

CHAPTER IX: FINALLY, SOME ACTION!

Quays placed his hands carefully, almost lovingly, on the materia and felt the tingling sensation once again. The colors swirled inside it and this time almost instantly turned green. He felt the intoxicating power flow into him, letting it wash over him. He stood there for a long time, much longer than the previous time, reveling in it. When he finally released it he thought the shock would tear him apart. He fell to the floor and laid there for long minutes, exhausted.

~*~

Tifa woke up and looked around. The room was dark, but she felt a tremor run through the building. She thought the whole room had shook, but it could have just been a dream. She got up and walked over to the window, staring out into the darkness. All was silent and calm.

Her room looked out over the courtyard, and beyond that the opposite side of the fortress. She could just make out the dark forest beyond in the moonlight. She stared out at the trees for a long time.

She couldn't help but wonder where her friends were now.

~*~

Cloud shook his head and sat up. He looked around, but he could barely see in the darkness. He thought he had heard Aeris cry out.

He rubbed his eyes and looked over at her. He could make out her dim form nearby, but she seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Slowly he eased himself back down, but it took him a long time to fall asleep again.

~*~

Just past the Gaea Cliffs the moon shone starkly over the barren region known as the North Crater. Long after the tremors from the release of the Ultima from Quays materia had ceased the ground around the crater continued to tremble. In fact the vibrations began to grow, and soon the entire crater was shaking violently.

There was a tremendous roar, and dirt and rocks began to spew from the crater, shooting up into the atmosphere as if by some cataclysmic upheaval of the earth. The few creatures that inhabited the area fled for their lives as the crater was obscured in a huge cloud of rock and dust. So it was that nothing on earth saw the clawed hand, half as large as a soccer field, that suddenly reached out of the crater and clamped down on the cold earth beside it.

~*~

Cid yawned as he walked into the room. He looked around and saw that all the others were there, as well as Renada and a number of her men. She looked at him as he came in.

"Well, you're all here now. I guess we can begin."

Cid sat down beside Vincent. Renada had led them back to her headquarters the night before, but by the time they got there they had all been too exhausted to ask any questions, so she had agreed to fill them in in the morning.

"I thought Renada was supposed to be a guy," Cid whispered to Vincent.

"Apparently they just assumed that," Vincent replied.

Cid shook his head.

"Leave it to Cloud and Reno to walk out into a barren wilderness and come back with fur coats and a beautiful woman."

"Cloud told us a little bit about you when we rescued him," Renada said to them all. "Enough for me to realize that we all should be working together. I understand you were in the fortress. Do you know what Quays is working on?"

"He's gathering all the materia energy in the region and concentrating it in one huge materia orb," Cloud replied.

"Have you seen the orb?" Renada questioned.

"No," Cloud replied. "We weren't allowed down in the lab."

"Do you know why he's doing this?" she asked.

"He told us for scientific advancement and the betterment of all mankind," Reno said. "But we find that rather unlikely."

"I assume he wants to use the materia as a weapon," Cloud said.

"Not quite," she replied. "He's got bigger plans than that. He actually wants to use the materia to force the planet to release another WEAPON."

"Another WEAPON?" Cloud said. "Why?"

"He believes he can use the super materia to control it," she responded. "As you know, the WEAPONS are tremendously powerful creatures, but they are controlled by the planet and will destroy any threat to it, even human threats. But if he were somehow able to control that power, he would be unstoppable. He could demand anything he wanted and destroy anyone who stood in his way."

"So that's why I felt the danger," Aeris exclaimed. "And the pain. He was using the materia to hurt the planet in an effort to get it to create another WEAPON."

Renada nodded.

"And the greater the danger, the more powerful the WEAPON it would produce. He has carefully calculated the damage that would be necessary to make the planet create the most powerful WEAPON it could, much more powerful than any of the others we have seen. This WEAPON would be the SUPREME WEAPON, and its power would be inconceivable."

"And he wants to use the materia, this 'super' materia, to control it?" Cloud said.

"Yes," she replied. "He has concluded that in theory the materia would be strong enough for him to manipulate the WEAPON with it. If it works, he will control SUPREME WEAPON instead of the planet."

"In theory?" Red said. "What if it doesn't work?"

"If it doesn't work then the SUPREME WEAPON will carry out its original instructions from the planet and eliminate the threat, which of course, would be Quays and his super materia."

"So he could be bringing about his own destruction," Barret exclaimed.

"Possibly," Renada replied. "But we cannot count on that. The materia will probably work, and then the WEAPON will be under his control. Even if it doesn't work and Quays and the super materia are destroyed, we'll still have SUPREME WEAPON wandering around without any idea of what it may do. Nobody wants to have a lion wandering around in their house, especially if they don't know whether it is going to be hungry for more or not. No offense meant," she said, looking at Red.

"None taken," he replied.

"No, the best thing to do would be to stop Quays before he releases WEAPON. We are planning an assault on the fortress. Today. Any of you who wish to join us would be more than welcome. We're planning on finishing this now, before it gets out of hand."

"Excuse me," Cait spoke up from near the back. "But I am afraid it is already too late."

"What do you mean?" Renada asked.

"A WEAPON has been spotted moving south near Icicle Inn. Also, Quays has contacted all the major cities and demanded that they declare him their supreme ruler or he will use WEAPON to destroy them. As proof of his power and control over WEAPON he has selected one city to be destroyed as an example. WEAPON is headed there right now."

"What city?" Cloud said sharply.

Cait paused for a moment and looked at Cid.

"Rocket Town."

Cid jumped up.

"Rocket Town! Damn. Shera!"

Everyone started talking at once.

"Hold on a minute," Cloud shouted.

He turned to look at Renada when the others had quieted down.

"We're with you, but we have to do it now. We have to stop WEAPON from destroying Rocket Town."

"Of course," Renada replied. "Everything has already been prepared. We can leave as soon as we get our gear together."

"How far away are we from the fortress?" Red asked.

"About ten miles," she responded. "It will take us about a half hour to get there."

"Half hour?" Barret said in surprise. "I don't know about you, but my feet don't go that fast."

Renada turned and looked at him.

"Then we shall have to do better than your feet," she replied. "Follow me."

She led the out the door and around the building. In the back was a large pen filled with white Chocobos.

"These fellows should make things a bit easier on your feet," she said.

"Excellent," Barret said in agreement.

Cloud walked up beside Renada.

"Thanks for the help."

"We're helping each other," she replied. "I'm not doing this out of the goodness of my heart. My brother worked for Quays, but when he found out what Quays was really up to he refused to continue. Quays killed him."

Cloud was silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She shrugged.

Aeris came up beside them.

"We better hurry," she said.

"Now that SUPREME WEAPON is already here, what exactly is the plan?" Cloud asked.

"I guess all we can do now is destroy the super materia," Renada replied.

"But what will happen to WEAPON then?" Cloud asked. "Will he return to the planet once the threat is gone?"

"I don't know," Renada replied.

Cloud looked at Aeris.

"It depends on whether the planet thinks there are any other threats," she said. "But we may not have to worry about that. If you can get me to the super materia, I may be able to stop WEAPON with it."

"What makes you think you can do that?" Renada asked.

"She's an Ancient," Cloud replied.

Renada's eyebrows went up.

"I had heard there were none of you left," she said.

"I am the last," Aeris replied simply.

Renada nodded.

"Very well. The plan is to storm the fortress and get the materia into your hands. Now we better get moving. We're wasting valuable time."

"One other thing," Cloud said suddenly. "One of our friends is still in the fortress."

"I assure you we will do our best to make sure that none of his prisoners are harmed," Renada said.

"She's not a prisoner," Cloud responded. "She's one of Zangan's people."

Renada looked at him in surprise.

"Is she some sort of spy?" she said.

"No, she's really working with him, but she doesn't know of Quays plan."

Renada frowned.

"We'll do what we can," she said. "But if she opposes us...well, you know what we'll have to do."

Cloud nodded, but if nothing else, he was going to make damn sure he was the first one to reach Tifa once the assault began.

"Let's mount up," Renada called out.

The pen was opened, Renada and her men collected their gear as the Chocobos were brought out, giving Cloud and his friends weapons as well. There wasn't enough Chocobos for all to ride so some had to share, even though Red would not ride one at all. His four legs would let him easily keep up with the birds, and the Chocobo hadn't been born yet that would let the lion like carnivore ride on its back. Cloud helped Aeris climb up behind him and moved up beside Cid.

"Cid," he said. "Take Vincent and Elena and head back to Mr. Holzoff's cabin. Get the Slipstream and try and stop WEAPON from reaching Rocket Town, or at least slow it down."

Cid nodded, moved up beside Vincent and Elena, and then they broke away and galloped ahead.

Renada, at the head of the formation, turned to the others.

"For my brother and all who have been hurt by this madman," she shouted. "Let's finish this!"

She turned and spurred her Chocobo onward, with the others right behind.

~*~

Tifa sat in the common room. It was long after lunch, and the room was empty save for her. There was a plate in front of her, but she had barely touched the food.

She felt more alone than she had since her father had died. All her friends were gone, and she hadn't really become friendly with any of Zangan's men. Most of them were polite but kept their distance, and some of them were obviously not pleased about her being here at all. Zangan was almost always busy, and had little time to spend with her.

Again she wondered where her friends were, and if they would come back anytime soon. She was beginning to think that maybe she had made a mistake, and had let jealousy dictate her actions. Maybe she should try to go find them.

She got up and started walking down the hall past their bedrooms.

No, she decided. She wasn't the one who had left. They had left her. Besides, if Cloud really did want Aeris then she would just be in the way. Perhaps all this time she had just been a wedge between them, keeping them apart. She didn't want Cloud and Aeris to be separated just because he felt sorry for her. Better to let him go.

She felt tears starting to form in her eyes again.

"Snap out of it," she said aloud.

She found herself in the lounge. She sat down on the couch and folded her arms across her chest, a look of determination on her face.

Cloud and Aeris were gone, she thought. It was time to get on with her own life.

She looked down and saw there was something on the floor beside the small table in front of the couch. It looked like a deck of cards.

She knelt down and picked one of them up.

Tarot cards.

She stood there in thought for a long time, then she gathered the cards up and walked swiftly away.

~*~

Zangan was sitting in his office, head bowed, when Tifa burst in. She walked over to him angrily and dropped the tarot cards on his desk. He looked up at her in surprise.

"What are these doing here?" she asked.

Zangan looked at the cards, then at her.

"What do you mean?"

"These are Cait's tarot cards. Why didn't he take them with him when he left?"

Zangan shrugged.

"How should I know. He must have forgotten them."

Tifa shook her head.

"You obviously don't know Cait very well. He would never forget these cards. His fortune telling skills, if you could call them that, are all he ever thinks about. He never lets these cards out of his sight. Now what's going on here?"

Zangan sat back in his chair.

"There's nothing going on," he replied. "I don't know why your friend left his cards. Perhaps he forgot them, perhaps he just left them knowing he would be back for them soon. I think you're making something out of nothing."

Tifa just stared at him, but her face softened, and for a moment he thought she was going to believe him. And in truth she wanted to. She didn't want to believe that Zangan would lie to her, or withhold the truth, but was she letting her belief in him blind her to what was really going on? How could she know what the real truth was? Suddenly an idea came to her.

"Fine," she said. "If you won't tell me, then I'll go talk to Quays."

She turned and walked toward the door, but before she could exit Zangan called out to her.

"Wait."

She turned and looked at him. For a long time he did not speak.

"I was hoping..."

He turned his head away, but she saw the sadness that she had noticed on other occasions, and for the first time it suddenly hit her how old and tired Zangan looked.

"Well, it doesn't matter what I hoped," Zangan continued. "I have betrayed you, Tifa. Your friends did not leave on their own, I forced them to go. The girl, Yuffie, she was here all the time. I sent her with them as well. They are probably all dead by now."

Tifa turned pale.

"What?" she said. "How could you..."

"The Turks found Yuffie. I knew if you found the girl you would all turn against us. I couldn't get rid of the Turks without raising the suspicions of your friends, so I had to get rid of all of them."

Tifa continued to stare at him, horrified.

"But why?" she burst out. "They were my friends."

"They would have interfered with the plan," Zangan replied. "They would have tried to stop Quays."

Tifa stared at Zangan. She didn't know what to say. All she could think of was how could he have possibly betrayed her like this?

"What is Quays doing?" she asked.

"He's used the materia to make the planet create another WEAPON. He can control it with the super materia. He's using WEAPON to basically take over the planet. Even now WEAPON is on it's way to destroy Rocket Town."

Tifa fell silent again. This was just too overwhelming. She didn't know what to think. But one obvious question did come to mind.

"And you're going along with this?"

"I was hoping he wouldn't go this far," Zangan exclaimed. "I was hoping he would use the super materia for good, as he told you. To build and cure, not to tear down and destroy. I was hoping he was a better man than that!"

"But you said he's already released WEAPON," she replied. "He's already chosen the path to destruction. I think it's obvious he's not going to change his mind at this point. Why don't you stop him now?"

Zangan looked at her and shook his head.

"I cannot."

Tifa looked at him in exasperation.

"Why not?" she cried. "Is this some sort of philosophical honor thing again? You told me when I went to fight Shinra that our tactics were dishonorable, and you were right, but by the same token, we got the job done. Somewhere along the line you've got to say enough is enough and do what you have to do, in spite of how you may feel about it. What dishonor could there be in trying to stop a madman bent on world domination?"

Zangan looked at her, and the trace of a smile appeared on his lips.

"Very nice speech," he said. "But I'm afraid it is nothing as complicated as all that. Quays is my son."

~*~

Renada and Cloud lay at the top of a ridge looking out over the fortress. She turned to another man beside her.

"Is everyone ready?" she asked.

"Yes," the man replied.

"The demolition charges in place?"

The man nodded.

"Very good, give the order."

The man crawled back down the slope until he was sure he couldn't be seen from the fortress, then got up and hurried off. Renada and Cloud worked their way back down the slope as well. The others were waiting with their Chocobos behind the ridge. They remounted.

"We attack as soon as we hear the demolition charges go off," Renada said. "Get in as quickly as possible. We have surprise on our side, but we know they have a well trained force. If we give them time to get organized the fight will be twice as difficult. If we move fast enough, we may be able to overwhelm them before they have a chance to do that. Remember, everyone on the planet is depending on us, we must not fail."

There was a loud retort from over the ridge.

"That's the signal," Renada cried. "Let's go!"

The Chocobos surged forward. Red, who was near the back of the group, leaped ahead but then stopped suddenly. He lifted his head, sniffing the air.

There was a scent in the air. That compelling scent he hadn't detected since that day on the mountain, and in fact had

nearly forgotten about. But now he smelled it, stronger than ever.

He looked around, trying to follow the scent with his eyes. They fell on a rocky crag in the distance. His eyes detected movement. There was something there.

His eyes widened, and he stared in shock.

"It can't be," he found himself saying aloud.

There on the crag a beast was staring back at him with the same red eyes as his own.

Barret suddenly halted his Chocobo beside him.

"Let's go Red," he shouted. "The battle has begun."

Red glanced at him.

"Look, over there.." he started to say, but when he looked back the ridge was deserted.

"We ain't got time for no sight seein'," Barret exclaimed. "Get a move on!"

With that he spurred his Chocobo forward, then turned to look at Red again.

Red glanced one more time over at the ridge. The urge to run over there as fast as his legs would take him was almost overpowering. With an almost superhuman effort he turned away and followed Barret as he rode toward the fortress.

In front of them Renada and the others were charging ahead. The fortress was right before them now, and Cloud could see that the doors on this side had been blasted open. A few of Zangan's men had come out to see what was happening, but they were too few to put up much resistance. Those who did not run back into the fortress were swiftly overwhelmed.

They reached the entrance and climbed quickly down off their mounts. Cloud and his friends pulled out the weapons Renada had supplied and followed her into the fortress. Already Cloud could hear the sounds of battle within.

He turned to Aeris.

"I've got to find Tifa," he said.

Aeris looked at him and nodded.

"I understand," she said.

Reno came up and took Aeris by the arm.

"You go on," he said to Cloud. "We'll take care of the super materia."

Cloud nodded. He turned to the others.

"Barret, Red, Cait, you're with me. Rude and Yuffie, you go with Reno. Everyone, be careful."

He turned to look at Aeris. She smiled.

"You too," she said.

Reno quickly led them away. Cloud turned and, with the others behind him, started down the hall.

~*~

The Slipstream slowly rose vertically off the rocky outcrop. Cid ran his hands deftly, almost lovingly, over the controls. The craft turned and began to pick up speed.

"Hang on," he said to the others. "I'm starting the afterburners."

Elena felt herself pushed back in her chair as the Slipstream suddenly surged forward. Within moments the ground below them was flashing past with surprising speed. This thing could really move!

Nevertheless Cid did not seem satisfied. He kept fiddling with the instruments and cursing complaints about how he couldn't get more speed out of her.

"Relax, Cid," Vincent said from beside him. "We're doing everything we can."

Cid looked at him but did not reply. Vincent could understand Cid's mood. It wasn't his hometown that was about to be destroyed.

Vincent looked at the gauges in front of him.

"We've got a radar contact," he said. "Looks like two aircraft coming up from the southeast."

Even as he spoke the radio crackled to life.

"Captain Highwind. This is Captain Tanaka of the Fort Condor air force, requesting permission to join your formation."

What God damn formation, Cid thought. I'm one freaking plane.

"Request granted," he replied. "Glad to have you aboard."

Within minutes the two other aircraft appeared and pulled up on either side of the Slipstream. Vincent could see that they were identical to Cid's own plane.

"Looks like those guys at Fort Condor have been busy," Cid observed.

"Good," Vincent replied. "I've a feeling we can use all the help we can get."

"We're coming up on Rocket Town," Elena said.

"Hot damn," Cid responded. "Let's kick some WEAPON butt!"

~*~

"Your son?" Tifa said.

Zangan nodded.

"It was a long time ago. Before I met you. During the war in fact. Wutai had established some refugee camps for those who had been displaced during the war. I was helping bring in supplies and food for the refugees. I met a woman. We had a brief affair. It was young, and it was nothing serious, at least not to me. I was called away and when I returned the refugee camp had been destroyed. I searched but could find no trace of her, or clue to where she had gone. I thought I would never see her again."

He turned away from her and stared at the wall.

"Then, two weeks before Meteor came I met her again in Midgar. That was when she told me about Quays."

He looked at her again.

"He was the only child I had ever had," he continued. "I wanted to do everything for him, to make up for all the time we had missed together. But then Meteor struck, and his mother was killed."

"I'm sorry," was all Tifa could say.

"It was my fault," Zangan said. "I was on my way home when the destruction began, and I stopped to help some people who were trapped beneath a building that had collapsed. When I finally got back to her, her home had also collapsed. She was barely alive when I reached her. She died in my arms. If I had only gotten there sooner..."

"Surely you can't blame yourself for that?" Tifa said softly.

Zangan looked up at her.

"Why not?" he replied. "I stopped to help some strangers while she was dying. I placed their welfare above that of the woman who had given me a child."

"But you didn't know!" Tifa said. "You were just doing what you thought was right, what was right."

Zangan snorted.

"All my life I have been doing what was right, and where has it gotten me?"

"Zangan," Tifa said, but he held up his hand.

"Before she died she made me promise to take care of Quays. He's the only thing I have left of her now."

Tifa was silent for a long time. At least now she understood. She took some comfort from the fact that Zangan had reasons for what he did, though not much. In spite of the fact that Quays was Zangan's son, what he was doing was still wrong and he had to be stopped.

"Zangan, I realize he's your son, but what he is doing is madness. Do you know how many people will be killed if he destroys Rocket Town? Can you actually tell me you will just stand here and let that happen?"

"I am hoping he will come to his senses before it is too late," Zangan replied.

Tifa just looked at him.

"Zangan, wake up! You're letting the fact that he is your son blind you to the truth. It's too late, he's not going to stop now."

Zangan looked at her but said nothing.

"Well, somebody's got to stop him, and if you don't, then I will"

She turned and ran out of the room.

"Tifa, No!" Zangan cried.

He sprang from behind his desk and went to follow her. As he crossed the room he suddenly heard a dull explosion.

He reached the hallway just as a man rushed up to him.

"Honored one," the man shouted. "The fortress is under attack!"

~*~

Greco moved silently down the hall. He knew the enemy was nearby. He could hear movement in the room ahead, and none of Zangan's people would be so incautious. He glanced around the corner and saw Reno walking toward him.

He stepped out into the hallway. Reno looked at him and stopped. They stood about fifteen feet apart.

"Prepare for your death," Greco said.

Reno looked at him and shook his head.

"What's this, the third time you've told me that?" he said. "Forgive me if I seem a little skeptical."

Greco smiled.

"Your gift of gab won't save you now. Waiting this long will just make it sweeter."

He took a step toward Reno.

"Just one thing," Reno said, holding up his hand. "If you're going to fight the Turks, you have to learn to fight by the Turks rules. And the Turks rules are..."

A shot ran out. Greco jerked backwards and then slumped to the floor.

Reno walked over and looked down at the lifeless body.

"...that there are no rules," he finished.

Rude stepped out from behind a nearby curtain, the gun still smoking in his hand.

"I thought it was, the guy with the biggest gun wins," he said.

Reno looked at him.

"No, that was last week."

Yuffie and Aeris walked up beside them.

"C'mon," Aeris said. "We've got to hurry."

~*~

As Tifa made her way through the common room she saw Quays enter from the other direction.

"Where the hell is Zangan?" she heard him call as one of his men ran by.

"Quays!" she said.

The look in her eye must have given her intentions away, for as soon as he saw her he pulled out his gun.

"No!"

Quays looked past Tifa and saw Zangan enter the room.

"Put down the gun, Quays, it's over," Zangan said. He slowly walked up to stand beside Tifa.

Quays looked at him in surprise.

"Over? How can you say it's over. I have control of the greatest weapon ever created. The world is mine for the taking and you tell me it's over?"

"Quays, please," Zangan said.

Quays face darkened.

"You have betrayed me," he said. "You told me if these 'friends' of yours found out anything you would take care of them. Yet now here they are, gathered like wolves at my gate. But there is still a chance for you to redeem yourself."

He turned to look at Tifa.

"Kill her."

Zangan looked at Quays, then turned to Tifa, but he did not move.

"Kill her or I'll do it myself," Quays said, pointing his gun at Tifa once more.

Zangan looked at Tifa again. He took a step toward her, never taking his eyes off her face.

"Defend yourself," he said.

"Zangan..." she said. How could he expect her to fight him?

Zangan struck at her. The blow hit her on her leg just below the hip. With a cry she fell to the ground.

"Finish her!" she heard Quays cry.

But Zangan made no move. Just stood there looking at her.

"At least try to defend yourself," he said. "What kind of warrior are you?"

Tifa got back up again, thinking furiously. Was this some sort of ploy he was attempting, or did he really intend to kill her? She looked in his eyes but all she saw was steely determination.

He attacked her again, but this time she was ready. She dodged out of the way, then blocked a kick as he suddenly turned toward her. She slid under an open palm strike to her face and had another kick glance harmlessly off her shoulder.

So far she had made no offensive moves of her own. She just couldn't bring herself to believe that Zangan would do this. But maybe she was just fooling herself. No matter how he felt about her, Quays was his son. Was it that hard to believe that he would turn against her for his own flesh and blood?

Tifa had been slowly retreating across the room. Zangan was increasing the speed and power of his attacks. But there was something not quite right. Looking at him she could see that he was leaving a gaping hole in his defenses, a hole that even an amateur would have noticed.

Tifa struck back, but not where Zangan was unguarded. It was so obvious, was he just trying to set her up, or did he have something else in mind?

Zangan twisted round to avoid her blow and they came face to face for a moment.

"A warrior should die in battle," he whispered.

She spun away. He came after her again. This time she stood her ground and fought back, but still she did not attack him on his unguarded side. She understood now, but she knew she could not do what he was asking.

He came at her again, attacking more strongly and recklessly than ever. Again their faces came into close contact.

"Zangan, I can't," she said.

"You must!" he growled. His hand shot out and caught her on the side of the head. She stumbled back and turned to face him again.

He struck at her now with all his strength, and she knew she could not continue fighting this way. If she didn't stop him it would just be a matter of time before one of his blows got through. He was too good for her to hold him off indefinitely.

She dodged to the side and then suddenly turned and kicked at the side of his head. The blow caught him squarely, for he made no move to defend against it, or avoid it. He stumbled backward, then fell to the floor.

Tifa stepped over to him, grabbing his head with one hand, while bringing her other back for a killing blow.

Quays raised his gun one more time and sighted it on Tifa. Even as he did so he saw her arm slowly drop back down.

"I'm sorry, Zangan, I can't," she said softly.

There was a commotion in the hallway and suddenly Cloud, Barret, Red and a woman Tifa did not know burst into the room.

"Cloud!" Tifa exclaimed.

Zangan sat up and Tifa helped him get to his feet. They all turned to look at Quays.

"Your forces have been routed," Cloud said. "Give it up."

Quays looked from one to the other of them, his glance falling last on Zangan.

"Quays, he's right," Zangan said. "End this before anyone else gets hurt."

"So that's it then, father?" And he spit the last word out as if it were a curse. "You're turning against your own to cast your lot in with this scraggly band of thieves? What power does this girl hold over you?"

"She holds no power," Zangan replied. "She is just my friend."

"And you would choose this friend over your own son?"

"Over a son such as you I would gladly choose her or any of her friends. I have tried to look after you for the sake of your mother, but I see now that my feelings of guilt about her death have led me down a path that made me forsake everything I've ever believed in. The truth of the matter is that if you were twice that man you are, you wouldn't be half the person she is."

Quays looked at Zangan, and his face turned red with rage.

"You have always been nothing but a sentimental old fool!" he shouted. "My mother was the only one who ever cared for me and you let her die. Well, why don't you just let me return the favor!"

He lifted up his gun and fired at Tifa. Then he turned and bolted down the hallway.

Cloud felt his heart rise up in his throat when he saw Quays fire, but he was much too far away to do anything about it.

Zangan appeared to be too far away to as well, but somehow in the next instant he was suddenly standing in front of her. He jerked backward and then slumped to the ground.

"Zangan!" Tifa cried.

Renada took off after Quays. Cloud stopped beside Tifa for a moment to make sure she was all right, then he followed Renada.

Tifa lifted Zangan's head up off the floor.

"Zangan, oh Zangan," she said, tears filling her eyes. "Please don't die. Please..."

Zangan coughed and looked at her. The red fist on his shirt had a matching stain on the other side. He smiled.

"A warrior should die in battle," he said softly. "I would have been honored to die by your hand."

"Zangan, don't say such things," Tifa said. "You're not going to die. You told me yourself you were too tough to be killed. Don't leave me now when I've finally found you again."

"Don't mourn for me," he replied. "After the things I've done there really is nothing left for me here. I'm looking forward to finally being able to rest."

"Zangan, no," Tifa said distraughtly. She looked around. "Aeris, where's Aeris? She could help you."

Barret came up beside her, and she looked pleadingly at him, but he just shook his head.

She wrapped her arms around Zangan.

"Please don't leave me. I'll miss you."

"Be strong, Tifa," Zangan said. "You have your friends to get you through this. And your young man. That night you saw him, the girl had been hurt. He was just helping her. It was nothing more than that."

Tifa shook her head.

"I don't care about that now," she said. "I just want you to get better. Please hang on."

She looked at him, but he did not answer.

"Zangan..."

Barret came up and laid a hand on her shoulder.

She looked up at him.

"Aeris. Get Aeris," she said. "She can help him."

Barret looked at her with moist eyes of his own.

"He's gone, Teef."

The tears streamed down her cheeks. She looked up and raised her fists to the sky.

"Why have you taken away everyone I've ever loved?" she cried.

~*~

Reno stepped into the lab and looked around. It was deserted.

"Looks like all the birds have flown the coop," he said as the others came in behind him.

"When they saw we meant business they probably all took off," Yuffie said. "Looks like Zangan didn't train his men as well as he thought."

"I don't think that was it," Aeris said. "But something is definitely wrong. They never put up any kind of organized resistance."

"Whatever happened, it's made it easier for us," Reno said. "C'mon."

They walked to a door at the back of the lab and opened it. There was a smaller room inside, with a glass enclosed chamber in the middle of it. The room was filled with yellow light.

They stepped into the room. They all stopped and looked in amazement at the size of the materia in the chamber.

Yuffie took a step forward.

Reno reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Not so fast," he said to her. "This is Aeris' job."

"But..." she protested. "Look at the size of that thing. What are we going to do with it after Aeris is done?"

"Destroy it," Aeris replied. "It's unstable. Materia cannot be concentrated to that intensity for long. If left the way it is it will

eventually explode."

"But can't we just use it a couple of times first?" she questioned.

Aeris ignored her and walked toward the chamber.

"Quit you're drooling and relax," Reno said. "This is one piece of materia you can't have."

Aeris stepped into the chamber. She hesitantly reached out and touched the orb. She brought her hand back, as if she had gotten a shock, but then reached out and touched it again. She put her other hand on it and closed her eyes. Slowly the yellow color faded away, and the stone began to glow a pure white.

~*~

"There it is!" Vincent said.

"I see it," Cid replied. "Shit, it's huge."

As Cid flew closer they saw the enormous hulking figure of WEAPON towering over the houses on the outskirts of Rocket Town. Already they could see some of the homes below were in flames.

"Let's see if we can get its attention."

The three aircraft streaked down toward the creature and launched a barrage of missiles. Elena felt her stomach turn inside out as Cid pulled up and flipped over so he could see the rockets strike WEAPON.

The missiles hit and for a moment WEAPON was obscured from view by the blasts, but when they subsided a moment later the creature appeared unharmed. It turned toward them and suddenly the air around them was blazing with the fierce light of half a dozen lasers. Elena thought she was going to lose it for sure at the violent maneuvers Cid went through to avoid the deadly beams.

"Well, we don't seem to have hurt it much, but we sure did piss it off!" Cid exclaimed.

"Did the missiles do any damage at all?" Vincent asked.

Cid did not reply for a moment as he brought the plane around for another run.

"Can't tell," he replied. "It certainly doesn't look like it."

WEAPON had turned again and was once more firing at the town.

"Damn, cut that shit out," Cid exclaimed. "Come after us."

The two other aircraft let loose with another barrage. This time Cid did not fire but followed the missiles as they sped toward WEAPON.

"Cid, what are you doing?" Elena said with just a touch of panic in her voice.

"We need to take a closer look to see if we're doing any damage. I'm hoping the explosions from the missiles will cover our approach."

"You're hoping?" Elena said.

Suddenly the sky lit up in front of them. For a moment they could see nothing but a fierce white light, then it faded and they saw the huge shape of WEAPON looming up right in front of them.

"Oh God!" Elena exclaimed. "We're gonna hit it!"

Cid pulled the stick over. The plane yawed until it was pitched on its side. He dropped down till Elena thought she could count the leaves on the trees they passed, then flew the plane right between WEAPON's legs.

"I'm going to have a heart attack now," Elena announced.

Lasers flashed around them once more. Elena was pushed back in her seat as Cid brought the plane about in a screaming turn just above the treetops.

Elena felt her stomach drop down into her toes as the Slipstream suddenly rocketed skyward. Then Cid leveled off and

swung around again.

"So, did you see any damage?" she managed to gasp out.

"Umm, I really didn't get a chance to take a look," Cid replied.

Elena looked at him in shock.

"Don't tell me we have to do that over again," she said through clenched teeth.

"I didn't see any damage at all," Vincent said.

"That's just great," Cid replied, shaking his head.

The radio crackled to life once again.

"Captain, Highwind, we used the last of our missiles on that run. Should we continue the attack?"

Cid looked out the window. WEAPON was firing into the center of the town once more.

"Goddamn!" he exclaimed. "We've got to find some way to get it away from the town. If we can't hurt it, then maybe we can distract it by annoying it. Close in and use your cannons."

There was just a moments hesitation.

"Yes sir," came the reply.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that an incredibly foolish thing to do?" Vincent asked.

"You bet your ass it is," Cid replied. "Hang on."

"Oh no," Elena moaned. "Why did I ever come with you guys?"

Cid turned the Slipstream toward WEAPON once more. He fired the last of his rockets and then followed the other two planes in.

Cid swung lower and WEAPON once more rapidly filled the view ahead of them. Cid opened up with his cannon as they closed in, then he pulled up and passed so close by WEAPON's face that he could see the creatures huge red eyes staring in the window.

Cid twisted the plane in a gut wrenching turn as lasers flashed by outside once more. Nearby he saw one of the other aircraft disintegrate in a ball of flame.

"We lost one," he said grimly.

Instead of pulling away he circled around WEAPON, keeping close enough to command it's attention, yet hopefully far enough away to stay out of harms way.

"What are you doing?" Elena said.

"We've got nothing left to hit it with," Cid replied. "But if we leave it alone it'll just start attacking the town again. I'm just trying to keep it occupied until..."

"Until what?" Elena asked.

Cid shrugged. He didn't really have an answer. He was kind of hoping that Cloud and Aeris would get something done at their end. At this point that seemed the only hope, but there was no way for him to tell when, or if, that was going to happen.

He turned sharply and dropped back down to treetop level, heading back toward WEAPON once again. If something was going to happen, he hoped it would happen soon. He knew if he kept acting like a fly it was just a matter of time before he got swatted.

Lasers buzzed around him as he closed in on WEAPON once more.

"I've been hit," they suddenly heard over the radio. "Losing altitude. My right wing's been damaged. Going to have to bring her down. Sorry, Captain."

"Nothing you can do," Cid replied. He looked at Vincent beside him.

"Looks like it's up to us."

There was the sound as if a cannon had gone off beside them and Cid twisted the stick as the Slipstream suddenly jerked violently to one side.

"We've been hit!" he yelled.

Elena almost screamed as the ground came rushing up to meet them, but Cid managed to lift the nose and pull up a moment before impact. Even so she could see he was fighting with the controls just to keep the plane level. Nevertheless, he brought the plane around and started to head back toward WEAPON yet again.

"Cid, what are you doing?" Elena exclaimed. "You can barely control this thing. We've got to get out of here."

"We're the only thing standing between it and Rocket Town," Cid replied sharply. "Every second we slow it down gives them more time to evacuate."

"But Cid..." Elena started, but then fell silent. She looked at Vincent. He said nothing but slowly reached back and took her hand in his.

Cid gained altitude. The controls were too unstable to fly close to the ground anymore. This made it less likely that they would crash, but it also made them an easier target for WEAPON.

He bore down on the creature again, knowing that this would probably be his last attack.

"Lady luck, don't fail me now," he muttered.

He opened up with his cannons, but he knew it was like throwing pebbles at a gorilla.

WEAPON turned toward them, and Cid braced himself to see the now familiar blast of its laser beams.

But WEAPON continued to turn, until it was facing north, away from the town and the Slipstream. Then it started to walk off quickly.

The Slipstream flew past it behind its back. Cid brought them around to get another look at it. It was indeed heading rapidly away from them.

"It's leaving!" Cid cried jubilantly.

The others just stared at it. Elena could hardly believe her eyes.

"They must have done it," she said.

"They must have done something," Vincent agreed. "Let's just hope..."

He stopped and they all looked past the creature. On the horizon ahead of it they saw a blazing point of light.

"What the hell is that?" Cid said slowly.

The light grew, becoming brighter by the second. It approached them with amazing speed, growing in seconds from a point of light to a huge ball of white flame. It came on, straight as an arrow at the huge creature in front of them. When it struck it emitted a flash of light so blinding that they all had to shade their eyes and turn away.

The light faded slowly, and it was many seconds before their eyes adjusted enough to be able to see the now empty plain where WEAPON had stood.

"Holy..." Vincent said softly.

~*~

Cloud moved quickly down the hall, the sword Renada had supplied him held firmly in one hand. It was no Ultima Weapon, but it would have to do.

He could hear Renada up ahead of him, and the occasional crack of a firearm told him that Quays was not far ahead either.

He turned the corner of the corridor and saw Renada standing by an open doorway up ahead.

He came up beside her. The room in front of them was a huge storeroom, filled with crates and barrels. She motioned to him that Quays was inside.

Cloud signaled for Renada to cover him, then leaped into the room. He heard the crack of gunfire as he dove behind a large pile of crates.

Renada followed him in, firing blindly and dodging behind a second group of crates to the left of him.

"Give it up, Quays," Cloud shouted. "Zangan's dead. Your forces have been defeated. There's nothing left to fight for."

The only answer was the cracking of wood as a bullet hit the crate he hid behind.

Cloud motioned to Renada that he would swing around and try to get behind Quays. Renada nodded. She fired again and ducked back quickly as Cloud made his way toward the back of the room.

He worked his way back slowly, feeling his way ahead by instinct. He listened carefully for any clue as to Quays' location as he went, but he heard nothing. Occasionally Renada would call out to Quays, hoping to get him to give away his location, but he did not answer.

Cloud came around a corner and saw Quays standing with his back to some crates. Quays saw him at almost the same instant. Cloud dodged back as Quays fired at him. He stood there with his back to the crates for a moment, sword ready. He looked up and saw that the crates backing this aisle were stacked up rather precariously.

He shoved the top crate, and the whole line of crates backing the aisle tilted and then collapsed into it.

He came around the corner, sword ready, to see Quays scrambling away. Quays fired wildly in his direction and then disappeared down another aisle. Cloud leaped to follow but then stumbled and almost lost his footing as his foot slipped on something on the floor. He looked down to see that one of the crates had broken open and dozens of grey materia orbs were scattered across the floor. He picked his way slowly through them and headed off after Quays.

Cloud came around another aisle to find himself at the back of the room. There was no sign of Quays. He must have missed him somehow. He turned and started back toward the front.

He hadn't gotten very far when he heard Renada call out in distress.

"Cloud!"

He ran around a corner and looked toward the front of the room. Renada was on the ground, with Quays standing over her.

"Quays!" Cloud shouted.

Quays turned to look at him. Cloud stooped and picked up one of the materia orbs.

Quays smiled.

"That's not going to do you much good," he said. "I'll take care of you in a minute."

He turned and Renada found herself looking down the barrel of his gun.

The materia orb flew through the air and struck Quays in the center of his back. He cried out and stumbled forward as the bullet he fired hit the ground just inches from Renada's head.

She scrambled to the side, grabbed the gun that Quays had earlier knocked out of her hand, turned, and fired.

Quays fell to his knees. Slowly he turned and looked at her. His mouth opened as he tried to speak, but no words came out. Then he slumped to the floor and lay still.

Cloud hurried over to Renada and helped her up.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said. "Thank you."

Cloud looked at Quays and shook his head.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's get back to the others. We're finished here."

Renada nodded, then she pointed to the ground.

"Hey, look at that."

He looked down. The materia orb he had thrown lay on the floor at their feet. It glowed with a faint but distinct green light.

~*~

It was early evening when Cloud and Renada, followed by the others, rode up and dismounted outside Icicle Inn. The Slipstream sat on a rocky outcrop nearby.

They entered the Inn to see Cid, Vincent, Elena and Shera sitting by the fireplace. They got up as Cloud and his friends entered.

"Cid has asked Shera to marry him!" Elena blurted out.

They all looked at her in surprise.

"What?" Cloud said.

"That's great," Aeris spoke.

The women all gathered around Shera, talking excitedly.

Cloud walked over to Cid.

"Cid, I didn't think you had it in you."

Cid looked at him sheepishly.

"No need to make a big deal out of it," he replied. "It's just that when I heard WEAPON was headed for Rocket Town the first thing I thought of was her. Not the town, not the Tiny Bronco, not even my spaceship. I figure if she can take my mind off that, well...you know."

Cloud smiled.

"It really must be love?" he suggested. "Congratulations."

Cid shrugged.

Reno suddenly raised his voice above the others.

"Well, if this isn't a cause for celebration, I don't know what is. Let's party!"

Most of the others went into the kitchen to get drinks. Red took his customary place on the floor in front of the fire. Aeris sat down nearby as Yuffie came over.

"I can't wait to go home and tell everyone in Wutai about this," she said. "They're never going to believe that super materia. I just wish I had something to show them."

Aeris smiled.

"Give it up Yuffie. I told you already that the super materia would destroy itself if we had left it active. I'm afraid you're just going to have to be happy with your fond memories."

"Besides," she continued. "After it was deactivated all the materia whose energy it had absorbed returned to normal. There were dozens of materia orbs in storage in the fortress, and we gave them all to you. You're going to head to Wutai loaded to the gills with the stuff. What more do you want?"

Yuffie nodded.

"I guess," she said. "But even so, I'm gonna dream about that materia for a long time."

"I suppose," Aeris replied.

Yuffie went over to talk to Shera. Red turned and looked at Aeris.

"I was looking through some of Quays notes in the lab," he said. "They indicated that he had found a way to keep the super materia stable."

"That may be true," Aeris replied.

Red looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"But you told Yuffie the super materia was unstable.

Aeris shrugged.

"So I did," she said.

Red's brow furrowed.

"Explain," he said.

"Isn't it obvious. You know Yuffie. If I told her the super materia was stable, she'd do anything she could to get her greedy little hands on it, and I cannot see any good coming from that."

Red looked at her for a long time, then nodded.

"So you lied to her," he said.

Aeris looked at him innocently.

"And we're all better off for it," she replied.

Red smiled. "So where is the materia now?" he asked.

Aeris returned the smile and patted her backpack.

"In a safe place," she replied.

Red turned his face back to the fire.

"I have no doubt that it is," he said with a grin.

~*~

Tifa sat on the steps outside of the Inn, looking up at the stars. She could hear the others talking loudly inside, but she wasn't paying any attention.

She heard the door to the Inn open, but she did not look to see who came out.

Someone sat down beside her.

"Are you okay?" Cloud asked.

She shrugged.

"I'm sorry about Zangan," he said.

She turned to look at him.

"He was..." and her voice choked off. She bowed her head.

"Why must it always end this way? Why does life have to be so unfair? You strive and strive to do your best, to be the best person you can, and what does it get you? Am I doing something wrong, or is this all just my punishment for what we did in Midgar?"

Cloud shook his head.

"I don't know, Tifa," he said. "I don't have any answers. But I do know this. You've lost your father and Zangan, and it's a tragedy, yes, but you should also consider yourself lucky to have known two such men in the first place. At least you got to spend some time with them, and that's a precious thing. I would have given anything to have known my father, to have spent some time with him, if only for a few days. But he left when I was just a child, and I never got to know him at all."

Tifa was silent for a long time.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted," she said slowly. "You're the only family I have now. I would hate to lose you. I was such an idiot."

"No, it wasn't you..." he responded. He put his arm around her. She moved closer and rested her head on his shoulder. He looked at her, not speaking for a long time.

"Thank you," he said, barely audibly.

She looked up into his eyes. "What for?" she asked.

"For being you. For everything you've ever done for me. I don't think I could have made it through all this...without you."

He looked at her, her dark brown eyes, still moist with tears, like immense wells flowing deep into her soul. They were enchanting eyes. Beautiful eyes.

"Cloud," she whispered.

He felt his face drifting slowly toward hers.

"Tifa, I..."

Suddenly the door burst open and they found themselves outlined in a stark white light.

"So there you are!" Barret exclaimed. "Come on in and join the party. You're missing all the fun."

Cloud looked at Tifa, rolled his eyes and smiled. He got to his feet and helped her up beside him. Together that walked back into the Inn.

THE END

~*~

AUTHORS NOTE: Come on Cloud, say it. Just SAY IT! Hah! You didn't think I'd make it that easy, did you? I suppose if I keep writing these I'm going to have to choose between Tifa and Aeris, and I am afraid that at that time Aeris is going to end up on the short end of it. But for all you Aeris fans out there, I promise to make it as painless as possible. And who knows? In a fit of madness I might just change my mind. Time will tell.

The Turks, good guys? Vincent and Elena together? Cid asking Shera to marry him? Aeris being devious? Aeris? I must be losing my mind.

Okay, I admit it. It was probably a bad idea to dismantle the Highwind, especially since it did nothing to further the plot of the first story. I don't even know why I did it, it just seemed reasonable at the time. And yes, I thought about calling the new aircraft the Highwind II, but I just like the name Slipstream better.

This tale had a pretty classic story line. The quest. The old master passing the torch to the next generation. But some plots never wear thin, and I think it's well suited to the characters. I'll try to be a little more innovative next time.

I'm sure you picked up on the hints of another of Red's species wandering around. Think it's a safe bet you'll be hearing more about that? I need a name for a female of Red's kind. If anyone has any suggestions, or any opinions at all about the story, or just wishes to vent, fell free to contact me at FCVERDE@ix.netcom.com.

That's all for now. My, how we writer's do have a tendency to go on...all right, shut up already.