

Alone in the Dark

by GlassShard

"Alone in the Dark"

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It was quiet now.

His steps had died away but their intensity still echoed in her mind. Those black boots, so loud against the metal catwalk, her ear so close to the ground that the sound had ridden a painful trail into her brain.

But what had been worse out of the torrent of observations that'd flooded her in those few hurried moments? There'd been so much to gaze upon. His black cloak, more a shroud than a uniform; his careless silver hair, crimson-caked at the tips, and his eyes, green pools, poisoned water. He'd been poisoned, turned into something different than what she'd met the week before at the base of Mt. Nibel. He'd discovered he'd been stolen from. And that night, he'd decided to find something, anything, to steal back.

A town, so many lives, so many dreams. Quite a haul for the new thief. Those flames were his calling cards, his scarlet pimpnel. This blood running from her stomach, this was also his mark but that was nothing that surprised her. Blood and General Sephiroth were two things one automatically associated with each other.

Of course, none of these thoughts mattered, because, as she'd already noticed, it was quiet now. The thief had fled with her life on the end of his sword, leaving the victim to gaze after and relive the moment of her own death over and over until the consequences of that blade ripping into her frame caught up with her.

The reactor spread about her, pressed in on her, ominous and strong and godly. So many secrets here in these thick, leaded walls. But she didn't care about any of Shinra's secrets, only about the real things. Dad and Nibelheim and. . . others. Sephiroth's problems, while they had inconveniently shattered everything that mattered to her, were rather trivial, rather unimportant and easily dismissed in her mind. She probably wouldn't have understood anyway. She didn't find it extremely important to understand. Dad was gone, the town was dead, everything was a smear of soot and soon she'd be joining it to complete the madman's amazing heist.

Pain tore through her and backed up the thoughts of her own mortality.

The ceiling of the reactor was dark and stretched so far above her head Tifa decided it wasn't worth her time to look. It was funny. She'd devoted so much of her life to perfecting her fighting skills. She could beat anyone, man or woman, at hand to hand combat. But she'd been killed with a damned sword. Yeah. It was funny.

She wondered if Cloud would laugh about it whenever he read the newspaper article on the destruction of his hometown. She wondered if he'd care.

Two years. Two years without a call, a letter, a postcard, or a "screw you". Nothing but a lot of sitting at the well and gazing off at the same moon they'd both looked at on that night. She'd sit there so often, staring at that faceless sphere in the sky, hoping that wherever he was, he was looking at it too. And remembering.

Had that night meant the same to him? She wondered sometimes. Two years ago, she'd been convinced that she'd finally found a boy who could challenge her, a guy with something to offer, something that those juvenile pigs who followed her around could never hope to match. And that was funny too, because he'd been there all the time, his beautiful blonde spikes bobbing right under her nose. She'd ignored him because she'd had plenty of others to be her admirers, one scrawny runt who didn't fall into line didn't make enough of a difference to concern her. But it should have, because that scrawny runt was stronger than every one of those brainless, heartless boys combined. Strong in spirit and mind, the kind of strengths she needed. Why hadn't she been able to tell him that at the well two years ago? Why hadn't she said, "But Cloud, you don't need to join Soldier, you're perfect the way you are, as who you are." The words hadn't come. She'd only been able to sit there and kick the air as he'd spouted his grand dreams, dreams she felt were trivial and unnecessary.

But were they really?

No, she realized now that she hadn't contradicted Cloud's desires for one reason. It was because they'd been his. He'd wanted them, so they'd become all right by her. If he was unsatisfied, she'd be unsatisfied too.

And how bizarre was that? When had Tifa Lockhart ever let anyone or anything influence her thoughts? Was she comfortable letting that boy have such control? She realized her opinions in the matter were unimportant. The choice wasn't hers to make, her stubborn heart was calling the shots.

There was a muffled groaning close by. That man from Shinra, the one who reminded her so much of him, he was writhing in silent agony across the stairway. Tifa would have called out to him, but she felt guilty enough as it was and lacked the strength to form words anyway. He'd rushed in gung-ho, expecting to conquer the plague that'd settled over Nibelheim. But, just as Tifa had, he'd been consumed by it. She could certainly relate to that groaning.

He was handsome, that man, that boy more like. But the more she looked at him, the more her mind drifted to Cloud. She felt like a fool, the way her moth-like thoughts insisted upon fluttering about that flame. She was dying, she should be saying some neglected prayers, or making peace with something or other. Instead she had some blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy's face hovering at the edge of her mind. But that spectre was the only thing she was ill at ease with in the world. Her father'd known she loved him, her mother was dead and her friends were gone too now, but where was Cloud? Where was that missing piece in her life? She so desperately wanted to see him again. Wanted to watch him avoiding her eyes, nervously mumbling his words, standing before her as though he were afraid she'd leap at him. Where was her neglected admirer? Where were his beautiful eyes, his stupid grin? Where was the only boy that made her heart even remember its existence?

Two years. He could be dead. He very well could be. She'd done reading on Shinra and its soldier program. The training was rigorous, intense, often dangerous, he could have died long ago. But she thought she would have felt it, if that was the case. Instead, she could feel his presence somewhere in the world. It was like a lonely candle, a flashlight flickering on and off far away. So far but still visible, just barely in her peripheral vision. That life she thought on so often. It yet burned somewhere amidst the coldness of the world.

Two years. One would of thought any feelings she'd ever had for the boy would've died off by then. But it didn't work like that. Not this time. Instead, that stupid feeling in her stomach whenever she thought of Cloud grew every day, that knot of emotion tightened and strained and tore at her nerves. There was a word for the feeling but Tifa thought it was rather immature to say it. How could she love him? That night at the well had been but one night. That conversation had come out of the blue, the words unexpected from a boy she barely even knew. How could that night have transformed, in two years time, to love? Was she in love with a fantasy, was she some delusional, drippy-eyed teenager who was idolizing an idea? The idea that Cloud was now a Soldier, a warrior, a hero? Tifa just didn't know.

Wait. Yes, she did. It wasn't that tangible strength that made her throb for him, it was the strength of his spirit, the strength of his mind. That quiet something that had made her unable to take her eyes off him at the well that night. The memory of that unnameable something was what she'd fallen in love with these two years. Cloud Strife could come back a failure, could come back with his head bowed, his shoulders broken beneath the weight of a world that hadn't wanted him, and she'd still love him, maybe love him even more for simply making the effort.

Why wouldn't he return? Why had he stayed away? Did he no longer care for her? A tear rolled warm down Tifa's cheek, splattering against the cold metal grating of the floor. She wished she could say she didn't care, but it would've been a selfish lie.

You said you'd come back and rescue me some day. You promised, Cloud. But maybe you were something different than what you've become when you said those words to me under the stars. I wish they'd stop sounding off in my ears, those words. Because they seemed so sincere, so real, so. . . honest with love. God, did you love me when you called me out that night? I didn't love you then, not really, but I didn't know you. I've had two years now to get acquainted. Did you know I go to visit your mother just so I can be in your house? While she's making tea or talking about old times, I'll sneak into your old room and just stand there. I love the smell of your house, Cloud, it smells like you, like your mom's cooking and that stupid pine freshener she uses. I'd live there, if I could. I'd sleep in your bed. Anything, anything to get to know better the boy I ignored for so long. I hate myself for being so blind. It took your leaving for me to really start to see you.

Her eyes had slipped shut. The quiet humming of the reactor filled her ears like a lullaby. Zack's groaning had stopped, and now there was only a sense of expectation echoing in the air, replacing the cold sound of Sephiroth's retreating boots.

Well screw him.

She nearly laughed at the venomous words, they felt so good. Better to brush off that unsettling Cloud Strife then spend her last moments going crazy over whatever mixed up ideas had rushed through his mind when he'd mumbled his dreams to her beneath the stars. The words and the boy who'd said them were probably dead now anyways. Why couldn't she just love one of the normal guys like dad had always said? No, she had to go and get a fancy for someone she hadn't seen in two years, she had to allow herself to become obsessed with a figment, with a phantom figure formed of her ideas of a dashing Soldier hero and that soft-spoken child she'd grown up next door to. Why did it have to be complex? And why did it have to end before it ever even began?

There were footsteps in the distance. Her eyes were closed, closed seemingly to never open again, but she felt the vibrations upon the metal catwalk, they jolted through her frame. Was that murderer coming back? Tifa shivered at the thought, wishing Cloud would come and help her as he'd promised. Damn him for forgetting that promise! And damn her for remembering it.

"Tifa. . ."

The voice sounded familiar but she couldn't quite place it. She was only glad it wasn't Sephiroth's insane growl, glad to know he hadn't returned with that damned sword and that damned blood lust.

"Tifa, oh my god. . ."

She tried to open her eyes but they'd been glued shut. She tried to reach her weak arms out into the blackness all about, to punch a hole in it and let the light inside. Tifa tried to see who it was that was speaking. Because he sounded so sad, so lost. Was he lost in this darkness too? Wouldn't it be wonderful if that was the case? Alone in the dark with that phantom figure.

Warm thick arms slid under her back, up under her shirt. His hands were hot against her cold flesh, but so strong she never wanted them to let her go. Those hands and nothing else, it seemed, could keep her anchored, not drifting away into this awful blackness now before her eyes. She wanted to cling to those arms, find his back, anchor him too, this sad, lost boy who was probably frightened at the dark, more so than she because Tifa was strong, Zangan had taught her to be strong. Any opponent, anyone, man or woman. She could disable any human alive, it seemed, as long as they didn't have spiky blonde hair and large blue pools for eyes. Such opponents were her only weakness.

"It's Cloud, Tifa, open your eyes and look at me. Damn you, Sephiroth, I trusted you. . ."

"You said. . ."

Words sounded in her ears. Soft words. She didn't know what she was saying, that name had triggered an accusation to spring unexpected from her tongue.

"You said you'd return for me. . . save me. . ."

Who was she talking to? Tifa asked herself irritably. This isn't Cloud! These aren't his arms, that isn't his voice. But why can't it be? Just this once, she didn't want to wake up from the fantasy. The dreams she'd had of that boy who'd disappeared from her life before she was able to make him hers, those dreams always ended, those scenarios she'd play out with the unseen phantom, the idea that she idolized for two years, she always woke up from it. But she needed that dashing hero now! The boy who hadn't returned for her, she needed him now!

Because this dark was scary.

It was making her shiver. Where was her Soldier to push it away?

The arms held her tighter, a tear fell on her cheek. It was warm where everything else chilled. If only she could bathe in those warm tears, Tifa knew she'd never be cold again.

The strong, sensual, comforting grip slackened suddenly and she wanted to cry out for it not to leave her alone. It didn't matter that this wasn't her blue-eyed boy, she could pretend it was, that wasn't any feat. Anyone could come, anyone, and she'd project that illusion onto him.

Footsteps again. Cold, reverberating. They shook the catwalk, shivered up her spine. They led away, into the distance, throbbing into nothing. The arms went with it, the warmth, the promise of light.

Her phantom hadn't come, her ideal, her Soldier, her soft-spoken little boy.

Tifa was left alone in the dark.

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