

Venus Gospel
By Princess Artemis

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Prologos

"That's an interesting weapon you have there," commented a stranger as he walked up to the owner of the spear.

Cid Highwind stopped and shrugged. He took one last drag off his cigarette then flicked the fag end to the ground. "It's a bit colorful I guess." The night was dark, but his spear glowed of its own light, faint, but clear enough to see the gold and blue blade, the crimson hand guard and the mostly green haft. Something about the colors more closely resembled light than the hues on more ordinary objects; it was as if light reflected through the richness of color rather than off it. This weapon was not one made by human hands; it, along with the Ultima Weapon, had been created by the Planet, formed of Mako and Spirit energy. All the other special weapons had been made either by humans or Ancients, with the exception of the Limited Moon, which was made from the Planet's Luna Raptor by humans. Those weapons could be used by anyone for the most part (assuming one knew how to damage an enemy with a megaphone). But these small weapons of the Planet had been made solely for Cid and Cloud, and though they were just a sword and a spear, they both seemed to have a life-force of their own.

The stranger nodded. "Does it have a name? Weapons like that always seem to have a name."

"Yeah. Venus Gospel. Silly-@\$# name." He clicked the end of the strange weapon on the ground, then began walking again. Unique it was, but it was a good spear.

The stranger followed. "Good news of love? You're right, that is a silly name. Never got anything but trouble in love," the man commented.

Cid grunted in response. He stopped again, thoughtful. He pulled another cigarette out of the pack and placed it in his mouth. He patted at the pockets of his blue flight jacket, then at his dark green pants. "\$%#@," he muttered under his breath. "Got a light?" he asked the stranger.

"Sorry," the stranger replied. He shrugged his shoulders. "Nope, never heard any gospel in love. Speaking of which, I must return home before the ol' wife misses me. See ya around." The stranger waved goodbye and began walking toward the outskirts of Rocket Town.

Cid continued on his way. Talking about, or even hearing, or even thinking about hearing the word "love" never failed to put him in a bad mood. Though he hardly dared even think he had one, he knew his love life hadn't been anything but trouble. His foul humor deepened. He mentally cursed the stranger for bringing up the subject in the first place.

He reached his house and threw open the door. He stormed in, slamming the door behind him. The Venus Gospel was unceremoniously tossed into a corner of the front room as Cid stomped into his room. The door closed with a reverberating crash.

Sitting heavily in his chair, Cid yanked his leather gloves off and threw them across the room. As he had many, many times before, he completely ignored the presence in his house of the woman he lived with. He cursed again, wondering for the umpteenth time why he lived with her in the first place. Hell, she wasn't even his girlfriend. He vaguely remembered it being some matter of convenience for late-night engineering, but that had ended long ago. With the exception of a handful of occasions, which he got the chills just thinking about, he and Shera had had no romantic contact whatsoever.

He sank back in his chair, suddenly pensive. He knew why it was he still lived with Shera. He grumbled deeply then grabbed his lighter off the nightstand. After a few fumbled attempts, he finally got his cigarette lit. He groaned inwardly trying very

hard not to think about what should have been very obvious and even welcome. He yanked off one shoe and half-heartedly tossed it over to where his gloves lay, then rubbed at his right ear. It still hurt a bit. No, he thought, I never had any good news in love.

* * *

The stranger looked back over his shoulder, watching the retreating pilot. Angry, guilty, in denial, but not torn up about it. He would be perfect. The stranger returned to his walk, ready to inform his master.

~*~

Logos

Two days later, a new visitor to Rocket Town walked quietly into the Shanghai-Tei. He was a tall man with silky black hair that hung to his waist; the top held back with a silver clasp, allowing the rest to fall loose. His skin was very pale, almost unnaturally so, but his eyes were black as jet. The coal color was reflected in the dark black clothing that he wore, which was similar to a monk's robe but with crisper lines. He slowly looked around the small tavern, searching for the dragon's son. His own father's vapors would make a powerful servant out of the ruin left of the flyer's dragon spirit. Glancing around once more, he spotted the one he sought. Shaking his head at the idea that such an average, ordinary looking man could ever have come from the line of Bahamut, he walked over and sat at the bar. Ignoring the bartender, he watched the dragon's son and his companions. The flyer sat at a table near the door, chair leaning precariously back and feet propped up on the table. The dark man could feel this one was a flyer indeed, born for the heavens. It wasn't just that he wore the garb of what others called a pilot; more to the point, it was the fact that the flyer had no part of him touching the ground. Even in such a plain, mundane setting as a bar in some old town, he still subconsciously attempted to keep himself in the air. The dark man felt in his gut that Bahamut's blood was stronger in this one than in most. Yet it was still very weak; by all rights, the man's dragon blood should have felt the dark one's presence.

The stranger looked to the man's companions. One was a blond man with wild hair, possibly the wildest he had ever laid eyes on, while the other was a fire red animal, every bit as much a wolf as it was a lion. Its tail fire flickered warmly, sending a few sparks into the air as it twitched it back and forth near the table, just like a cat. The spiky-haired one glanced toward the bar. The dark man caught his look, noting the glow of his Mako eyes. The dark man stood up, straightened his robe, and then walked over to the dragon son's table. Grabbing a chair as he went, the man bowed deeply, causing his black hair to cascade down his shoulders. "May I join you, most worthy gentlemen?"

"Uh, sure," said the man with wild hair, motioning to an empty space with one gloved hand. He sat gracefully. The dark man noticed the dragon's son grab a cigarette and light up. He smiled slightly. Fire breathing dragon, he thought in amusement.

The dark man's smile widened. Bowing his head, he declared, "My name is Seir. I have come from the deep mount of the north to bring greetings from the line of Ancalagon the Black to the most honorable son of Bahamut." He held his pale hands out, palm up toward the dragon's son.

The three companions stared at him for a moment, at a loss for words. Recovering quickly, Cid declared, "You're a friggin' nutcase." He blew smoke in the stranger's face.

Red XIII, ever practical, turned to the man and asked calmly, "To whom are you speaking, sir?"

Waving the smoke from his face, Seir asked, "What are your names, gentlemen? Then I may answer." He turned to face Red XIII.

The fiery animal answered, nodding to each of his companions as he introduced them. "This is Cloud Strife and Cid Highwind. I am called Red XIII."

Seir acknowledged each in turn then bowed his head again. "It is to Mister Highwind, son of Bahamut, that I address my greeting."

Both Cloud and Cid exchanged a look, thinking, Is this guy for real? Cid chuckled slightly, taking a drag off his cigarette. "My old man could be a big pain in the \$#@ sometimes, but he sure as hell wasn't a dragon." His face clearly expressed the low opinion he held concerning Seir's sanity.

"I met your parents once," Cloud stated. "I don't remember them having wings and tails. Sure would explain your temper, though." Cloud barely dodged the half-used cigarette Cid flicked at him. He snickered at Cid's reaction. Sometimes it sure felt good to bait friends.

"Ah, you have misunderstood me. You are separated from your father by many thousands of years. It is through your mother that your line is traced, back through the great Dragoons of old and on to the King of Monsters. Bahamut's blood runs very thin in your veins," Seir replied.

"Well, dammit, if you had just said so the first time, I woulda believed you!" Cid retorted, voice thick with sarcasm. "Maybe I oughta summon Daddy and have him wipe the floor with your crazy \$%#!" He grabbed another cigarette and lit it, blowing more smoke in Seir's face.

Red XIII looked thoughtful. "Perhaps we could summon Bahamut and ask him about it."

Cid sat forward in his chair, removing his feet from the table. Both Cloud and Cid looked at their animal friend, incredulous. "You don't actually think it's possible that Cid is part dragon!" Cloud asked in shock.

"Some friggin' Joe Blow nut comes in on off the street and feeds us some line of \$#@%^\$#* and now I'm a monster!!" Cid yelled, slamming one gloved fist on the table. Something must have been bothering him deeply for him to get so angry so fast. "Red, you're nuttier than this loon!"

Looking slightly foolish, Red XIII hung his head, but still looked in their faces with his one good eye. "It's possible. It's happened before."

Seir dipped his head in gratitude toward Red XIII. He turned again to face Cid. "Does not your soul ache for the heavens? Is it not so strong a longing that at times you can leap into the air, to fly without your father's wings?" He apparently was referring to Cid's numerous jumping limits.

Cid muttered some foul curse. He knew the ancient Dragoons could jump as he did, except they could do so at will. This was really beginning to piss him off. He muttered something about always winning at the high jump in school, then went on to say in a louder voice, "Doesn't mean I have any damn dragon blood in me. What does jumping have to do with anything?"

"You know it was the power of the Dragoons," Seir answered. "The passion to fly, but without the ability to truly do so. Yet they could leap as no other."

"Dragoons aren't dragons, Seir," Cloud countered.

"My tribe has many legends handed down from the past concerning monsters and Ancients producing children. It was not a common practice, but several great monsters were known to have human children. Maduin's daughter is the best-documented case, but it is known that Shiva and Bahamut also had children by the Ancients. They all carried some of their parent's power." Red XIII explained.

"@#%\$!! You ain't helpin', Red! Go chase a mouse or something," Cid yelled at the fiery animal. Red XIII growled a harumph, then curled up on the floor, setting his head on his paws.

Seir just shrugged. "It doesn't matter if you believe me. Your own dragon spirit speaks against you. Nevertheless, I have a gift for you as well as a greeting from the children of Ancalagon the Black." Cloud leaned in close to Cid and whispered, "Isn't Ancalagon a dragon in those hobbit stories?"

"Dunno," Cid answered under his breath. Cid had ignored the common knowledge that one must read Tolkien's masterpiece before graduating from college.

Seir reached into his dark robe and pulled out what looked like a short black-bladed dagger mounted in a glass hilt. All three companions tensed, suddenly unsure of Seir's intentions. Up to now, he seemed harmless, but that had become uncertain. Seir turned the blade over in his narrow hands, allowing the dim light of the tavern to illuminate its edges. "This," Seir explained, "is the least of Ancalagon's scales. It is mounted in diamond. It is sharp and very powerful. The darkness of Ancalagon's heart is contained within it. A relic of a long forgotten age." The dark man looked down at the blade, smiling almost fondly at it. He gazed at the weapon for a long moment, perhaps remembering a time when the owner of the scale terrorized the world. A slight movement, a twitch of Seir's hand, and before anyone could react, the dagger neatly entered Cid's throat, through his scarf, imbedding itself in his spine.

Cid blinked in shock. He heard his breath whistle around the scale, gurgling slightly. Apparently the blade was indeed sharp; it didn't hurt nearly as bad as Cid would have expected a slit throat would.

Both Cloud and Red XIII got up quickly. Cloud reached out to take the dagger from his friend's neck. Seir shot forth one pale hand and clasped Cloud's wrist, preventing him from reaching the blade. "That would not be wise," Seir stated calmly. Cloud shot him a death glare then again moved to reach the blade. Seir's hand restrained Cloud effortlessly. "The scale is extremely sharp. If you drew it from the throat of this dragon child, you may very likely cut him to ribbons. It will slice bone as easily as flesh. Are you so sure of your steadiness of hand?"

Red XIII growled. Seir was probably right. The blade that had neatly bisected Cid's larynx had drawn little blood, indicative of its sharpness. If the edge was as keen as the dark man said, it would take remarkable reflexes or complete stillness to remove it without severely injuring Cid. His growl deepened. "Listen to him, Cloud," he hissed through exposed teeth.

Cloud withdrew his hand, fuming. Murder in his stare, he clenched his jaw and asked in fury, "What do you want."

Seir merely motioned for silence. He gazed intently at Cid as he struggled to breathe around the black object stuck in his throat. Cid gazed back, angry as hell. The blood from his wound trickled down his windpipe, choking him for a second. That was all it took. He coughed hard, causing the imbedded knife to further cut his flesh. He gasped, which only sucked in more choking blood. Coughing harder, he contorted in pain and fell out of his chair, landing hard on his side. He tried to grab the offensive blade, but Seir had somehow managed to take hold of both his arms. Blood trickled out of his mouth; each time he gagged and coughed the blade cut again. Something black and vile began to fume from the blade, dark and nauseating. Cid inhaled the evil fumes along with a sudden breath. The dank vapors turned his stomach. It was utterly revolting and it felt like it was trying to drown him. He thrashed violently, trying desperately to free his arms from Seir's strong grasp.

As soon as Seir released his hand, Cloud leapt over the table and on to the dark man's back. His arms closed around Seir's neck in a viscous headlock, intending to choke the life out of him. Seir, however, was much stronger than he appeared. He couldn't defend himself without letting go of Cid's arms, but Cloud's strength wasn't sufficient to crush his throat so he was in no real danger. Whatever half-baked ideas he had about Cid, Cloud almost thought Seir might have been a dragon for his strength.

Seir yelped in pain as he felt the deadly quills that made up Red XIII's feathered headdress rake across his arm, drawing blood. Seir lost his grip on Cid's arm, but it didn't matter now. The time had come. He reached down and freed the dagger with one swift, graceful motion. Black vapors curled around the blade then went out, but not before it assaulted Red XIII's sensitive nose. He howled at the utter evil he smelled and cried for the vile stench to leave him.

The dagger disappeared inside Seir's dark cloak. He watched dispassionately as Cid slowed his frantic struggling. He couldn't breathe through the black fumes filling his lungs. Seir let go of his other arm, allowing it to fall limp over Cid's chest. He turned his head in an attempt to face Cloud. "Tend to the dragon's son. See? He is drowning."

Cloud was furious. The tavern had emptied quickly, apparently full of cowards who didn't even have the guts to call for help, much less aid their Captain. He wanted so badly to take something, anything and run this madman through, but he realized if he took the time, Cid would probably die. With a cry of helpless frustration, Cloud jumped over to where Cid lay. "Red, watch that bastard," he growled through clenched teeth. Red XIII turned his one good eye on Seir while Cloud dragged Cid out into a straight position. It was obvious he had stopped breathing and his lips were fast turning blue, but his eyes were full of panic even as his consciousness slipped away. Cloud tilted Cid's head back a little, then silently groaned at what he must do. It was completely irrational, but somehow he couldn't shake the idiotic thought that he was about to full

on kiss Cid. This was even worse than his trepidation concerning little Priscilla of Junon, but then as now, he had no other choice. Taking in a breath, he decided that after this, he would just have to get that stupid idea out of his head. Go into counseling or something. It was costing Cid precious time. So, before his resolve faltered, he placed a hand over the hole in Cid's neck and tried to exhale the air into his chest. He couldn't; perhaps Cid really was drowning.

Seir declared, "He's drowning you idiot."

Cloud stared daggers at the dark haired man, then turned back to Cid. He moved down a bit and tried to force out whatever it was blocking his lungs. Some thick tarry substance spurting out of Cid's mouth and throat. He pushed one more time, forcing out a good bit more of the gunk. He moved back up and quickly removed as much of the tar as he could, then blew in another breath for Cid. This time Cloud saw Cid's chest rise and fall. After a few more tries, Cid sputtered and coughed. Relief washed over Cloud as Cid began breathing more normally. He coughed hard, wincing with pain as the force of it pushed his wound against Cloud's hand. A few more productive hacks later, Cid roused himself, something approaching a normal color returning to his face. He looked up at Cloud who was grinning in relief and attempted to say something. No sound came out. He scowled in frustration after a second attempt to speak failed. Feeling something on his face, Cid moved one hand up to examine the stuff. He looked at the black sludge on his fingertips, then glanced a question at Cloud.

Cloud opened his mouth to respond, but Seir answered. "Nicotine," he stated simply.

Cid about threw a fit. He had had just about enough of this crazy son of a #\$%*^*. Furious, he lifted his right arm and drew a cross in the air with a clenched fist. He then pointed his arm at the dark man, guiding the quickly materializing dragon to its target. It hissed in anger as it encircled Seir, sucking out much of his life and giving it to Cid. Seir stumbled back as the dragon faded, dizzy from the sudden weakness. He recovered quickly, however. Bowing low and holding his hands out much as he had before, he said graciously, "You have a fine dragon's heart, stronger than I thought. May it serve you well, son of Bahamut." He turned to leave, but thought better of it when he met Red XIII's dark stare.

Cid laid his head back against the hardwood floor, closing his eyes. Dragon...somehow Seir's words suddenly rang true. It was madness, but his dragon spirit had indeed witnessed against him. It wasn't exactly an everyday occurrence that someone could summon a dragon without materia just because they were pissed off. The realization that some part of him, no matter how small, was not human, was unexpectedly painful. Darkness passed, clouding his vision for a moment. "Damn," he whispered.

Cloud looked down at Cid, realizing he had heard him speak without any touch of wind on his hand. He lifted his hand. The wound was gone, apparently healed by Cid's Dragon limit. Cloud sat back against the wall, crossing his legs. "What in the hell do you want?" he yelled at Seir, anger thick in voice.

"For the truth to be known, to end the lies. Your friend isn't human. His form may be human, but his soul is as much that of a beast as any dragon's," Seir answered. He turned to look at Cid. "What have you done, dragon? Whom have you injured with your inhuman heart? Animal. You make me sick." Seir growled low, venom dripping from every word.

Cid made no response other than to grimace slightly.

Surprised by Seir's words, Red XIII asked, "Why do you call Cid honorable and then only moments later an animal? How can you denounce him as such when you yourself admit you are the progeny of a dragon?"

Seir laughed, cold as ice. "The difference, worthy creature, is that I know what I am. And I act accordingly. It makes me ill to see creatures deny their true selves, acting human when they are not. I am a true son of my father. Perhaps your friend will realize his bestial roots. I hope so." With that, Seir's form suddenly shifted to something monstrous, then to vapor, which dissipated quickly.

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Red XIII walked out of the Shanghai-Tei, anxiously watching the shadows for the dark man Seir. He sniffed the air, sensing some malintent, but unable to place the source. The sensation was much like knowing there was a criminal breaking in to the home of someone who lived on the other side of town. It was not in any way a present threat.

He twitched his flaming tail once, then turned to his companions. "I believe he is gone. I don't smell him anywhere."

Cloud helped Cid to his feet then supported him on the way out the door. Cid coughed again, grimacing at the tarry substance this produced. He lifted to his mouth the cloth napkin Cloud had "appropriated" on his behalf and wiped the dark slime away. He felt surprisingly weak; of course, some was to be expected, after all, he did just have his throat slip by an insane stranger. That took an emotional and physical toll, however this weakness was something else entirely. It was deeper than that. He felt as though his will had been fatally damaged; he didn't want to put one foot before the other, to hold himself up, or even to breathe. He knew it was ludicrous to give in to such weakness of will, but whatever shaky cord it was that held him back was quickly disintegrating.

The three companions slowly made their way toward Cid's house. Red XIII found himself drawn deeper and deeper in thought concerning the events of the evening. There certainly was something very strange about a seeming madman coming out of the blue and making an attempt on Cid's life. That much was obvious. However, there was something more to it than just a homicidal man's indulging himself. The fiery animal felt some explanation tickling the back of his mind. The fumes from the blade and the tarry stuff Cid kept coughing up were decidedly unusual. He smelled the evil in the fumes and he knew Cid could hardly have missed it; Red XIII thought it was perfectly understandable to get violently ill at the strength of the evil in the vapors. The tar however lacked that deep sense of evil, but they were obviously related; that was plain to smell. He would watch Cid carefully over the next few days to see how he reacted to the substances. It would provide valuable clues, as well as easing his anxious mind. He considered Cid a friend, and he had no wish to see him come to harm.

As they reached Cid's doorstep, Red XIII looked up at the pilot and asked, "May I stay here a few days? I would not take up much space."

Cid blinked listlessly, seeming to rouse himself from some distant place, then nodded his head. "Ask Shera to be sure," he added in a voice less than a whisper.

Red XIII nodded while Cloud opened the door. He helped Cid over the doorstep then to the less than new couch that occupied much of the space in the front room. Cid sat down heavily and wiped more black tar and blood from his mouth.

The large animal padded quietly over to what he guessed was Shera's room. He was reluctant to wake her, but felt she would like to know what happened. He carefully tapped his claws on her door until he heard Shera stirring. She opened the door, rubbing her eyes. She looked over Red XIII's head, seeing no one. When she realized that it wasn't Cid knocking on her door, she looked around more carefully until her tired eyes landed on the animal. "Hello, Red," she muttered as kindly as possible when one has just woke from a sound sleep.

"Hello, Shera," he said quietly, his voice almost a purr at that level. "Would you please come into the front room?"

Shera blinked as she stepped out of her room. "Is something wrong?" she asked groggily.

"Yes," Red XIII replied. "Cid has been attacked by a strange man at the Shanghai-Tei." When they reached the front room, Shera took in a surprised breath. As a rule, Shera was cool as a cucumber. The woman faced fifteen seconds before she would be fried by a rocket engine and still managed to keep enough wits about her to perform precise diagnostic tests. She was usually unflappable. But being intellectual and rational left her defenseless when something got under her skin. Cid did so with great élan, so she was prone to lose her cool when it came to him. She immediately moved to Cid's side, sitting down on his right and gently turning his head to face her. She held his head tenderly.

"Oh, Captain...what happened to you?" she asked as she took the napkin out of his loose grasp and began removing the rest of the tar and dried blood from his face.

Eyes hooded and dull, Cid moved his jaw as if to say something, but no sound came out. His jaw remained slack and any spark of expression drained from his face. It was obvious he had completely retreated from reality. Shera looked toward Cloud and Red XIII anxiously, looking for help.

Cloud scratched his head with one gloved hand, causing his wild blond spikes to bob up and down. "I don't know. Someone

came in to the bar and attacked him. The guy was loonier than a 'toon, a regular crackpot; kept calling Cid stuff like 'dragon son' and things like that. He disappeared before we could stop him."

Red XIII elaborated. "The man called himself Seir. He claimed to be the son of Ancalagon the Black. He also claimed that Cid was a descendant of a dragon, this time Bahamut."

Shera shook her head. "Ancalagon is a fictional dragon, and I thought Bahamut was just a summon. Hmmm, there is a lot of mithril in the world...makes me wonder about the history of our Planet...Well, anyway, it's silly. The Captain can't be part dragon." She stroked Cid's blond hair, perhaps trying to comfort him, but he didn't so much as blink.

"There is evidence to suggest that Ancalagon may indeed have lived on our world long ago before the seas were bent, as evidenced by the abundance of mithril among other things; and Bahamut is the King of Monsters. He doesn't live on this world which is why we only know him as a summon. It is known that he had human children. However, any relationship to Cid is mere speculation." Red XIII replied. He licked one paw then washed an ear, prompting Shera to remove his Limited Moon headdress and clean Seir's blood from the dagger-like Luna Raptor feathers. Red XIII blinked in surprise. She was a very kind human indeed. He washed his ear once more then continued on with his elaboration. "The dagger Seir had did indeed appear to be a small scale from a black dragon. It was with that knife that he attacked Cid." The animal very carefully traced a line with one claw along Cid's neck, extending from just below his jaw to approximately halfway down his neck. "The dagger first entered here," he stated, pointing a claw. "Apparently the tip was imbedded in a vertebra. It neatly bisected his larynx, which only made it difficult for him to breathe. I believe this was Seir's plan all along, for the blade began to fume. The smell of it was evil." At this point, Red XIII wrinkled his nose, almost snarling at the memory of that stench. "Cid became very ill. I believe the fumes condensed into that tarry substance he has been coughing up."

Shera looked under Cid's chin at the spot Red XIII pointed out. She was relieved to find it had completely vanished.

"He summoned a dragon," Cloud stated, "and it healed him."

"A dragon...? That's one of his limits. He told me about it, but I never saw it," Shera replied.

Cloud shrugged. "It seemed to really upset him. I think all of Seir's dragon nonsense started to get to him. Anyway, Seir left after retrieving his dagger. When we got here, Cid was still with us. I mean, he was awake."

Shera frowned, looking carefully at Cid. "I wonder what really happened..." she whispered, more to herself than to anyone else. She carefully removed Cid's ever-present flight goggles and laid them on the coffee table. He never moved; his eyes were still open somewhat, but he stared at nothing. "Cloud? We should get him to bed. Would you help me?"

"Yeah," Cloud answered. It took some doing; Cid was not a small man and his catatonic state made him especially unwieldy. The job did eventually get finished, with only minor bumps incurred from trying to negotiate the hall without dropping him. Red XIII curled up on the floor next to Cid's bed. For some reason he could not fathom, Cloud and Shera both found it highly amusing that he insisted on circling the spot several times before settling down. Perhaps it was just late, or the stress of the evening. After Shera quietly closed the door, Red XIII wished, for a moment, that he could curl up on Cid's feet, or better yet, in his hair, but that was something only tiny cubs did. He guessed he must just be afraid for his friend...at times like this, he felt just like a scared little cub. He laid his head on his paws and tried to sleep.

Out in the front room, Shera said, "You can stay here if you like, Cloud. You can take my room."

"I can just snag the couch. Thank you for the offer, though," Cloud responded.

"Good night, Cloud...and thank you for taking care of the Captain," Shera said, her words interrupted by a quiet yawn.

Cloud stretched his arms in front of him, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Shera? Can I ask you something?"

She turned toward Cloud, stifling another yawn. "Sure."

"Why do you always call Cid 'Captain'?" he asked, then almost immediately regretted it. He had always been curious how this strange relationship came about, but he felt like he was being way too nosy, and at this hour?

Shera brushed a stray hair out of her face, a pensive look crossing her features. "I don't always," she said, "but I guess it's partly out of habit and partly to keep my distance. It's hard sometimes to maintain this little world we've made. I don't like it when things get unpredictable. Things get messy....," she paused, becoming uncomfortable with the subject. The truth of the matter was that it was one small thing she did to set a boundary over which she would not cross. She and Cid often brought out the best in each other, but it was a two way street. They knew things about one another only the best of friends could know, they could talk for hours about anything, or nothing...and they could fight like cats and dogs. Whenever that metaphorical line in the sand was crossed, whenever the Captain became Cid Highwind, someone inevitably got hurt. And despite Cid's harsh words and contrary to popular belief, it wasn't always Shera who got hurt. So as much as possible she lived with the Captain and not Cid Highwind.

"I'm sorry, Shera. I get too nosy for my own good sometimes. I didn't mean to upset you," Cloud apologized.

Shera shook her head. "No, don't worry about it. Just get some sleep." With that, she returned to her room and softly shut the door.

Lying down on the couch, Cloud thought about Shera's words and her sad expression. He guessed that she didn't trust Cid, but she probably didn't have any reason to. But she obviously cared about him a great deal... Maintaining her distance. Things getting messy. He wondered why they didn't just 'fess up to what was plain to everyone else. The thought deepened, but he pushed it away before it really registered. Somewhere in the dark recesses Cloud carefully avoided, he knew he didn't trust Tifa, either. He didn't want to admit it, but it was true. No matter how close they had become in the Lifestream...there was something unnamed and ignored that he couldn't let go of. He turned over on the couch, changing positions as much to rid himself of those nagging thoughts as to get more comfortable. With the truth firmly denied, Cloud fell asleep.

* * *

No, Cid.

It's not time yet, this won't do...don't lose your will yet.

Leave Cid...You can't continue like this, unforgiven.

Can't be forgiven, dragon son, heartless beast.

She did it out of self-defense. Always hurting, always torn, she had to do it.

Some memory he shouldn't have came unbidden to his mind. Some terrific pain, his flesh burning, seared by rage. He heard it, smelled it, liquid fire tearing up his senses. Couldn't see, lost his hearing, then everything else was gone.

What was done to your face was done to her soul...but slower...she never faded away...felt it every time. It can never be forgiven. She had every right.

Cid jerked, tossing in his bed. He coughed up more tar, the black slime slithering down his face and onto his sheets. He groaned in his sleep, trying to hide, to flee his thoughts, but he couldn't. Something wouldn't allow him to retreat into the coward's twilight he had fallen into earlier that night. He thrashed harder, moaning, fighting to escape insurmountable guilt and dark accusing thoughts.

Red XIII pricked his ears. He remained motionless, fighting the natural instinct to wake his friend from his nightmares. It was more important to gather evidence and observe Cid's reaction so that a workable solution could be reached; either to cure or combat whatever it was causing his condition. That sense of nearby darkness tickled the animal's mane, causing his hackles to stand on end.

Cid sat up with a start, chased back to the land of the living by something very dark. He coughed uncontrollably, the traces of the black tar trickling down his chin and onto his bedding. Red XIII brought him a damp towel from the restroom, which Cid accepted gratefully, holding it to his mouth while he coughed.

"Cid, are you feeling all right? Were you having a nightmare?" Red XIII asked calmly after Cid's coughing subsided.

Still wiping up the tar, Cid glanced over at the fiery red animal. "Think I broke something..." he said weakly, holding his side with his free hand.

"It happens. How do you feel otherwise?"

"I don't know, Red." Cid looked down at the dirty cloth. "What is this?"

Red XIII cocked his head. "I suspect it is some residue from the black fumes. Perhaps it has condensed to liquid."

All at once, Cid shivered. He hugged himself tightly, bowing his head. The memory of those fumes terrified him. Choking, black...not the black of night but the deepest dark of the pit of emptiness, whose walls closed in tight and rose so high no light could penetrate. It was the horror of utter despair.

"I smelled it, too," Red XIII commented, knowing what it was Cid recalled. "But it isn't in the precipitate...perhaps the vapor was only a vehicle for the dark presence we felt."

Still trembling, Cid made an attempt to put a cigarette in his mouth, but he couldn't keep a grip on it. After dropping it several times, he gave up.

Suddenly, Red XIII jumped to the window, setting his large paws on the sill. The shadow passed, whispering sinister secrets through the trees.

"What was that?" Cid asked, sensing some faint presence.

Red XIII shook his head, causing the small beads that decorated his mane to sway. "Perhaps we should investigate."

"Yeah..." Cid got up and slipped on a warm robe and slippers. Red XIII made some grunting noise that was his equivalent of a chuckle. Even if Jenova had been standing there in all her evil glory, Red XIII would still have to laugh.

Cid wore bunny slippers. Very old, worn, beat up bunny slippers.

"Oh, shut the hell up. I've had them for years." The owner of the battered slippers glared at Red XIII, but without his usual heat. Cid was still deeply terrified.

Out of a real need to relieve Cid's tension Red XIII remarked, "Did Shera buy them for you?"

Cid quickly smacked Red XIII on the nose with one of the aforementioned bunny slippers. "Yes, dammit! Now are we going or not?" Red XIII was relieved to hear Cid's ire up; he didn't like seeing his brave friend so scared. He didn't want that fear to have the mastery, and if it meant getting his nose royally stung, so be it.

The two quietly slipped out of the house, careful not to wake Cloud and Shera. It was almost dawn; the light of the sun barely illuminated a few high clouds. The circled around back, near the old rocket launch pad. Cid caught a dark form moving in his peripheral vision and quickly turned toward it. It had gone toward the fence that enclosed his yard. The two quietly moved in pursuit. That feeling of dread presence suddenly became very near. Cid blanched, feeling an ill weakness fill his body. Red XIII's hackles lifted high, his tail becoming three times its normal diameter. His flame flared bright, illuminating the area and casting long shadows in all directions.

"There!" the fiery animal exclaimed, seeing a wavering shadow slowly crawling along the outside of Cid's house. The shadow stopped, shifting toward them what looked like a thin snout, regarding them with empty eyes. The shadow was no larger than Red XIII.

"What are you doing here?" Red XIII called out. It shifted again, revealing nascent claws on the edges of vaporous wings.

In a preternatural voice that sounded as if it came from a great distance, the shadow said quietly, "I grow here."

Cid asked in a shaky voice, "Do you have anything to do with Seir?"

The creature laughed, its voice like a wind. "I am a seed of Ancalagon...I feed on destruction. Go in peace—it is not I who destroys."

"I don't understand," Red XIII replied. He was surprised the shadow was even answering. As long as it was, the red beast would press his questions.

The darkness shifted again, scurrying higher up the wall. They could feel it gazing down at them. "I will never harm you. But the balance is tipped; the wind picks up and the jackal has been given teeth. All things that fall before the wind give me shape. Every drop of blood the jackal draws gives me strength. I merely wait." With that, the shadow withdrew, its body almost formless, as if it really were in the process of growing into a fully formed beast. The dark presence passed.

Cid rubbed his face, hands shaking. "You get any of that?" he asked.

"You didn't understand it?" Red XIII questioned.

"Red, I'm a rocket scientist not a damn theologian," he replied with a note of irritation.

Red XIII glanced at Cid, a question in his eyes. "Theologian?"

"Well ain't they the ones concerned with good and evil and stuff like that? Like I said, I don't know \$%^# about that sort of thing," Cid offered.

"Well...," Red XIII was deep in thought. A parasite perhaps...but was it connected to Seir and his assault on Cid? The smell in the shadow was familiar; he suspected it was the lost evil that the tarry substance missed. Did it have any connection to Cid? The shadowy beast itself didn't seem to care to do anything but wait. Seir, however, had singled out Cid as a 'dragon son' and attacked him with a dragon scale. "I wonder," Red XIII said mostly to himself, "if that shadow is Ancalagon's spirit that Seir said his dagger contained...I know at least it is the evil we sensed in the fumes."

Cid began walking back to his front door. "If it is, what does it have to do with me? That crackpot thought I was a dragon. Why would he attack me?"

Red XIII turned to follow. "I don't know. Perhaps the connection will soon present itself. In the meantime, the only thing I can suggest is to watch that shadow carefully. I don't like the idea of it running around, but we need to observe everything carefully if we are to solve this mystery."

"Yeah," Cid replied. They reached the door carefully so as not to wake the other occupants. Cloud was still sprawled out on the red checkered couch, snoring rather loudly. Red XIII padded in softly, his feline footfalls strangely silent.

A door closed in the back, and a moment later Shera emerged from the hall. She walked in to join the others. "I heard you go out. Are you better?" she asked Cid.

Something in Cid's gut twisted, causing a sudden nervousness to which he wasn't accustomed. He grimaced, putting a hand to his stomach. He tried to say something, but he couldn't speak.

"Captain, is something wrong?" Shera inquired as she touched his cheek. He jerked away, unable to allow her to be so kind.

Shera looked stunned. She took a step back, confused. Red XIII glanced up at Cid, watching his expression and body language with a learned eye.

Cid shook his head, surprised at his own actions. Stabbing anxiety knotted his stomach, almost making him nauseous. He looked at Shera for a moment, but he couldn't continue so he lowered his gaze. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he even look at her?

"What is going on?" Shera asked sharply. It was making her quite angry that Cid was acting so strangely to her. No, it wasn't strange, just uncharacteristic—he was giving every indication that he wanted to go as far away from her as possible.

He was hurting her again. Guilt held Cid tight.

Look at how angry Shera is. She doesn't want anything to do with you.

Cid started to back away. The anxiety and now guilt building up inside him nearly made him cry. His face was twisted in what looked like pain. He tried to shake off the unpleasant feelings; he was partially successful. "Shera...I...don't know. Don't know. I can't do this. I don't want to hurt you anymore..."

"Captain, I know you don't," Shera offered. She didn't really want to get into this now, or ever, really, so she said, "It's still a bit early to get up; why don't you go lay down...we can talk about whatever it is later." Shera instinctively stepped toward Cid again, intending to offer some comfort. He looked like he needed it, but again he jerked away, obviously extremely uncomfortable. His expression was almost pleading, as if to beg that she leave him alone. It stung to see him react so badly to her kindness...she began to wonder if he could no longer stand being near her, or maybe that he hated her.

Cid saw her injured expression and knew he had caused it. The guilt he felt grew stronger; even after tank number eight had malfunctioned, proving Shera right after so many years, he had never felt so regretful. I'm a curse on her, he thought to himself, what have I done? I've been so cruel to her she had to burn me to express it. Callous, heartless... He let out a choked sob, unable to deal with this vision of himself, a man so injurious that others were driven to such rage. She must wish him dead...

Cid stumbled into his room, shutting the door behind him. Red XIII was silent as he watched Cid leave. The large beast looked up at Shera, his one yellow eye full of compassion. "Don't be angry with him...something happened to him, I don't know what, but it is hurting him."

Shera looked after Cid, gazing at the empty hall. Red XIII's words caused her to ponder Cid's actions a bit slower. "What did he do? He looks like he did something terrible." It never occurred to Shera that he might feel that way about how he had treated her over the years; overwhelming guilt was not something that had plagued Cid's general outlook on life. She knew he had felt bad about his cold words, but it had never been a crippling regret, not as he obviously felt now.

Red XIII shook his head, unable to answer her question. Cloud just snored.

* * *

A few hours later, during what both Cloud and Cid considered morning proper, the blond swordsman awoke to a most delicious aroma. It was frying Uribo bacon, crisp and thick. He got up off the couch and stretched the cramps out of his body. He wandered into the kitchen where Shera was preparing the cured meat. He looked over her shoulder, licking his chops like any hungry animal. "Looks good. Need any help?" he offered.

Shera looked back at Cloud as she turned over a few slices of bacon. "You can scramble some eggs if you like."

"OK," Cloud replied as he moved over to the refrigerator. He opened it and pulled out several black eggs, amused that Chocobos always laid eggs the same color as their feathers. These must be Setzer's eggs. Cloud recalled that after he had returned to the land of the living from Mideel, he had been surprised to discover that Tifa and Cid had been busy breeding Chocobos. Someone had named the black female Setzer after some famous gambler from long ago. It wasn't entirely inappropriate; Setzer had earned them a pretty penny at the Chocobo Races. Cloud took the eggs and began preparing them on the stove next to Shera. After cracking them, he wished there had been some yellow Chocobo eggs; the yolks were black as well. Or perhaps a mountain Chocobo's—green eggs and ham anyone?

As Cloud prepared the eggs, Shera walked down the hall to awaken the others. She reached down to shake Red XIII's large shoulder. The animal roused himself with a prodigious yawn and a thorough stretch. He had been sleeping in front of Cid's door, keeping guard. This whole situation had definitely roused Red XIII's maternal instincts.

Red XIII sniffed the air in delight. Fresh Uribo meat! "You are very kind, Shera. That smells wonderful." He wandered into the front room, leaving his post for the moment.

Shera softly rapped her knuckles against Cid's door. When she heard no answer, she slowly opened the door and peeked in. Cid was lying huddled on his bed, 'cocooned' in sheets and a pillow over his head.

"Captain?" Shera asked quietly, just to see if he was awake. He stirred, then slowly sat up, leaving the pillow in his lap. He looked so lost and forlorn.

Cid looked down at his pillow and plucked at the tag. His voice barely above a whisper, he asked, "Shera, do you hate me?"

Shera jerked her head back in surprise. "Of course not. Why would I?"

Cid looked like he was about to cry. His voice rough, he replied, "Every thing I did...everything I said..." He paused, eyes unfocused and rubbing a thin scar on his right cheek.

That small movement stung Shera like a slap in the face. It was her fault he had that burn mark. "I...I'm sorry...I was angry, I didn't mean to do that," she said. This was the first time she had apologized for that incident.

A tear made its way down Cid's cheek and on to his chin, then it fell to the sheets. His voice was strained as he said, "Don't apologize. I deserve much worse than that."

"Captain, don't say that—" Shera began, but her words were cut off by Cid's violent reaction. Hours ago he ran from her touch and now he tried to escape her words. She wished there was something she could do, but now it seemed as though he could not accept anything from her. That hurt; it didn't feel right for her long-time companion to reject her like that. She didn't know what to feel; anger and sadness predominated. She pulled at the sleeve of her robe and looked at the floor. She was silent for a moment, then asked, "Are you hungry? I cooked the Uribo meat Vincent sent us."

Cid didn't respond, so Shera took that as a yes and used it as an excuse to leave. She felt strange, uncomfortable with Cid's uncharacteristic gloominess. She passed Red XIII in the hall as she made her way back to the kitchen. Red XIII looked questioningly at her. She responded with a sad shrug.

Red XIII quietly slipped into Cid's room to check on him. He had returned to his previous huddled position, but the pillow was left on his side. Red XIII watched him, unsure if he should listen to his protective instincts. His tail twitched in uncertainty. Finally, he decided to just go for it so he carefully hopped up on the bed and snuggled up next to Cid. He extended his legs in front of him as dogs do and set his head high as a cat does. He looked in Cid's blue eyes with his one yellow. Cid returned the gaze, expressionless. Red XIII moved his muzzle close and licked Cid's cheek with his raspy tongue. Cid closed his eyes and cried silently. He put one hand on the animal's brown mane, stroking his soft fur. Normally, Red XIII would never allow such a thing—he felt it was beneath his dignity to let a human, a two-legged thing, pet him as though he were a dumb animal. The tribe to which he belonged shared much in common with both the wolf and the tiger; they were loyal and protective as the canine as well as prideful and independent as the feline. He, Nanaki, as his father Seto before him, was dedicated to protect that which he loved. It was for this reason he laid next to his tormented friend. He allowed Cid to pet him because Cid needed it. Red XIII purred deeply, discovering a different and higher dignity. His childhood pride was humbled by his more adult need to help ease Cid's pain. And it didn't hurt that Cid was scratching behind his ear in just the right spot. He realized he could allow his friends to show their affection in the only way they could without losing his dignity. Red XIII kissed Cid again then laid his head on his legs, snuggling a little closer to his friend.

For a little while, the guilt and self-loathing that were beginning to tear Cid apart were banished by Red XIII's kindness. For some reason he could accept it from the fiery animal whereas he could not from Shera, or perhaps anyone else. A measure of peace restored by Red XIII's comforting presence, Cid soon fell asleep.

* * *

A few hours later, Red XIII lay next to Cid, facing him and trying to get the pilot to talk. Cid just stared at nothing and frowned from time to time.

"Cid, you can't keep everything inside," the fiery animal declared.

Cid closed his eyes and shifted onto his back. Red XIII might be right, but he just couldn't bring himself to share what was bothering him. The longer he mulled over it, the more truth he heard in Seir's words. He was nothing but a monster.

"Cid...," Red XIII said, a slight touch of pleading in his gruff voice.

"I can't, Red," Cid answered quietly. How could he be so cold to Shera, say such cruel things to someone who by every right should have been his best friend? She probably hated him for it... "Red...I can't stay here anymore...," he said, voice tight with emotion.

Red XIII sat up and looked at him carefully. "Stay here? This is your home. Why can't you stay here?"

Cid began crying again, shaking with silent sobs. "Shera...," he finally choked out, "she, she...better off...if I left..."

The red animal sighed, flicking his fire-tipped tail. Red XIII knew that wasn't true; it was plain for all to see that Shera cared a great deal for Cid, and if nothing else, she would miss her long-time companion. "I think she would have left by now if she thought the same," he commented. He licked his shoulder then asked, "Can you at least tell me how you feel?"

Cid turned to look at the fiery animal. He wiped away his tears and coughed a little, not noticing the dregs of the black tar discoloring his lips. It surprised Red XIII that not a half-minute after Cid stopped tearing, he wouldn't know by looking that he had been crying at all. The animal carefully took the dirty cloth in his teeth and gave it to Cid. Cid took it and held it to his mouth, just in case he coughed up more of the black stuff.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then looked back at Red XIII. "What's happening to me?" Cid asked, desperate for an answer. It wasn't like him to cry all the time. He knew something was wrong; for the moment his head was clear and he knew that his powerful and frightening emotions were sick and beyond reason.

"I don't know, Cid," Red XIII said, disappointed that he couldn't answer. He added, "I think it has something to do with Seir, but I don't know how yet. Don't worry, we'll figure it out." He dropped his head, looking a little sheepish. "I, um, I'll stay with you if you want," he said. He wasn't insincere, in fact, it was almost rhetorical. He had no intention of letting Cid out of his sight.

Cid reached over and scratched the back of Red XIII's head, right below the ear. Red XIII leaned into his hand, lifting his head and smiling a very doggy-looking smile. A moment later, Cid sighed. "It scares me," he revealed, "It scares me, and I know it's gonna ruin me...I feel like there's this black pit that keeps getting' bigger and bigger and soon I'm gonna get lost in it." He dropped his hand to Red XIII's paw and looked away from the fiery beast, the fear he described clear in his features. "Help me, Red...it's gonna kill me..."

Red XIII didn't know how to respond. He had never experienced anything like that, and somehow he knew no words that would suffice. He let his head droop, lost in thought. They lingered in silence for several minutes. Cid got up and walked to his closet, pulled out a large Shin-Ra duffel and began stuffing it with a few articles of clothing, shoes, some gloves, and one of his blue flight jackets. He carried it over to his nightstand and set it down. He opened a drawer, took his pack of cigarettes out, and tossed them into the open duffel. Red XIII watched him, unhappy that he could do nothing to help. He asked, "Why do you have to leave your home? I don't understand."

Cid straightened, dropping his lighter into the bag. He sighed heavily. "Red," he said sadly, "I can't even look at her...." He kicked his bag in anger, mad that he couldn't stay in his own house because his emotions were out of control. It was his home. He was forcing himself out of his own home because he could not stand to see Shera, even hear her voice, because it hurt him. Stabbing guilt accompanied the thought. He winced, his gut twisting again in fury... "I can't hear her! What's happening to me?!" he cried, panic and self-hatred rising like a gale-force wind...like a hurricane that fed on its own tumult. It was moving so fast that before he realized it, he lost all semblance of control. "I can't even THINK ABOUT HER!!" he screamed, grabbing at his hair and pulling out some of it. Now he knew the cruelest irony, the greatest cosmic joke...and it pulled him under fast. He screamed louder, his voice rising to a shriek, all that was human absent from his voice. He continued to tear at his hair, his movements erratic. He stooped low, turning toward Red XIII and hitting his head on his

footboard. He didn't seem to notice; he just went on shrieking.

Red XIII flattened his ears, his one eye wide with fear. He was stunned into inactivity, dumbfounded at how fast Cid had lost control and the incoherent noise of that fury. Cloud and Shera rushed into the room, drawn by Cid's cries. Red XIII pushed them out of the room before they could even react. He didn't know what else to do.

"What's going on?" Shera asked in concern as Red XIII herded them into the front room.

Red XIII shook his head, unsure how to answer. "I don't know, I really don't."

Shera looked back down the hall. "We can't leave him like that!"

"I don't think we have a choice," Red XIII replied.

Cloud shrugged, accepting it even if he didn't like it. "So, now what? Do you think that Bahamut might know something about Seir?" He glanced back at Cid's room. The horrible sounds he made were making Cloud's skin crawl. "And do you think we could go somewhere else?"

Shera nodded. She hated what she heard. "We could go in the garage." They did, all circled around Shera's classic roadster. Cloud noticed that Shera was immediately distracted by the parts she was fabricating. Without further notice, Shera started to fiddle with the parts and suiting up for work. Cloud and Red XIII exchanged a glance and decided to go outside. Shera clearly wished to concentrate all her energy on something else, to forget everything outside the existence of those parts.

As Cloud and Red XIII went out through the large door, Shera started up a grinder and began making a righteous noise. Cloud covered his ears, only uncovering one long enough to close the door. The two walked some distance away, far enough so they could hear each other over the din.

"So, what do you think? Should we summon Bahamut and see if he knows anything?" Cloud asked again.

"We could try," Red XIII replied, "I don't know what else to do." They looked over the area surrounding Rocket Town and decided to head southeast toward the Nibel Mountains. When they had traveled a sufficient distance from Rocket Town, Cloud pulled his glowing red summon materia from a pocket and slipped it into a small round slot in his gauntlet. He quickly spoke the words the knowledge of the Ancients revealed to him and gathered up his magic to summon Bahamut. Only a few seconds later, a huge gray dragon swooped out of the clouds, spreading his vast wings and surveying the landscape. He settled down on his hind legs when he saw only the two companions. He stared into the eyes of the swordsman who summoned him. Then he leaned forward, crashing down on his front legs, one hand landing on either side of Cloud. Cloud stumbled as the ground shook from the impact. Bahamut's huge snout was only a foot away from his face. Cloud felt the dragon's surprisingly cold breath ruffle his hair. Bahamut continued to stare, his unblinking yellow eyes daring Cloud to speak.

Cloud found himself feeling unusually timid. This great dragon commanded a presence even Jenova would find daunting. He felt in his bones that he was standing before a great king; it suddenly seemed to be an act of wanton disrespect to summon him for anything, much less to chat about his kids! He cleared his throat, attempting to gather up a sufficient amount of bravado, but failing miserably. He didn't make a sound.

Red XIII was in similar straits. He smelled Bahamut's great age, his royalty above all other monsters, and it struck him speechless.

Bahamut narrowed his eyes. In a voice filled with ancient dignity, the dragon boomed, "DO NOT SUMMON ME FROM THE ANCIENT MOON WITHOUT REASON. I AM THE KING OF MONSTERS AND WILL NOT BE TOYED WITH." With that he jumped into the air, and with a great down beat that blew dirt in every direction, the dragon king flew back into the cloud cover.

Coughing and brushing dust out of his face, Cloud muttered, "Well, that didn't work. Man, I feel dumb."

Red XIII shook the dirt from his fur, saying, "Yeah, I do as well. Hmmm, maybe not so much. He is the king of monsters,

after all." He licked his nose then added, "Let's head back."

When they returned to Cid's house, they stood outside in silence. Each pondered what they knew about Seir, which was precious little. A moment later, Cloud turned toward the garage as the ruckus Shera was making stopped. Something hit the ground with a thud and Shera stomped out of the garage. She was decked in full machinist's regalia: earmuffs resting below her ears, goggles over her eyes, face shield up, dust mask on her chin, long leather gloves up to her elbows, and a dirty white overcoat carefully belted so as not to offer anything for her grinder to grab onto. Her sleeves were rolled up over her elbows, also buckled so they wouldn't fall. And she was fuming. Apparently, her efforts to fabricate parts were being frustrated. She stopped in front of them and asked, "What's going on out here?"

"We tried to summon Bahamut and ask him about Seir, but, well, um...he was, um...really intimidating. So we don't know anything more than before," Cloud answered. Just then, Cid emerged from his house. He was in his normal get up, cigarette in mouth and Venus Gospel in hand. He refused to look at anyone, but he did say something, although it was too quiet to hear.

"Huh?" Cloud asked.

Cid looked extremely nervous, fiddling with a strap on his duffel bag and shifting as though at any moment something might attack him. "I have to leave. I have to leave. I can't stay here anymore," he said quietly.

"Huh?" Shera asked. "Why can't you stay here? What do you mean 'anymore'?" Cid turned away, wouldn't look at her. Her face reddened, fists clenching in anger. "Answer me!" she demanded hotly. His words sounded too permanent; if he was just going to up and move out, she deserved an explanation.

He finally managed to look Shera in the eye for a second, his despairing blue to her fierce brown. He quickly lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry," Cid muttered, then began walking toward the outskirts of Rocket Town, carrying his spear on his shoulder.

Red XIII looked an apology at Shera, then went after Cid, bounding to catch up. Cloud opened his mouth to say something, but he didn't know what. He looked to Shera; she was fuming, and well within her rights—if someone he had lived with for years up and walked away like that, he would most likely have relieved that person's shoulders of the burden of carrying their head, no matter what the circumstances. In fact, he felt like bashing Cid's head in on Shera's behalf. Then he turned his head toward Cid and Red XIII; they were two of his closest friends—and Cid had traveled the world and risked his life with him at the drop of a hat, just because he didn't have anything better to do. That deserved some respect... Cloud looked back to Shera, who was one of the gentlest and most hospitable people he'd ever met; she was soft spoken, polite, and saw good in everyone. He didn't want to repay that with rudeness; she didn't deserve his disrespect.

Shera sensed Cloud's divided loyalties and waved her hand in a shooing motion. "Go take care of the Captain, Cloud. I'll be all right."

Cloud nodded in gratitude then took off after Cid and Red XIII. He caught up with them at the Chocobo stables on the outer wall of the inn. Cid was tacking up Setzer, who cooed quietly. She was an easy-going Chocobo, hand raised by Cid. That left Cloud with Boco, the gold Chocobo. Boco warked loudly when Cloud approached him; this was Tifa's pride and joy, given her by an old traveler in Kalm in exchange for the Desert Rose, and he didn't like others riding him. He tolerated it, but just barely. Cloud sighed and retrieved Boco's tack out of the shed. As he was laying the saddle pad on Boco's back, he turned to glare at Cid.

"You know, Cid, that was a pretty cold trick you pulled back there," Cloud told him in a chilly voice.

Cid glared at Cloud darkly. Without responding, he turned back to his black Chocobo and cinched her saddle tight. Red XIII glanced questioningly at the swordsman as Cid mounted Setzer.

"It's obvious she cares about you. I don't care how bad you're feeling, there's no excuse for what you just did," Cloud continued as he finished tacking up Boco. He hopped up on the saddle.

"Warrrk!" Boco protested, but decided not to throw him.

Cid strapped the Venus Gospel in the leather mount on Setzer's saddle. He moved Setzer alongside Boco and looked Cloud in the face, frowning darkly. "Damn you, Cloud. What the hell do you know?" Cid's fists were clenched so tight on Setzer's reins that his arms shook. He looked like he was going to add something, but thought better of it and rode the black Chocobo out of the stable.

"Cloud, what are you doing?" Red XIII asked as he and Cloud exited the stable.

Cloud sighed heavily. "I'm just mad. I know how I'd feel if someone did that to me. Not even saying goodbye."

"He isn't well, Cloud," Red XIII commented.

"No, I guess not, but that still doesn't excuse him. I don't care if his head fell off and someone stuck it on backwards using duct tape and bailing wire. You just don't do that to people," Cloud replied.

"True," Red XIII conceded, "but he feels guilty enough now without being reminded of another sin. He's terrified of his feelings of guilt."

Cloud harumphed then dropped the subject. They continued over the mountains toward Costa del Sol, Red XIII and the gold Chocobo on foot and the black Chocobo flying. They intended on catching a boat to Junon then crossing the Misty Mountains to Kalm. "You know," he said after a moment of thought, "no one ever told Shera about that parasite shadow-thingy you told me about."

Red XIII grunted in response. They should have said something to her; it might not help much, but she deserved to know that Cid hadn't just fallen apart. He stared into the distance, lost in thought. He wondered what they could do about that shadow as the three continued on their way to Kalm.

* * *

As Shera opened the door of her garage, a chill went up her spine. She saw a strange shadow pass overhead and wondered what it was. Once the dread chill passed, she pushed it out of her mind. Right now, she didn't want to think about anything. So she grabbed her pneumatic grinder and lowered her face shield, throwing herself into her work

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"I've been meaning to ask you," Cloud said as he turned to Cid, "Where did you get that scar?" He motioned to a thin burn mark extending from his cheek to just before his right ear. The skin around it and on his ear was slightly discolored. Cid rubbed the mark with his gloved hand and looked away for a moment. Tifa's Empyrean Circle, a new bar she had built in Kalm after the abandonment of Midgar, was usually busy, but right now, only a few patrons were scattered about. Red XIII, whom Cid had finally decided was his official 'baby-sitter,' was lying near his chair. Little Marlene, young bartender extraordinaire, was carefully layering some fancy rainbow colored drink for a rich looking young woman. Cid looked back at his blond friend with a clouded expression. He shook his head slightly then looked down at his drink.

"Shera cleaned my clock with a fryin' pan," he finally answered, without the usual gruffness.

"Huh?" Cloud said, surprised. "But, I thought things were going pretty good before with you and Shera."

Cid picked at the leather fingertips of his gloves. He muttered something then took a deep drag off his cigarette. "I...", he began, then stopped. He fiddled with the stirring stick that came with his tea. He really didn't want to talk about it, but somehow he figured that red mutt that was worrying over him like a mother hen would stop at nothing to get him to open up. Red XIII seemed to think it was important...he was probably right. He needed Red XIII's presence more than he cared to admit; secretly he was grateful, but he outwardly he acted irritated. Cid sighed, blowing smoke out his nose.

~*~

Things had been going well. Just a few months ago, the Shin-Ra launched one of Cid's mechanical babies, the Shin-Ra 26. The intention was to blow Meteor out of the sky. It didn't work, but it did have one unintended side effect: it took Cid to

the stars. Shera had hitched a ride as well; Cloud hadn't known it at the time, but she had wanted to go into space every bit as badly as Cid. As the escape pod descended, Cid pressed one hand flat against the viewport. He watched the stars...his stars. There was something powerfully real about Cid's possessive feelings. He felt his home out there in the dark. Home, his real home, not that chunk of rock below them with all its own cares and concerns, but the place for which he was made. It wasn't in space, it wasn't in the stars, it wasn't anywhere...but he felt it touch him in a deeper place that he never knew was there. He did not belong to the Planet but to that true place for which everything he had ever seen was a shadow. Tears streamed down his face unheeded. He longed for it. No, longing didn't come close to describing it. It was higher than longing, more his than anything he had ever felt, more right and true than words could express.

Without looking away from the seeming infinite sea of stars, Cid whispered, "Shera...Shera...," his voice faltered, cracking slightly. "I feel it, my Promised Land...?"

Shera wrapped one arm around Cid's waist and set her other hand on his extended arm. She easily set her chin on his shoulder (she was actually an inch taller than Cid) and whispered in his ear, "I know; I feel it too."

"Can we ever...is it ever meant for us? I want it more than anything...is it even real?" Cid asked.

Shera just held him tighter and said, "I don't know, Cid."

Cloud just watched them, confused. He was not sure what they were talking about; he had never felt as if he belonged anywhere, much less somewhere that could remotely be compared to the fabled Promised Land. Nibelheim, the only home he knew, had burned to the ground, destroyed by Sephiroth. That was five years ago; he had nothing now. Maybe they were just overwhelmed because they had finally had their dream come true. Maybe it was something else. He wished he could share it with them. He frowned, then smiled a bit when he thought about how painfully dense those two must be not to realize they were head over heels. Cloud raised an eyebrow at Red XIII, who bobbed his head in what apparently was supposed to be a bemused shrug.

Suffice it to say, it took a full thirty-six hours after the escape pod landed for Cid and Shera to return to good ol' Terra Firma. It seemed like they were both drunk with excitement. Meteor be damned; they had been in space. So they went out and celebrated. For Shera, this meant dragging everyone to the neighborhood dance hall. There was some swing band playing; not everyone thought Meteor was a reason to stop enjoying life. Shera could not be deterred; even Vincent's dark frown didn't stop her from taking him along. No one was given time to change into more appropriate attire.

When they arrived, the band was playing a bright melody, suitable for those with two left feet. Cid and Shera immediately went out on the floor and performed a simple dance. Barret whispered in Cloud's ear, "He may get the chills jus thinkin' about marryin' her, but he sho do look like he's in love." Cloud nodded.

"How sweet," Tifa said, having overheard Barret's remark.

Yuffie stuck a finger in her mouth and made pretend gagging noises.

The band began an authentic swing song from long ago. Most of the dancers formed a rough circle, leaving a large space for one couple to dance. Cloud moved over to the circle and peeked over some lady's head. He dropped his jaw in amused wonder at what he saw. Good heavens, Cid could swing. Not in a thousand lifetimes would he have expected to find Cid Highwind dancing as if it were second nature. Shera was a fine dancer as well. Moogles couldn't cut a rug so well. Cloud motioned the others to come and look. When Tifa peeked her head over Cloud's shoulder, she put one hand over her mouth to suppress a delighted giggle.

Barret commented, "Next thing ya know, we'll be findin' Vincent snoozin' wit a stuffed Moogle." The ex-Turk shot him a fierce look.

"C'mon Cloud!" Tifa grabbed his arm and tried to drag him into the circle.

"Oh no! Oh no! I don't dance!" he cried, raising his hands in protest. Cloud had uncoordinated feet. Very uncoordinated.

Tifa stuck her fists on her hips and harumphed. She then looked at Barret. "Uh, um...it's hard ta dance wit a gun for an

arm?" he sputtered quickly, fumbling for an excuse, any excuse.

She was getting mad. "I want to dance!" She was quickly running out of options. In an act of desperation, her gaze landed on Vincent. He never noticed; he was watching Cid and Shera dance, pondering his own inscrutable thoughts.

"Not me," Yuffie warned. Tifa scowled, rolling her eyes at the young ninja.

Cait Sith hopped up and down on his huge Mog. "I'll dance with you!" he exclaimed merrily. Tifa stomped one foot, but she did want to dance. The cat hopped off his Mog, hopes soaring. Glaring venom at Cloud, she went and took Cait Sith's small, furry arm and led him to the dance floor. She was no less proficient at dancing than she was at fighting; Cait Sith did his best, his little red cape fluttering.

Cloud blinked a few times before his shocked mind would register what his eyes saw. Not only could Cid swing, but Cait Sith, Cait Sith, was a decent dancer as well. And that furball was dancing with Tifa.

"Smooth move, cat," Barret commented, grinning at Cloud.

Cloud fumed. "You're just a regular smartass tonight, aren't you?"

Barret just chuckled. Soon the circle broke up as the band began a slow tune. Cloud, against his better judgment, found himself cutting in with Tifa, roughly shoving the small cat away. Tifa grinned sweetly, but soon grimaced as one thick boot landed squarely on her foot. "We've gotta teach you how to dance."

A few hours later found the dance hall sparsely populated and Tifa's embattled toes very sore. Cait Sith had managed to find another very amused dance partner; it was a slow dance, so the cat was sort of hugging his partner's legs. Red XIII and Vincent both slept in a small alcove with a fireplace and a low table. Yuffie had been forcibly ejected some time earlier for her constant complaining about how bored and tired she was. Cid and Shera were completely oblivious to the outside world. Apparently, Barret had gone back to the inn.

"Did we bring some Restore materia?" Cloud quipped, glancing at Tifa's feet.

Tifa smiled. "It's OK."

The next day, the party gathered around Cid's front door, debating exactly how to go about removing the pilot from his home. It was well into the afternoon and no amount of pounding on the front door could get him to come out. They had put up with Cid and Shera playing like a couple of kids (they couldn't have stopped them if they had tried), but it was time to move on to more important matters such as killing Sephiroth. Enough was enough. Finally, Red XIII volunteered to go in and get Cid. The rest knew he had reached his objective when they heard Cid's loud cursing and something crashing into a wall. A few moments later, Red XIII emerged with the half-conscious pilot in tow, grumbling many an oath. Shera came to the door a moment later in a robe and slippers. She kissed Cid goodbye, perhaps a bit longer than she intended to.

"Oh gawd," Yuffie groaned.

It wasn't until Cait Sith began whistling and shouting things like "Go Cid!" through his megaphone that Shera woke up enough to come to her senses and retreat into her house. She turned an interesting shade of pink and quickly closed the door. The rest dragged Cid back to the Highwind, where he promptly fell asleep in a meeting room chair, grinning like a fool.

For about a month after Sephiroth's defeat, things continued to go well with Cid and Shera. He had, accompanied by many apologies, promised her he would never insult or degrade her with his words again. She accepted the apology and forgave him his many trespasses. Or so it seemed.

They still lived together as companions and nothing more, but the neighbors all agreed that they were finally on the road to figuring out for themselves what everybody else in Rocket Town had known for years. It seemed very peaceful over there in the Captain's house. One morning, however, that all changed. Cid had, as they say, 'gotten up on the wrong side of the bed', and lapsed into his old ways. He made some loud, rude comment about how slow Shera was fixing something on

the revamped Tiny Bronco. She glared hard at him and he had apologized immediately. It seemed she was content with that and let the matter drop.

Cid spent the better part of the day riding his black Chocobo aimlessly, thinking of such things as what an @\$%^* he was and how little he deserved such a fine woman as Shera. Occasionally the Chocobo would stretch out its wings and fly. He couldn't figure out why she hadn't left his sorry #\$\$ long ago. When he returned that evening, he found Shera deep frying some such for a recipe his aunt had given her. He sat down carefully at the table and rubbed his face, trying to think of something to say. He fumbled for better words a moment longer then gave up and said, "I am such a complete jackass. I'm really sorry about what I said earlier...Is something wrong?" He noticed that Shera was suddenly very tense. He walked up behind her and set one hand on her shoulder. He opened his mouth to say something, but his words were cut off by what sounded very much like a low growl.

In a fit of rage, Shera swung the frying pan, hitting Cid in the face with the edge of the hot metal pan and throwing oil all over the right side of his face and ear. By some bit of fortune, if it could really be called that, Cid went out cold. He fell like a rock to the kitchen floor, blissfully unaware that his face was burning.

When he came to, he found himself in his bed with one mother of a headache. After a few moments of deep thought, he remembered something hard and very hot smacking him in the face. The word 'hot' brought his attention to the terrific pain emanating from the right side of his face. "Damn, that hurts," he muttered. Bringing his hand up and expecting it to meet his cheek, he instead discovered some heavy gauze covering a good deal of his face. He explored further and found his ear in similar straits, but for some reason he didn't hear the loud scratching he expected when he touched the gauze. Usually when something was that close to his ear, he could hear it clearly. "Uugh," he commented. Why hadn't someone used the Restore materia instead of the Fire materia? He tried to get up, only to find a small hand pushing him back.

"Huh?" Cid asked. He hadn't seen anyone in the room; the reason became clear when he realized his right eye had been covered as well. Who ever was there was apparently sitting on his right. He barely heard some muffled response, but he didn't understand. "Say again?" he said a little louder.

"It's me," Shera answered, her voice still muffled but clear this time. He could tell she felt bad about what she had done by the tone of her voice, but she didn't say anything else.

"\$%#@, woman!" Cid exclaimed. "Why in the nine circles of blazing hell didn't you use the damn Restore materia?!"

Shera shrugged. "I couldn't find it quick enough. I don't know where you store it and you never gave me the key to the box holding your Master materia." That had been a safety precaution. If Yuffie knew anyone had Master materia, there was no telling to what lengths she would go to obtain it. "Besides," Shera continued, "you hardly have any defensive materia. Do you even have a Restore?"

"Why are you talkin' s'damn quiet? Speak up!" Cid yelled, exasperated that he could hardly make her out.

Shera circled around to the other side, on Cid's left, so he could see her. "I'm talking normally, Captain."

Cid turned to look at her straight on. "Now you are. Ya weren't before."

Shaking her head, Shera turned her gaze to her fingernails. She picked at one as she said, "The doctor, he thought that... um, that..."

Cid groaned. "%&#@!! Spit it out, dammit!"

"Um, that you were probably deaf in your right ear...he didn't sound hopeful," Shera finished quickly. "I got the doctor as soon as I could," she went on after a minute, "you know he can't use materia."

It was true. The doctor didn't even have enough magic to pull a gil out of a kid's ear much less cast a real spell. Cid looked up at the wood beams that framed his small house. Deaf...he prayed he wasn't also blind.

"I do have a Restore, by the way," he muttered. "I usually just leave 'em in my weapons." Cid was quiet for a moment.

Something lurking in his heart that he didn't want to face was tickling the back of his mind. He considered asking Shera why she had hit him...with something so cliché as a frying pan no less...but he couldn't. He knew he had something like that coming for a long time, but he didn't understand why she had gotten so angry over one slip-up. It would be a long time before he could forget it. He shook off the thought. After a moment he asked, "Why'd ya keep me down? Just a burn, right?"

"Yeah, but the doctor told me to keep you in bed for a few days. It's pretty bad, and you were in shock. He thought it would be best if you rested for a while," she answered. She got up from the chair in the corner and asked, "Are you hungry? I'll make you something and bring it in."

Cid looked at her for a moment, somehow knowing she wanted to leave, that she wanted to run. "Yeah...thank you." He paused. "Nothin' fried." He smiled weakly; his attempt at levity really wasn't very good. Something hurt too much for any laughter.

"OK," Shera replied. Her smile seemed forced as well. Her feelings of guilt were clearly expressed. She turned to the door and when she left, she closed it softly behind her.

Cid touched the dressing again. Not long after he began to cry silently. This hadn't been the first time she hit him. He had never once raised a hand to her and she had never said one harsh word to him; but she did from time to time vent her pain on him with her fists. It was a cycle that had gone on for years. But this time something had gone very wrong. He thought the cycle had been broken; she had forgiven him for his cruel words... He tried to wipe his tears away, but the heavy dressing prevented him. He tried to stop crying, to stop thinking about why she had been so angry. He wanted to run, too. But there was no where to go. The pain in his face would not allow him to forget her rage. He didn't want to think of Shera so filled with fury that she would hurt him like this. A broken promise...one lapse...she couldn't trust him not to hurt her. Tears came faster. He didn't understand why, but he knew he could not trust her either. The fire he felt from the burns could not compare with the gash Shera's rage had left in his heart.

~*~

"That all happened about three weeks ago," Cid finished his story about how he got hurt, strangely calm. Red XIII had noted with increasing optimism that after leaving Rocket Town, Cid had managed to maintain his composure, albeit with great difficulty at times, the entire trip. The farther they got from Rocket Town, the better he coped. Red XIII wondered briefly if it was just a change of pace or the fact that the shadow had been left behind in Rocket Town.

"Wow. I didn't know Shera was the violent type," Cloud commented after letting Cid's story sink in for a few minutes. He took a sip of his beer and diddled with a small coaster on the table. He had trouble imagining Shera hurting anyone. He knew she seemed weak when she was seen silently putting up with Cid's crap, but he also knew her to be exceptionally calm in the face of adversity, which took a great deal of strength. Even when Palmer was trying to steal the Tiny Bronco she had been very calm and low-key about it, suggesting that Cloud should go 'talk' to him. Shera seemed like the type with a fuse a mile long.

Cid frowned. "She isn't," he replied after a long silence. He rubbed the scar again. The confusion of emotions he had been feeling seemed to have subsided for the duration. He still felt terrible for pushing Shera to that point, but it was not a paralyzing remorse. "Not usually, anyway. She...puts up with a lot," he added. Using the butt of his old cigarette, he lit another. He wasn't generally a chain smoker, although he consumed more than his share, but remembering how he was burned and talking about it had drained him. Even now the world was just a bit dimmer to his right, but thankfully not too much. He was almost deaf, however.

Cloud leaned his elbow on the table and supported his head with one hand. His brow furrowed in thought. The two engineers had lived together for years, not even romantically, and they still got in rows that would put many a lover's quarrel to shame. They shared a deep friendship, but even that love foundered. The blond swordsman wondered how he and Tifa would fare in the long run. He lived with her now and they had their share of battles, mostly small ones, but some were extremely hurtful. He loved Tifa passionately...but that wasn't enough. He gazed into the distance, searching for some answer that would allow faulty humans to love without killing each other in the process. He got no answer.

Red XIII looked up at Cid. "I see you're feeling better. Perhaps you just needed a change of scenery. It must have been very

unsettling to have an attempt made on your life." The fiery animal turned toward the door. "I hope that is all it is, anyway." Hoping against what he knew deep down to be the truth. Humans were not the only kind to set the veil of what they wanted to know over what they did know.

Cid flicked some ash off the end of his cigarette. Red XIII was just deceiving himself. The pilot still felt that shadow, somewhere, not near, but somewhere. He knew it was following him to Kalm, he knew it was in the black smoke, but he didn't know why it followed. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the swinging door of the Empyrean Circle open and so he looked toward it. A familiar person walked in, but for the moment, Cid couldn't recall where he had seen the man.

The man looked around the room then strode toward the table occupied by Red XIII, Cloud, and Cid. He carried an envelope in his hand. Cloud gazed at him warily. The man wore average clothes, a green turtleneck sweater and jeans. He arrived at the table and proffered the envelope. "This just arrived for you, Mr. Strife."

Raising his eyebrows, Cloud reached out and took the envelope. "Who do I know that would send me mail?"

"It's from a Ms. Shera Stargazer," answered the man.

"Shera! Why would she send me mail!" Cloud exclaimed. Cid looked intently at Cloud's letter.

Red XIII set his large paws on the table. "Well?"

Cloud shrugged then slipped a finger under the seal on the envelope. He managed to tear a corner off the enclosed paper in his bungled attempt to open it. Tifa had purchased many a letter opener for him but he always lost them. He grinned sheepishly at the mocking stare he got from Cid. Cloud removed the letter with some difficulty but it was extracted without further incident. He unfolded the paper and held the torn corner in its rightful spot.

Cid looked back at the letter carrier, suddenly remembering where he saw him before. "You were in Rocket Town. I remember; you asked about my spear. What the hell are you doing here deliverin' mail?"

The man looked askance toward Cid. "I don't know what you're talking about, sir. Sorry." With that, the man turned to leave.

Cid narrowed his eyes at the retreating stranger as Cloud read his letter, a deep frown marking his features. "This doesn't sound like her at all. She says everything is fine and asks how the weather is. She also says something about daisies growing and how she wishes we would visit sometime. I don't think this is even her handwriting."

Red XIII placed his nose near the paper and the envelope. He growled deeply and said with a mixture of fear and anger, "The envelope smells like Shera but the letter like Seir!"

Cid stood quickly, grasping his stomach. He felt extremely ill. Should have thought of that! You knew there was a dangerous man in Rocket Town! He stumbled back, stooped from the intensity of his anxiety. It'll be your fault! He felt like crying but found himself strangely unable.

Red XIII declared, "We have to go back. She may be in trouble. We don't have time to cross the ocean by boat...let's go to the Chocobo ranch and get Cid's gold Chocobo. I'll see you to Junon."

Cloud rose and stalked to the door. "You're right," he answered with a determined tone, "I wish you could come, but you're right, we'll have to cross by Chocobo. C'mon, let's go." He grabbed the Ragnarok and set it on his back, then turned to say goodbye to Tifa.

Cid wrapped his shaking hands around the haft of the Venus Gospel, feeling the spear's faint life flicker a bit stronger. He took it and left Tifa's bar.

Outside, the two men mounted their Chocobos and quickly rode out toward the Ranch. Red XIII followed, easily keeping pace with Boco and Setzer. It took just about a half-hour to reach the Ranch, where Choco Billy, one of the ranch hands,

greeted them warmly.

"What can I do for you?" Choco Billy asked good-naturedly.

Setzer sidled up next to him, cooing quietly, her crest rising in greeting. Cid looked down from her back, holding one hand on her black feathered head. "I need to take Cid out," he said, a bit awkwardly.

"Will do!" Choco Billy answered as he turned toward the stables.

"Cid'?" Cloud asked in amusement.

The pilot grumbled as he dismounted Setzer. "Yuffie named her. That damn brat was mad 'cause she kept pukin' her guts out all over my Highwind. Decided to take it out on the pilot, which happened ta be me."

Cloud shuddered with laughter, causing Boco to wark nervously. "Cid's a she!! What is it with you namin' your girl Chocobos with guy's names?!"

Normally Cid would have taken it out of Cloud's hide, but his heart was too heavy with worry and guilt over Shera. When Choco Billy led Cid, Cid's gold Chocobo, from the stables, the pilot mounted her in silence, setting his spear in its holder. Your selfishness probably got her killed... The torrent of guilt and pain he left in Rocket Town threatened, menacing behind him and slowly advancing. It was alive like a fire, ready to consume everything in its path. In terror of himself and what could have happened to Shera because of him, he rode his Chocobo away at top speed without another word.

Cloud blinked, gaping. Then he frowned, looking over at Chole, Choco Billy's sister and an excellent judge of a Chocobo's capabilities. "Cid is faster than Boco, huh."

Chole nodded. "She's a good Chocobo. I've never seen a faster. If your friend just rides her at half speed, I don't think even Boco could catch up."

"Damn," Cloud muttered under his breath. He looked down toward Red XIII, who appeared to be upset. "We'll follow him... if we don't catch him by Junon, we can take the boat across."

Red XIII nodded, worried about his friend and stung by his behavior. He was upset that Cid hadn't even had the decency to say goodbye. "No...it would be best if I just followed by boat. He may get himself in trouble and you should reach him as soon as you can. If Seir has done something to Shera, she will need your help also. I doubt he would hesitate to kill Cid." The fierce animal looked up toward the blue sky.

* * *

And Seir laughed.

* * *

Cid slashed at the walls, the golden blade of the Venus Gospel effortlessly biting into the drywall and drawing white dust into the air. Glass dishes shattered as he brought the spear down on the kitchen table. The weapon cleaved the wood in half, sending splinters flying. Its blade sharper than a scalpel and made keener by Cid's tormented spirit, the spear bit into anything it touched. Cutting deeply into another wall, the blade glinted fiercely, reflecting the rage that was destroying its master. Cid was lashing out at the pain that was eating him alive. When he had arrived home earlier that evening and found one of Shera's white coats torn and stained red with blood, the true storm began and he was lost in it. Somewhere deep in his shattered heart he knew what he was doing was futile; no amount of destruction would ease his pain or assuage his guilt. This only deepened his rage, the Venus Gospel now slashing at shadows in the air. He howled in unmitigated despair as he tore apart his home, reflecting the pent up hurricane of pain destroying his soul. Ever vain swing of his spear brought him closer to madness, feeding his inner agony rather than purging it. The gaping maw of that terrible beast only got hungrier the more it devoured itself. It was a pain too deep for words; its incoherent madness was so far below language nothing so sensible as words could describe it.

Sobbing inwardly, his breath catching on tears he could not shed, Cid stood the beautifully colored weapon on end, bracing it between one leg and the arm of the red checkered couch. He looked deep into the intensity of color the Venus Gospel wore, seeing his reflection in the shining blade. He was sickened by what he saw, a man with the heart of a cruel dragon. Fists clenched, he lifted his arms up high, holding them above the golden wing blades that flared out from either side of the vibrant blue shaft of the spear. In some frantic belief that something must end for his inner torment to end, Cid had nearly destroyed everything in his house. Now he would destroy himself. He brought his wrists down hard against the Venus Gospel, trailing blood on the gold. A distant sense, almost a gasp, shuddered through the weapon. It recoiled against the taste of its master's blood. Cid let it fall; it clattered to the floor, the blue dulling and its sharp edge fleeing.

Shera left the old launch pad, carrying a bag containing an assortment of metal odds and ends she intended to fabricate into parts for the classic car she was restoring. As she strolled toward her house, she heard the sounds of wood cracking and glass breaking. She dropped her bag and ran toward the back door, wondering if someone was robbing her house. She was about to take a metal rod from the ground to protect herself when she heard Cid's anguished cries. She rushed in, turning the hall corner just in time to see the Venus Gospel fall, wet with blood. She let out a startled cry then quickly grabbed both of Cid's hands. She held his bleeding wrists in a grip of steel.

Sheer force of will and fear kept Shera's grip tight as Cid struggled to free himself. She must hate him with a deep loathing to prevent his life from draining from his veins. What level of cruelty had he driven her to that she wanted him to continue in such pain? Why would she not allow him to die? Wasn't there peace in that last darkness? He didn't even realize Shera was safe and alive, such was his confusion.

"Let me go!" he cried, still struggling in vain.

"Why? So you can finish bleeding to death? Captain! Get a hold of yourself!" Shera shouted back.

"Let me go!" Cid repeated, his voice shrill, expressing perfectly how close he was to falling over the precipice. Suddenly, Shera let go, allowing his blood to flow freely. A wave of dizziness forced him down on the couch. Now maybe he would find his elusive peace. His vision clouded, leaving nothing but black and bright sparkles.

A moment later his vision cleared. Cid looked up at Shera and nearly screamed. She had grabbed the Restore materia out of his spear and was now casting a cure spell on him. He tried to fight it, but no death wish could resist holy magic. Things were moving too fast; Cid's mind shut down as he inwardly let go of every thought. He began to shiver, deeply chilled by the blood loss and mental exhaustion his frenzy had left. He gazed in terror up at Shera, his breathing fast and shallow.

Shera returned the gaze, both anger and sadness warring for her mastery. She could not understand why he violently rejected any kindness of hers, no matter how minuscule. It angered her. But to see him in so much pain felt like a knife in the heart. "What is going on, Captain? Why are you acting like this?" Her voice betrayed her conflicting emotions.

Cid was utterly lost. What had he done this time to hurt her? Whatever it was, she would never forgive him. He couldn't be forgiven. How could she not know that both of them would be better off if he died? He tried to say so, but the words were choked off, the pent up tumult swallowing them. The harder that hellhound raged the more it cut itself off from any release. There was nothing for it but to ruin him. It had nearly finished him. Shera started to cry. Cid shook harder, feeling his own tears drown him. Even that release was denied him. He could not cry.

Wiping away some of her tears, Shera knelt down on the floor beside Cid. She laid a hand on his knee, but she couldn't tell if he shrunk away because he was shaking so hard. She looked around the front room, taking in the ruin. Very little was unharmed. She returned her gaze to Cid, watching him shiver like a small, terrified animal. She cried harder; she couldn't stand seeing him like this. How could he do this to her? The feeling was irrational, but felt nonetheless.

"Captain...please stop. You're hurting me," she said, unable to keep out the note of anger. He turned his head away and closed his eyes, making some agonized noise that sounded as though it were all he had left in him.

Shera looked down at the blade of the fallen Venus Gospel. The golden blade was dull, almost tarnishing where it touched Cid's blood. It seemed as if it was trying to shrink back from that blood. Shera drew her own blood-soaked hand along the face of the gold wing, leaving a crimson streak. She thought she felt the weapon shudder.

Shera looked back toward Cid, turning so that she could see his blue eyes. He did not look back. "Why are you doing this to me? Did I do something to hurt you? I—"

Cid interrupted her words. "...No..." he managed to whisper. "No..." he said again, his voice gaining some strength. "...I...I did, can't be forgiven..." He covered his face with his hands, not caring that they were sticky with his own blood. He lay down on the couch, brining his knees up to his chin. He tried to curl himself up as tightly as possible. Can't be forgiven. Can't be loved. She must hate me so much. "Go away..." he whispered.

"Captain..." Shera spoke softly as she gently touched his blond hair. She nearly hissed in anger when he somehow managed to curl up even tighter in an attempt to escape her. She got up to leave, furious now with his repeated flights from her. How could he do that? And why now? What could have happened to change him so much? They had lived together in this house for years and he had never acted so distant. Was he finally just tired of her? He had said so many awful things to her...she wanted to believe he didn't mean any of it, but did he? The hurt she felt from his recent distance was beginning to get the better of her. Why was he doing this? She clenched her jaw, resisting the urge to hit him. Maybe he was as heartless as his words. Patience tried and finally broken, her anger rose at the same time as humiliation at being such a fool burned her ears. She clenched her fists and opened her mouth to rain down curses, worse than any he had ever shouted at her.

A glint caught her eye, drawing her gaze to the Venus Gospel.

The gold shone now against scarlet. One drop of Cid's blood fell, soaking into the rug where it landed. Faint life...Shera recoiled from what felt like a slap in the face. She jerked back in mental shock. The shine, the faint life now settled itself in a corner of her heart, small yet inexorable, intent on revealing what she truly held there.

I don't know why, how he feels...

--So what. He hurts me. He has and still is, now more than ever.

Why is that...

--I don't care.

I don't know why he hurts me, but I know why it hurts...

--But he hates me! Look! He won't let me help him!

Do I know he hates me...

Do I know what he feels...do I know that he feels...

--What?! Of course he has feelings!

Did I ever really see that before...

--Yes! Of course!

Did I ever see that before...

DID I EVER EVEN CARE...

--...

No, I didn't...

--...

I was too worried about my hurt...too worried about me...selfish...

Yes, he hurt me, but he apologized...

--I forgave him. He said he would never hurt me again. And look! I believed him! I'm such a fool!

I never believed him...I never forgave him...

Shera blinked. She hadn't forgiven him. She told him she had, but in truth, she hadn't. Only moments ago he said he couldn't be forgiven...could it be this was her fault? Could it be that he knew she had lied, even to herself? Now she knew why she had burned Cid with her frying pan. She had never forgiven him. Suddenly she felt sick. Yes, Cid had said some awful things over the years, but it was Shera who held onto them. In the end, it was Shera who was hurting Shera. Cid had legitimately hurt her, but nothing he had ever said could continue hurting her long after the words were said. She had taken his dagger and stabbed herself with it. That wasn't his fault, but she blamed him anyway...did that hurt him? Could holding on to her injured feelings cause Cid pain? Shera was loath to admit it, but the answer was yes. The least of the hurt it caused Cid was the burn, the mark of which might never heal.

She had never forgiven him any slight.

--This is my fault. All of it.

I cannot continue to deceive myself...The devil takes the seeds...

Cid has taken that dagger against himself...

In this end, Shera realized, Cid was not only hurting Cid; he was killing himself from the inside out. "Oh, Captain...Cid...what can I do?"

Just love him...just forgive him...

Shera walked over to the sink and washed her hands. She then picked up a nearby handtowel and wet it, bringing it back to her Captain. She began gently washing the back of his hands, cleaning off the sticky blood. Again he pulled away, but this time she did not get angry. She continued undaunted then began to speak softly, "I'm sorry Captain...Cid. I didn't forgive you before, and I'm very sorry for the pain that caused you..."

Cid groaned, unable to hear her words without his gut twisting in knots. Can't be forgiven, can't be forgiven... "...lying...you don't forgive me..." The words kept repeating in his head, over and over, fueling the fire. Can't be forgiven, still hurting her! I'm always hurting her! The words he had just spoken stung him, knowing they were harsh. Hurting her. He twisted, making sounds more animal than human, unable to relieve the fast returning storm, wanting to vent its rage but knowing he couldn't. He held his head, as if to crush it, writhing in his inner torment.

Shera sat back hard, taken aback by Cid's actions. He acted as though he were losing his humanity. Somehow, she knew there wasn't much farther he could fall. Every strangled noise he made felt like a dart stabbing her; she froze in fear for his life.

No matter how fast or how far Cid ran, he could not escape himself or the shrieking jackal devouring him. He felt its teeth, its gale force, tearing him still, not satisfied, insatiable... He grabbed the Venus Gospel violently, desperately seeking the only escape he knew would work. He saw again his reflection in the shiny blade, through a layer of his own red blood. Hoping this would be the last time he saw his face, he stood the weapon as he had before. The spear shuddered almost as if it knew its master's intentions. The glint in the gold quickly dulled as the blue flame in the center of the blade faded to black. It seemed to be running as well, but from what would a spear run?

...i don't want to drink your blood... ..but i will cut your heart...

Cid trembled, the Venus Gospel shaking in his grip. He was certain he was finally succumbing to madness. From what did it run?

Shera's heart stopped for a moment in disbelief. Was he going to try this again?! "Cid! Why are you doing this? Don't do this!" She grabbed one wrist as he raised his arms over the flared blade.

Tears unshed caught in Cid's throat. "I won't hurt you anymore this way...everything..." he paused, voice faltering, then continued, "...won't hurt anymore." He wrenched his arm out of Shera's grasp. This was the only way.

"And this won't hurt me?!" Shera nearly screamed. "I love you, Cid Highwind! I'd give my life for you! You know that! If you commit suicide, that is a hurt that will never heal. All of the rest, it's in the past. It's gone. This won't heal!" she cried, tears flowing heavy, panicking that he wouldn't see it, that her Captain would die.

The blue flame of the Venus Gospel flickered. How pointless it was for a weapon to run from blood. It was just as foolish for a man to run from his soul. The gold fled the spots stained with Cid's blood, leaving a tarnished black. Cid looked at it again, his blood, bled for his pain...but it hadn't taken the pain with it. She was right, wasn't she? All the things he had done...if she loved him, this would top them all.

Can't be forgiven, can't be loved. No, it's not true. It won't hurt her. How could it? You would be doing her a favor. Still, he lowered his arms, grasping the Venus Gospel tightly.

Shera moved behind Cid, wrapping her arms around his waist. She laid her head on his shoulder, allowing her long brown hair to fall on his arm. Tears flowing, she thought again about what life would be without her Captain. Her Captain...

All I can do...

"Cid," she began, whispering in his ear, "you keep saying that you can't be forgiven. Why are you saying that? Don't you see? I love you and I forgive you..." She swallowed hard before saying her next words. It was against her better judgment; the words most likely were best left unsaid, but she needed him to understand that if she was wronged and dropped the matter, the matter was dropped. "Isn't it me you hurt? So doesn't that make it my choice to forgive you? You have to acknowledge that, Cid. I've decided that you are no longer guilty. Don't throw that in my face!"

The pilot tightened his grip on the Venus Gospel, using it as a support. A small spark of his bleeding soul held onto her words, wanting to believe them. He felt the Venus Gospel's faint force pass through his hands, seeking out his spirit and magic. The spear connected; it flared bright, the blade casting off the blood that disgraced it, the blue flame growing strong. Normally the weapon amplified the relative strength or weakness of Cid's spirit and magic. This time it was Cid who gained strength from his spirit touching the Venus Gospel. It was that tiny corner of his wounded spirit that the weapon had touched, and it grew bright. The weapon stood formidable, immovable, steadfast to the point that the only way for him to escape utter destruction was to stop resisting and let it sink its blade deep into his heart of hearts. Cid stared at it with new sight. No, it wasn't the spear itself that was irresistible, but the spirit in it, the real Venus Gospel. He stood gaping at the weapon, shocked out of his madness, his soul quietly waiting.

I want to believe her...

There was something else, the voice of the storm, the teeth of the jackal...How can you believe her? You've done too much. Is she violent by nature? Yet she burned you...that in itself shows how damaged she is. You can't forget that...that scar will never vanish, you will never hear properly again...you can feel it tingle, your vision is clouded...

Cid blinked a few times. It was true his eye and ear had been permanently damaged; it was barely noticeable in his vision, but he was half-deaf now. He could never forget the action that had caused these injuries.

But I can forgive...

She forgave me...

--Can she forgive me?

Like hell she did. She lied then and she's lying now. You can't trust her!

Is she...she said the words...

Words!! That's all you have, meaningless words.

--Words aren't meaningless! If anyone should know by now, it's me! Dammit, I've been throwing words at her too long... they ain't meaningless...I remember, 'sticks and stones,' but words can kill.

They kill, but they can't give life...you can't trust her.

I don't know that...

Who am I to say she did not mean her words...

She's gotta walk the talk. When has she done anything to prove her words? She burned you, that proved her words, didn't it? She would never give her life for you. She wouldn't even risk it.

She did...she has...

--I would have died...

In a way, Shera had given her life for Cid. When she was checking the oxygen tanks, it was so he would not die. And more than that, it was so he could have his dream...it was indeed a selfless love that moved her to put his happiness above her life. As it turned out, Cid couldn't let her make that sacrifice; so his dream ended so she could live. Perhaps now it was time to even the score... In order to give her her happiness, he would not risk his life; he would live it. He would live for her.

--I can't...

No, you can't. She'll turn on you.

I can...what choice do I have...

--Live for her or die by my own hand...Give her...

The one I love...

--...what she wants, make her happy...or let my own pain consume me, disregarding what it will do to her...Oh, God, I'm afraid...

Isn't much of a choice...I am presented with life and death...

--...I...I'll live for her...

I choose life...

No! NO!! You can't do that! How can you? You hurt too much; it'll hurt too much to live. She can't want that! It's a lie! ALL LIES!!!

She has said what she wants...

--I have to trust her...

Something shrieked in his head then fled. Cid felt its absence although he never could remember it being there. In its place, he felt the Venus Gospel's unwavering spirit. He knew then what had taken the teeth from the ravening jackal, what had calmed the storm. It would no longer eat him alive, no longer rage futilely. It was still there, the pain hadn't gone...but it had slipped a notch. If Shera forgave him, he was forgiven. It didn't make one bit of difference how he felt about it. But

he would keep his promise. He let the Venus Gospel fall to the floor. He wouldn't hurt her.

"Oh, Shera, what have I done?" Cid asked, suddenly seeing that he had allowed his pain to take over, that his distrust and guilt had let that rage feed on him. He began crying, finally the tears flowing freely. Shera helped him to sit down on her lap, holding him and letting him rest his head on her.

"I'm so sorry..." he whispered. He wouldn't reject her forgiveness—he realized now that would hurt her. It was hard, but he understood why; she loved him, and it would hurt anyone for someone they loved to refuse a gift of that magnitude. He cried harder, feeling some of the pain finally vent. He didn't deserve her love but again he couldn't reject it. It wouldn't change how she felt...if he even wanted it changed. He smiled at the thought, the first time in days. As long as he was facing the truth, he might as well 'fess up about that, too. Crow with a side of humble pie. Eat up, Cid. #@\$*.

Wiping some of his tears away, he looked up into her face. She was crying too. He faltered for a moment in his resolve, but gained his footing again. "Shera...um..." Slipped.

Shera picked up the damp handtowel and used it to clean Cid's face, removing the blood he had smeared across it a little while ago. "Yes?" she asked.

"...Uh...um...Damn, I need a cigarette." Slipped again. He started to cry again. He couldn't now, but he would get it out. He silently promised Shera he would tell her how much he loved her, sometime, when the pain of the storm's ruin wasn't so fresh. He wouldn't hurt her.

For a long time, they just sat there and cried.

* * *

How could this be? It was so close. So close to being truly alive, to finish its being. It would not give up; the dragon's son couldn't cast it off forever. His destruction would be complete and the shadow would be complete. The dark creature left the corner in which it slept, stretching forth its wings. Its snout had grown long and thin, needle-like teeth sharp and black. It now sported long twisted horns, two on each side. Its wings had grown strong, no longer wavering like smoke; each one had on its leading edge a four-fingered hand. The fingers tapered to hard points; it had no nails. The shadow cried, a long whispering sound, then flew into the air. The dark presence removed itself from Kalm, heading back to Rocket Town.

* * *

Cid stirred; he was somewhat perplexed to find himself awake when he didn't remember falling asleep. He blinked a few times in a valiant attempt to wake up completely. Catching a hint of a sweet scent, he inhaled deeply. He sat up with a start when he realized it was Shera. He was awake now! Promptly losing his balance, he fell back and attempted to break his fall by grabbing the couch, but ended up hitting his head on the hardwood floor anyway. "Ow," he muttered as he examined the situation to figure out why he fell. He realized he had fallen asleep on Shera's lap, so when he sat up so quick he ended up slipping on her white coat she always seemed to wear. This left him in a somewhat awkward position from which he found it difficult to remove himself. He needed the use of his legs, but right now most of them were on the other side of Shera, draped over her lap.

Shera yawned and stretched out her arms. She looked over where Cid was sprawled on the floor and giggled. When she tried to stretch her legs, she yelped, exclaiming, "Aaah! Pins and needles! They're asleep!" Cid snickered. It was sweet revenge for falling and hitting his head.

After a moment's recovery from her numb and tingling legs, Shera asked, "How do you feel this morning?"

"Like a damn fool!" Cid answered. He felt just a little silly for having fallen, but more embarrassed for falling asleep in Shera's arms.

Shera smiled wide. "Good. I'd much rather see you feeling foolish than how you've been for the last few days."

Cid groaned, having temporarily forgotten the events of the last week. He looked at the wreckage he had made of his

house, seeing nothing that was undamaged. He felt shame begin to crawl up his face, turning it red. He looked upset, as if he might start crying again.

"No, Cid...c'mon, get up. It's done with. You can't do anything about it now...just let it go," Shera said. She offered a hand to Cid. He took it, using it for leverage to sit up and shift his legs over then next to Shera. When he was finished, he kept hold of her hand. Shera was surprised—but she didn't take back her hand.

Cid rubbed his face with his free hand. He knew Shera was right...so he let it go. He did easily what so many had tried and, much to their continued misery, failed to do. There wasn't anything he could do but clean up his house and start over. A secret of the ages and I found it in my damn spear, he thought to himself. He smiled at the unexpectedness of it, the sheer unadulterated craziness of finding such a thing in his strange and colorful spear. All it took was a shift of vision, looking at things from an absolute perspective...it was difficult, but at the same time the simplest thing in the world. The end of the relative was incredibly freeing.

Cid reached over, took the butt of the Venus Gospel, and pulled it onto his lap. He laid his hand on one of the yellow and blue hand grips, watching the light play on the vibrant haft. He felt the weapon send its spirit to find his magic. It did as it always had. The faint life he had always known was still there, but quiescent, quiet. Its stillness was a great contrast to the vitality, the inexorable force he felt the day before. Nevertheless, the serenity it had now was no more movable than it was before. When one resists the irresistible, it shows its fearsome power; it is gentle as the scent of the wind when one does not resist. He knew it was not the spear itself but the vitality of its spirit that was irresistible. Somehow, he knew that the real spirit of the Venus Gospel was a great deal larger and a great deal more alive as well.

Cid grabbed a cigarette and lit it, careful to blow the smoke away from Shera. He thought of her, what she had risked. He didn't deserve her. And now he was about to say what might turn out to be the scariest and most wonderful words of his life. They weren't what he had always considered to be the most emotionally loaded words one could say, not anywhere near it. Certainly no cliché here. Only a declaration of what was true. He took another drag off his cigarette then removed it from his mouth, holding it between two fingers, then turned to face Shera. He searched her features, then sighed. "You saved my life," he declared simply.

Shera lowered her gaze, uncomfortable with such a direct statement. Was it true? She wasn't sure, but she almost didn't want it to be true. It was a monumental thing to save another's life and she didn't know how to handle it.

He continued to gaze at her unflinching. "Shera, I owe you my life," he added. Cid took her chin gently in his hand and lifted her head, wanting to look her in the eye for his next words. His voice careful and steady, he continued, "I need to settle the score. You wanted me to live when I wanted to die, so because you love me, here I am. I love you, Shera and I'm gonna live my life for you." He paused, then added in a less serious tone, a smile tugging at his lips, "Now yer stuck with me. Is that whatcha wanted?"

Shera laughed nervously, unsure what to make of all that. She was having enough trouble with the idea that she had saved his life. Now he owed her? Doubly worse he just about gave himself to her! "Oh...," she said quietly. Things were about to get very messy. She was, as he had just said, 'stuck.' What had she gotten herself into? She needed and demanded his trust the day before...she got it in spades. Did he really decide to go on and not to end his life for no other reason than because she wanted him to? Just because that's what she wanted?! It staggered her mind. But what Cid had now done, it was what she wanted... It was exactly what she wanted. "Yeah...," she said, overwhelmed. She laughed again, terrified and overjoyed. She shifted a bit so she could lay her head on Cid's shoulder. There was a road in front of her, unexplored, unknown, to be discovered by her, by them... They sat in silence at the head of it.

After a long period, Cid asked jokingly, "So yer in love with a dragon, huh?"

Shera shrugged. "I don't care if you're a jackass—"

"Obviously!" Cid interrupted.

"—Or a dragon, you're still my Captain," Shera finished, squeezing his hand.

They sat again in silence for a long moment, enjoying the peace. "Uh, Shera...?"

"Yeah?" she responded quietly.

"Why the hell are you still alive? When I found your coat, I thought for sure that black-haired bastard had done you in," Cid asked in curiosity.

Shera looked genuinely puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"Cloud got a funny letter from you in Kalm. Red XIII smelled Seir's slimy fingers all over it, and he smelled you on the envelope. We all thought you were in trouble...that's why I came back," he explained.

Shera shrugged. "I don't know anything about it. I've never seen Seir."

Just then, something caused Cid to turn his head toward the front door. He knew there was something outside. He felt the dark presence that followed him to Kalm and that left him the day before. He stood, taking the Venus Gospel as he did, then strode to the door. He put a hand on the knob, hesitating. Shera came up behind him, a question in her glance. Cid whispered, "It's that damn shadow thing that me an' Red saw the other night. Red thinks it's a parasite or somethin'."

"How do you know it's out there?" Shera asked under her breath.

Cid shrugged. "I dunno. I just do."

A distant and yet very near voice whispered, "Come out."

Shera shook her head. "Don't, Cid. It's a bad idea."

The distant voice chuckled, a cold hiss. "I want you back, dragon child." The two heard a scratching sound on their door. All the color drained from Cid's face. Shera was shaken by the evil voice.

"I have to kill it, Shera. It's a parasite on me. I can feel it...it's trying to take me back," Cid said quietly. Shera didn't like the idea, but she knew Cid was an accomplished fighter; he would be no easy kill. She nodded slightly. Cid opened the door and stood face to face with the shadow. The dark beast moved away from the door, motioning for Cid to follow. He almost saw the creature smile when he stepped out the door, his spear in hand. Shera walked out behind him and shut the door.

The shadow held up its sharp hands and beckoned to Cid. "My dragon, sweet dragon, come back to me. It's right, Cid...you know it is. You've done too much." It almost sounded like a jilted lover trying to sweet-talk him.

Rather than answering it, Cid brought up the Venus Gospel and thrust it through the shadow. The creature howled in pain, but it didn't fall. Instead the shadow creature flew toward Cid, claws extended. They began to fight in earnest. The Venus Gospel moved with grace and power; it was as if it was an extension of Cid's left arm, so naturally did he wield it. Cid also flew with grace—he possessed an incredible ability to jump; he never ran, no fancy footwork, just long leaps from place to place and for every attack. But it wasn't enough. The dark form would howl, but it never slowed. It looked more as if it were playing with Cid, trying to wear him down. Shera watched, suddenly aware of the nature of the creature, as only one who knew it well could. She did know it in her heart; it in itself was a separate entity, but its energy and form was made of Cid's ruin. She knew Cid's pain, and she knew Cid could no more kill it in a physical manifestation than he could kill it as it tore his soul apart.

Shera shouted, "Cid! Stop!" just as the shadow knocked him down. The Venus Gospel flew out of his hand, landing several yards away from Shera. The darkness set its sharp claws around Cid's neck while it wrapped its long sinuous tail around his legs. It pinned his arms under its feet. The dark shadow lowered its snout close to Cid's face. "Come back to me, my heartless dragon. Come back and I will spare your life."

Cid tried to squirm out of the thing's grasp, but to no avail. "You said you just waited and grew. What's all this 'spare my life' *&#;\$%&? You said you'd never harm me."

The creature growled low, its cold breath chilling Cid's face. "I am not growing any longer. I am not finished. I do not wish to

harm you, my dragon. Listen to me..., " the shadow hissed. Listen to me... Cid felt weak, all the strength he had left from the fight draining away. Was this shadow beast responsible? His will was fleeing again. He felt his chest tightening, finding it increasingly difficult to breathe. Falling away...retreating...it would be so easy to give up, to close his eyes and leave...

The shadow removed one thin hand from Cid's throat and ran it through his hair in an almost affectionate manner. Like that...listen to me...I will not hurt you...go far away...let me finish...everything will be fine that way... Cid was breathing very shallow now, his eyes half closed and without expression. He couldn't think—the shadow had clouded his mind with its slow, whispering words. So easy...so easy to let go...

Cid jerked his head, weakly trying to clear his mind. Let go? He couldn't. It would be easy, but he had already decided not to go that way, already decided that he wasn't his own that he could just die because it was easy. He groaned, still shaking his head.

The shadow dragon hissed, angry that Cid would not give up and let it finish growing. In its anger, it let up on its mesmerizing words, allowing the fog to lift from Cid's mind. When the shadow looked down and saw his blue eyes glaring defiance, it cried out in rage.

"You worthless creature. Why do you fight what you cannot hope to win? You cannot kill me, no more than you can direct the wind. I am your destruction! You cannot defeat what is your defeat!" The shadow creature tore out a clump of Cid's blond hair, prompting a cry of pain and a long string of loud curses. It threw the hair into the wind then returned its hand to Cid's neck.

Cid clenched his teeth in anger. "I don't give a damn! You're gonna get your #\$\$% kicked all the way back to Hell just the same!" He was in no position to back his statement, but it wasn't a false bravado. He felt no fear.

The creature tightened its grip, enraged. "I will have you back...", it growled. It intended to choke Cid until he reached the same state of semi-consciousness his shadow words had induced so it could make another attempt to insinuate itself back into his soul. Cid continued to stare the darkness in the face.

While this was happening, Shera was sneaking forward, one cautious step at a time, until she was within reach of the Venus Gospel. She didn't want to draw the shadow's attention to her, although it made her ill to see it try to mentally rape Cid. She thought that she might be his only chance. She carefully extended an arm and wrapped her hand gingerly around the blade. She was shocked to find it as dull as a butter knife. She grasped it firmly and slowly dragged it toward her. The shadow dragon caught the movement in the corner of its eye and swung its head in her direction.

"What do you think you will do, \$%&*#?" the shadow whispered in its distant voice. It had no time to wait for an answer because Cid was making a nuisance of himself below its feet. It looked down to see such complete rage that Cid was able to free his arms. He struck the creature in the face with surprising force for someone who was suffocating. It shook off the sting, glaring down with its empty eyes. Its sinister voice cried, "What is wrong? She has been called that before. That and worse by your own tongue, my dragon."

Striking the creature again and clawing his fingers into its dark snout, Cid gasped out, "Never...again...! Won't let...any...body...!"

The darkness was now too angry to even try to finish growing. It wanted nothing but to kill Cid, to ruin his body the way it had almost ruined his soul. The shadow's sharp fingers pierced his flesh, it had so tightened its grip.

Shera picked up the dull-bladed spear, weighing it in her hands. Even to her inexperienced arms, it felt unbalanced and clumsy. She briefly wondered how Cid could wield it to such startling effect. She felt the weapon's faint life tickling her hands, raising goosebumps. The tickle snaked up her arms, searching her; she realized it was seeking Cid's magic. When it touched her spirit and magic, the faint tendrils it had sent snapped away, almost causing Shera to drop the weapon. There was no way she could use it the way it was meant to be; it was Cid's spear in a truer sense than she had realized. It sought Cid's spirit and Cid's magic, needing Cid's hands and Cid's strength. The Planet made the Venus Gospel for Cid Highwind and it was no one else but Cid's. Shera couldn't even keep the weapon steady. She looked down at it, hope almost gone. But it was all she had.

The dark beast shrieked in rage. Still, still, this hated dragon child defied it, still he stared it in the eye, still he refused to give in! That dragon son was so close to death, so close! The pilot weakly pointed one finger toward Shera, a faint smile on his pale face. The shadow growled and looked toward Shera. It let out a shrill scream at what it saw.

The scream was the last sound the shadow creature ever made. It fell dead even as it tried to take Cid's life. Its dead fingers were still tight around Cid's throat, drawing blood, but the creature was no more. The golden blade of the Venus Gospel had sunk deep into the shadow dragon's head, the point extending past the creature's twisted horns and the flared wings jutting out of either side of its face. Shera let go of the haft, grateful that her inexperience and the spear's dull edge weren't enough to stop it from killing the shadow. She knelt down next to Cid and pried the claws from his throat, allowing him to breathe. The claw marks weren't deep; the shadow's attack had left more serious wounds, but nothing that put him in any immediate danger. Cid looked up at her, gasping and coughing. He closed his eyes and smiled broadly despite the pain he must be feeling.

Still catching his breath, Cid took a few to say, "Da-amn, woman...won't get...in yer way...." They both looked toward the shadow as it began to smoke, returning to vapor. There was no evil in it; the black spirit that inhabited the dark smoke had already been banished. The black smoke caught on the wind and was quickly dispersed. The Venus Gospel clattered to the ground behind Shera, several feet away.

Seir watched in growing despair as the shadowy form of his dark servant evaporated. What had gone wrong? He had watched the battle. The flyer was much more experienced with that weapon and it shone in his hands. The woman could barely keep it from wobbling and dipping. It was absurd. But it had happened; with one blow from that beautiful spear, that woman had destroyed the flyer's demon. He stepped over to where the spear had fallen, examining it. The blade was dull. Seir nudged it with his foot, then jerked back from the jolt he felt run up his leg. So that was it. It wasn't the dull blade that had killed, running through the shadow's head, but the vital spirit in it. He briefly considered destroying the weapon, but he knew it would be pointless. He could toss the Venus Gospel into the Lifestream, returning it from whence it came, but nothing could destroy its spirit. The real Venus Gospel would never absorb into the Lifestream; the Planet had only made the spear, not given it life. Seir's quest was over before it began. He had other servants, their hosts ruined in mind and dying...but the dragon son's was to be his strongest. Even so, he knew it was over; it was only a matter of time before the others were slain in the same way...by other men and women who knew about the Venus Gospel. His servants would be found. However, Seir realized, he could still carry on his futile quest for some time. It would be a long time before anyone else would learn of what the flyer and his friend had accomplished, and not everyone could stand in the same power. There would be no ultimate ruin, no rule for Ancalagon's children, but there would be ruin as long as he lasted. He looked once more at the spear; ruin yes, but futile nonetheless. Seir turned from that awful, beautiful spear and began to walk aimlessly away from Rocket Town.

~*~

"Cid? Is that Seir?" Shera asked, just now seeing the back of the dark man as he turned to leave.

The pilot lifted his head from the ground and looked in the direction Shera was pointing. He grit his teeth, anger rising. "That's the bastard."

"Well then....," Shera said in a voice of deadly quiet. She brushed some brown hairs from her face and reached for the butt of the Venus Gospel.

~*~

A howling wind, a high pitched whine...the long green wyrm, the fearless dragon, circled itself around Seir, surprising him and enveloping him in light. The dark man felt his life sucked out of him, knowing the flyer had summoned his dragon spirit. He stumbled back then spun around in anger, his black hair flying. Time slowed, the fates granting him one last vision...the dragon's son lowering his right arm from the summon...his blue eyes angry yet not enraged. The dark one beheld the woman, Shera, running forward...tears spilling down her cheek in indignation at what he had done...fire in her eyes, determined to have vengeance for Cid's pain...and an inexplicable joy, knowing Cid would be the last, that this was the end. The golden point of the Venus Gospel a hand's-breadth away...the beautiful, terrible spear.

Seir closed his dark eyes forever.

Epilogos

They gathered around the corner table of the Shanghai-Tei, quietly enjoying various beverages. It had taking Cloud nearly two days to travel the distance from Kalm to Rocket Town, riding Boco hard. Red XIII came a half-day later. Seir was long dead by the time they arrived. All four of them, Cid, Shera, Cloud, and Red XIII were lodged in the Shanghai Inn, as Cid's house was uninhabitable at the moment. Progress was being made cleaning up the mess Cid left in his wake, but it was slow; almost everything needed to be replaced, right down to that lumpy old red-checkered couch. Just now, Cid had finished telling the others about the events surrounding Seir's death.

Cloud set his empty mug on the table, shaking his head. "That's a strange tale you just told. I'd have trouble believing it if I hadn't seen Mr. Fruit Loop deader than a doornail with my own eyes. Did you ever figure out what he was up to?"

Cid shook his head. "Nope. Only thing I can figure is he wanted to make a dragon-thing outta me."

"It fed on all Cid's bad feelings. Somehow it made them physical," Shera added simply, recalling the strange familiarity of the shadow dragon. Cloud noted silently that she hadn't called him 'Captain'.

Cid reached down and stroked Red XIII's tall mane, looking into his one good eye. Red XIII looked back, accepting the silent thanks in Cid's blue eyes. Both Cloud and Shera were surprised when Red XIII didn't rip the pilot's arm off. Red XIII looked over at both of them in turn then said hesitantly, "It's something higher...it's new...I can't explain, I don't understand yet." He was still a child; the fiery beast trusted that someday he would have that wisdom.

"Red, you are one of the best damn friends I got. You kept me 'n Shera saved me. Hell, I don't deserve what I got," Cid added gruffly to his silent words as he sipped his hot tea.

Red XIII dipped his head in acknowledgment then lapped some water from a small bowl the bartender had lent him. The animal had wanted a Cosmo Candle, but the bartender botched it, so he settled for water. "So, what are you two going to do now?"

Cid paused a moment to exhale some smoke before answering. "Go on as we did before," he answered matter-of-factly. He turned his head toward Shera and his entire demeanor changed. He still held himself as he always did, in that slightly cocky way, but without the rough edges. Something in his face had changed dramatically, and neither Cloud nor Red XIII could place just what. Whatever it was had washed ten years straight off. "We've got a whole hell of a lot of repair work ta do."

Cloud shrugged, then became very quiet. It seemed to him that they should follow a different path, if they loved each other. However, the path he tread with Tifa was crooked and full of confusion, although he would never dare admit it. He lost trust, couldn't trust, didn't want to trust...feared trust... Cid was alive because he believed Shera, took her at her word. Cloud would not allow himself to know that freedom that came from having faith in the ones he claimed to love, the freedom to live. He would not because he would not let go of his soul. Cloud held his hands tight around, thinking he protected himself, not knowing he killed instead.

Shera caught the look in Cloud's bright eyes and sighed. She took Cid's hand and said to Cloud, "Cid didn't exactly tell the whole story; he told you the events, but not his heart, or mine. Let me tell you something about the Venus Gospel and the dragon who wields it..."

The End

Author's Notes

Just a couple of simple things. For all continuity freaks and nitpickers (like me), I shall clear up a thing or two. For one, I rearranged Cid's house because I felt it was important for the inhabitants to have somewhere to rest their heads. If you look carefully, Cid and Shera are pretty much the only people on the face of the Planet who don't have nice, big beds to sleep in. The only thing that comes close is that dinky little red couch in that dinky little room that's stuffed to the gills with junk. But I kept the couch. Also, I figure the Venus Gospel is about eight to ten feet long, a full half of which is wicked lookin' blade. Stood on end, Cid could see his reflection, and I doubt it would get stuck in the ceiling.

About the dragon stuff: don't tell me I'm the only one who thought at first that Cid was a Dragoon in pilot's clothing. Watch him fight. He never ever runs except to escape (in fear that the monsters would laugh at him?) He always jumps, sort of like Aeris but not so high or funny looking.

Moria, the Dwarven home, which had an extensive mithril (True silver) mine, was under and through the Misty Mountains, so I decided to call the mountains over the Mythril Mine after them. Who says it wasn't once in Middle Earth?

On a more serious note, I wanted any potential readers who made it this far to know that I didn't make up the emotional stuff. I know the hurricane and the jackal, the power and sharpness of the Venus Gospel, and I've felt the Promised Land. I've been on both sides. So this is a lot autobiographical, with a good measure me bein' weird. Hope you enjoyed it.

--Princess Artemis

P.S. And yeah, I did have two Chocobos named Setzer and Cid. Not my fault they turned out ta be girls!