

THE DARK SHORE

By Frank Verderosa

CHAPTER I: I SPY

"What do you know about the submarine that was at pier three?" Elena asked.

The Harbormaster looked up from the large book he was jotting something down in and stared at her for a moment. Then he frowned.

"Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Elena," she replied, although she didn't see how that could possibly be relevant. "I'm with the Turks. Now what do you know about that sub?"

He looked at her again.

"Nothin'," he said and returned to his bookkeeping.

She stood there for a moment, surprised, and not at all pleased with his attitude.

"You are the Harbormaster, aren't you?" she questioned sarcastically.

He did not look up at her.

"Yeah, that's right. And we've got dozens of ships comin' in here every day. As long as they pay their docking fees I don't really pay much attention to them."

Elena didn't know much about being a Harbormaster, but she was pretty sure it entailed more than that.

"Don't you even know where it came from?" she asked.

He looked up again, and the expression on his face made it clear he wasn't happy about her wasting his precious time.

"No I don't," he responded. "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you. That information is confidential. Now if you don't mind, I've got a lot of work to do here."

"Work?" she replied. "Sounds like a tough job."

He ignored her and continued writing in his book.

She stood there for a minute, looking at him angrily, while he took great pains to pretend she wasn't there. Finally she turned and walked out.

The others were gathered beneath an overhang beside a garage holding docking equipment. The rain had lessened some, until now it was a mere drizzle. Not that it mattered at this point, they were all soaked.

Barret and Vincent had talked to the dockworkers while Elena had gone to see the Harbormaster. Tifa had just sat there, shivering and not participating at all, but she did seem to have pulled herself together.

"Nobody I spoke to could tell me anything about the ship," Barret was saying.

"There does seem to be a certain reluctance among them to talk about it," Vincent stated. "However, I did convince one of them to give me some information. It seems the submarine has been here before. The man I spoke to told me he'd seen it three times in the last two months. Always coming in to pick up supplies, never dropping off any cargo of its own. The skipper always goes up and has a long chat with the Harbormaster, but the man didn't know what it was all about."

They turned to look at Elena.

"The Harbormaster didn't tell me anything," she said. "He wasn't cooperative at all. I think he's hiding something."

Vincent looked at her thoughtfully.

"Perhaps I should go speak to him. Maybe I can convince him to be a little more...cooperative."

The Harbormaster was finishing the last page of his bookkeeping when a sudden shadow blocked out his light.

He turned and the look of anger on his face was replaced by one of shocked surprise.

An apparition stood behind him. He saw a long flowing crimson cape, a face concealed in darkness. Was it a human or some kind of monster? A metal claw reached out and locked around his neck, forcing him back until he was pinned up against the wall. He saw fiery red eyes, inhuman eyes staring at him from beneath black, flowing hair. The man spoke, for he realized now it was a man, or some twisted combination of man and monster.

"I understand you weren't exactly forthcoming with my friend."

The Harbor-master's eyes darted wildly around the room. He struggled for a moment, but stopped when the metal claw tightened around his neck.

"Who do you mean?" he stammered.

"The woman who was in here a moment ago," Vincent replied. "She asked you about the submarine at pier three. She seemed to think you knew more than you let on."

Vincent move closer and stared into the man's face, his eyes boring into him.

"I don't know anything about the sub," the man answered nervously.

Vincent's other hand came up. It held his handgun.

"I don't think this is a very good time for you to lie," he said grimly.

The man glanced at the pistol. Sweat started to bead on his forehead.

"If I tell you they'll kill me," he said.

Vincent brought his face even closer, until it was inches from the Harbormaster.

"In that case you have a difficult decision to make," he said. "You've got to decide if you want to tell me and wait for them to come kill you..."

He pointed his gun at the man's forehead and pulled back the hammer.

"...or whether you'd just like to get it over with now."

The man's eyes went back and forth between the gun and Vincent's face a couple of times.

"If you kill me you'll never learn anything."

Vincent raised one eyebrow.

"What do you know," he said grimly. "The man can think after all."

He slowly brought the gun down until it was below the man's waist, then brought it up against him once more.

The Harbor-master's eyes widened.

"I guess I'll just have to shoot you in a spot where it won't be fatal quite so quickly," he hissed. "Now I'm losing my patience!"

The Harbormaster glance at him one more time, but turned away immediately.

"The sub is from Mysteele," he said.

"Mysteele?" Vincent repeated. He had never heard of it. "Where is that?"

"It's a city south of Mideel," the man replied.

"There are no cities south of Mideel," Vincent said. His grip tightened around the man's throat.

"I swear it's true," the man replied quickly. "It's across the ocean."

"Across the ocean?" Vincent said. "On an island somewhere?"

"They never really told me," the man said. "From what they've said, I think it's more than that. I think it's another continent. They've mentioned other cities at times."

"Who's they?" Vincent questioned.

"Captain Tyler and some of his crew," the man replied. "They come into port every once in a while to pick up some supplies, but they mostly come for information."

"What sort of information?"

"All kinds of stuff. Mostly about the cities in the area. Questions about the government, military forces, economy. All kinds of things."

"What do they need this information for?"

"How should I know?" the Harbormaster replied. "They ask questions, I tell them and then they pay me. Whatever they're after is none of my business. I don't know and I don't care."

"So when are they supposed to come back?" Vincent questioned.

"I don't know. They never say. They just show up every once in a while. They don't seem to follow any kind of schedule."

Vincent looked at him thoughtfully.

"What else do you know about them?"

"Nothing," the man replied. "They never say anything about themselves. But I know they don't like to be talked about. One of the dockworkers was blabbing in a bar about them a while back. A week later his body washed ashore a little south of here. If they find out I've told you anything I'm a dead man."

Vincent suddenly pushed him away. The man stumbled against his desk and fell to the ground. He looked up as Vincent stood over him.

"Well, then I guess you better hope they don't fine out," Vincent stated. He looked carefully at the man again, his red eyes gripping the man almost as well as his claw had.

"But there's one other thing you better hope for even more."

The man looked at Vincent.

"What's that?" he asked.

"You better hope I don't find out you were lying to me," he replied. Then he turned and vanished from the room.

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Cid walked into Tifa's bar, followed closely by Aeris. After Barret had called them with the news he had gone to pick her up in the Slipstream The others were waiting for them.

"I talked to Barret on the way back here," Cid told them. "They're planning on following the sub. If it was a surface vessel, we could probably find it with the Slipstream, but that won't be possible with a submarine. The Slipstream can't track a vessel underwater. They tried to hire a ship to take them south of Mideel, but they couldn't find anyone willing to do it. Seems there's some rumor going around of ships disappearing mysteriously in that area. So they've decided to follow them in our own submarine. They'll be leaving tomorrow morning, after they've stocked up on supplies. Aeris and I are going to take the Slipstream and meet them there. Anyone else who wishes to come is welcome."

He looked at the others.

"I don't know what we're going to run into," he continued. "Barret says we may be going to a new continent. I have a feeling it's going to be dangerous."

"That's never stopped us before," Red stated. He looked at Nipala, who nodded.

"We're in," he said.

"I'd be happy to join you," Reeve said slowly. "That is, if you think I can be of any use."

"Of course you can join us," Aeris said.

Zack walked over and looked at Aeris.

"We still haven't gotten to have that long chat," he said to her. "I don't want to put it off any longer. I'm with you."

Aeris smiled.

"Are you sure you're up to it?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I'll be fine," he said. "Besides, Cloud is supposed to be my best friend, isn't he?"

Yuffie sat at one of the tables drumming her fingers on top. She looked thoughtful.

"Hmmm," she said. "New continent, new materia"

She looked up.

"Count me in."

"I'm going too," Rude stated.

Reno looked at him sharply. Rude turned toward him and shrugged.

Reno saw all the others gazing at him. He turned from one to the other, looking lastly at Rude, but Rude did not turn toward him again. He opened his mouth to speak and then shut it. Finally he shrugged.

"I guess I better come along," he grumbled. "I'm sure you're going to need someone there to get you all out of trouble."

"All right," Cid said, looking at them with satisfaction. "Let's get going."

Shera came up beside him.

"Be careful," she said. "And hurry back. The baby is due next month. You better be here by then."

Cid grabbed hold of her, tossed his cigarette aside, and kissed her.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," he said. He looked at the others. "Let's move out!"

~*~

"Where the hell are we going?" Cloud said, standing up. They had led him down into a compartment deep inside the submarine, yet even so he could feel the motion as the ship slowly started forward.

"Relax, Mr. Strife," said the lone man in the room with him. "Someone will be here momentarily to explain everything to you."

Cloud looked at the man doubtfully, but then slowly sat back down.

The Captain had been waiting on the dock when Cloud had arrived. He had introduced himself as Captain Tyler, then he had ushered Cloud quickly into the sub, saying everything would be explained once they were aboard. But as soon as they entered the Captain had excused himself and had this other man bring him to this cabin. Now the ship was underway, and Cloud had no idea what he was doing here or where they were going. In hindsight he now thought he should have told someone where he was going. Suddenly it seemed like a very bad idea to have come at all.

The door opened and a man walked in. He nodded to the crewman, who stepped out and closed the door behind him. The man looked at Cloud.

"Glad to have you aboard," he said with a smile. "My name is Magnus. Can I get you anything?"

"Actually, all I'd really like now is an explanation," Cloud replied. "The message said he would meet me at the dock. It made no mention of an ocean voyage."

Magnus shrugged and looked at him apologetically.

"Unfortunately unavoidable," he replied. "I'm afraid your father is not aboard this ship."

"Then why did I get that message?" Cloud questioned.

"Because he was with us at the time," Magnus replied. "He was abducted."

Cloud just looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Let me explain," Magnus continued. "Are you sure you don't want anything. Something to drink, perhaps?"

Cloud shook his head.

Magnus sat down in the chair the crewman had vacated when he left and looked at Cloud earnestly.

"This vessel is under the flag of the government of Mysteele, which is a city on the southern continent."

"There is no southern continent," Cloud stated.

"I assure you there is," the man replied. "Few of your people know of us. Mysteele and the other cities of the southern continent have always remained isolated from the rest of the world. We thought it was in our best interests to not get involved in your...disagreements."

Cloud looked at him thoughtfully.

"You mean our wars," he said.

Magnus nodded.

"Frankly, yes. We've got enough of our own problems without getting involved in someone else's politics. In fact, that's how this whole thing started. You see, just recently our President was assassinated. It was done by a group of insurgents, known as the Brotherhood, who are attempting to bring down our government. It has thrown the entire country into chaos. The Vice President has taken over, but is all but paralyzed by the terrorist threat. In order to restore any type of order in our city the Brotherhood must be brought down."

Cloud shrugged.

"Even if this is all true, what has it got to do with me, or my father?"

"I was getting to that," Magnus replied. He glanced at the door, then turned to Cloud and continued in a lower voice.

"Your father was working for our government," he continued. "He had infiltrated the Brotherhood. He was obtaining important information for us. Vital information."

"Are you trying to tell me he was a spy?" Cloud said.

Magnus nodded.

"But someone in the Brotherhood found out about him. I don't know how they knew we were coming here, but somehow found out. We're not the only one's with spies. They killed four of my men and took him, undoubtedly back to the southern continent to face their own brand of justice."

Magnus gave him a probing look. Cloud's face remained expressionless. His father had left his mother before he was one year old. Cloud had never seen him again, could not remember anything about him. As far as Cloud was concerned, he was a total stranger.

"I still don't see what this has to do with me," he said.

"Just because we are isolated doesn't mean we don't know what has been going on," Magnus replied. "You made a name for yourself when you destroyed Shinra. We know you've had experience being a rebel leader yourself. You were quite good at it, in fact. My government believes that your knowledge of what the rebels might do would be invaluable to us."

Cloud looked at him with a puzzled expression. He had never considered himself some great tactician. All he had done was follow Sephiroth and defeat him.

"So you want me to be some kind of adviser?"

"Exactly," Magnus responded. "We need someone who can think like a rebel. Who would be better for the job than someone who had been one? But now we have an even more pressing need. We have to rescue your father from the rebels before they kill him. We need the information he has. I'd like you to help us."

Cloud sat there for a while in thought, looking at Magnus carefully. This whole thing seemed so wild, so out of the blue, that he didn't know what to think. What, did they think him some kind of grand strategist, whose cunning moves had resulted in the downfall of Shinra? If that's what they thought, boy, were they ever in for a surprise.

"I don't see that I can be of much help to you," he said frankly. "All I did was follow Sephiroth and defeat him. It didn't take

any brilliant thinking, just determination and more than a little luck. As for finding my father, I don't see how I can help there either. I've never been to your city, how could I possibly assist you in finding him?"

"I think you're being too modest," Magnus replied. "You probably know more than you realize. I'm sure you could be a great help to us. Of course you couldn't help us find your father, but you may be able to lend a hand when we do. Sephiroth was said to be the finest swordsman in your land, and you defeated him. We are short of well trained men. We could always use another sword. I assure you you will be handsomely paid for your services."

"Well, at least in that regard I may be of some help," Cloud replied.

"So you'll help us?" Magnus asked quickly.

Cloud looked around for a moment.

"It doesn't look like I have much choice," he said slowly.

"We can turn around in an instant," Magnus replied. "We'll drop you back off at the dock like nothing happened. All I would need is your word that you would make no mention of this meeting to anyone."

Cloud stood there for a long time before he spoke again.

"All right," he said finally. "But I ran off without telling anyone. I need to get in touch with my friends."

Magnus shook his head.

"I'm afraid that would be impossible at the moment. Any radio messages we send out could be picked up by the Brotherhood. I'm afraid I'm under strict orders to maintain radio silence. I'm sure once we get back to Mysteele you'll be able to get a message through."

"How long will that take?"

Magnus stood up.

"We should reach port tomorrow night," Magnus replied. "On behalf of my government, let me thank you for helping us. I assure you, you will not regret it."

Cloud looked at him skeptically. For some reason he didn't share Magnus' confidence.

"I've got to be getting back to the bridge now," Magnus said. "One of the crewman will be stationed outside. . If you need anything, anything at all, don't hesitate to ask. He can even take you on a tour, if you wish."

"Thanks," Cloud said as Magnus departed.

Cloud sat there in thought for a while. He just didn't know what to make of this. Was this whole thing on the level, or what? He had never thought of himself as having the kind of knowledge these people were looking for. And his father being a spy? His mother had never really explained to him exactly what had happened, she had just told him his father had abandoned them. To tell the truth, the only reason he had come was to see if it really was his father, and if it was to ask him one question.

Why?

On the other hand, if he did find this man, how would he know for sure that it was really his father? He didn't remember him at all. Had not heard from him his entire life. Now suddenly he appears out of nowhere? How was he supposed to believe anything these people were telling him?

He sat back in his chair and shook his head.

Well, it was too late to turn back now. Whatever else was going to happen, they had gotten his attention.