent #3 of the Shinra Manufacturing Department of Administrative Research, Vincent."

"Accompany Hojo and Professor Gast of the Chemistry Division to Nibelheim and assist in their effort to calm the situation there. Allow no information of the occurrences there to be let out to the public, even if it means taking no hostages."

The lounge room of the Turks was simple, with a coffee machine, the television set, and doors to the offices of each agent. The only two things that may have set it apart from the other floors of the Shinra building were the target-practice/battle training room in the back, and the weapons arsenal on the east side. The one window bathed the room in a kind of unreal gray light as the overcast, polluted sky kept its gift of sunlight from the group of murders.

"Crap," cursed Tseng, who was quite effectively shooting the stuffing out of a misused punching bag with his .44 double-barreled rifle. "You two get to go kick some ass, while I'm stuck informing that perverted fag that he's gonna be the 'brains' of Shinra."

"Calm down, Tseng. It's our orders and we have to follow them." Vincent was examining the arsenal, already choosing the best weapon to use. "Argue too much, and you'll become dispensable."

"Is that a threat?"

"Hush, Tseng! Let's go." Rude hadn't spoken much since he joined the Turks; only when he had something to say.

Discarding their activities, the Turks rushed out of the darkening gray room, weapons in hand. Rude, of course, had only his fists as weapons, but they would suffice to quiet this disruptive 'informant' to the Shinra. Before evening the elevators, though, he checked his reflection in the mirror. His head freshly bald again, he could see his own reflection in his forehead, the dark shades enhancing the aura of dangerousness. His ironed blue suit and polished shoes gave him every appearance of a serious business man, and yet he was so, so much more.

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The Wall Market quickly became empty as Rude strode through the dirt street and imperially-lighted stands and shops. Leaving out the front gate of the market, he sensed an almost audible hush of relief from the townspeople inside. Why did it feel so good to be so feared? Finally, he reached a secluded little shack near the Sector 7 gate. Looking at his photo of the informant's house, he recognized the similarity, but the shack in reality seemed much more ragged than in the photo.

"Damn, must be an old picture."

Still there was something hauntingly familiar about his hideous, little hovel. As Rude stepped near, he reeled in disgust as the strong stench of alcohol and God knew what else was in there. Holding his suited arm over his nose, he braced himself, and entered.

Inside, fleas and maggots crawled all about the walls and floor. Broken bottles, syringes, and large piles of unused cocaine littered the corners of the disgusting eye-sore. There were only two pieces of furniture; the maggot-ridden cloth cot suspended in the corner, and the broken plaid couch with all the springs out laid right in the center. In the couch lay a fat man, wrinkled to the point of looking like his surroundings. He wore an overstretched and torn wife-beater undershirt, and his face was full of greasy, gray facial hair. There were growths of something elsewhere on his body that Rude suspected was not hair at all. Almost overcome with

animalistic revulsion, Rude peered at the face behind the hair, gawking stupidly at him. That face. The very same whore-happy, maddening, cruel face. That demonistic face that had haunted him since childhood.

“What the F.. mmph! MM! Mph! Arrrghghgmmphh!”

Rude easily grasped the alcohol stained lips of the fat man, but there was something different about this particular hold. Rude wasn't trying to keep the bastard quiet. His other hand was holding the fat man's nose, as well.

Eyes wide with terror, the fat man could do nothing under Rude's unbreakable grasp upon his face. His arms flailed wildly as his face turned colors. A cruel, victorious smile crept over Rude's face.

“Goodbye, Daddy.”