

Angel Fallen

A Final Fantasy VII Side Story

By GideonD

Preludes

Darkness drifts like soot blackened snow. All is darkness, inky black in varied hues. The gentle murmur of tortured souls echoes muted in the background. The sickly wet splatter of demon talons rending flesh pierces the haze like the beating of a giant ruptured heart. All is dark, cold, and horrid. All is burning pain and dull ache.

Thoughts form out of a consciousness that is barely coherent. Vague thoughts, full of dull colorless images from someone's life, a life lived a thousand lifetimes ago, or so it seems at least.

What...what is this...who am I? Do I live...do I exist? Is this hell?

Rational thoughts begin to fade away once again. After all, if this is death what use is there for thought? What use is remembrance of something too far lost to ever hold again.

Yes child sleep...sleep eternal, for you need not fear the turmoil and struggles of life any longer. The deep slithering voice of doom and darkness pours like chill water full of fetid slimy filth. You need not concern yourself with the world of mortals any longer. You are a twilight child now, adrift in the limbo between life and death. Fear not for it shan't last forever. Come; come with me to a place of warmth, a place of fire. Offer up your very soul, entrust it to me. Let me be thy keeper, trust in me for I am the end of all and all comes eventually to me...

Tempting, so tempting this offer. To escape this pain, to escape this fog of memory, this dull ache of an unfulfilled life. Why struggle anymore, what would it matter? This is the end of all things after all; all things come to this. There is no use clinging to the threads of shattered hope; the vapor of lost dreams.

Listen not to this uncouth beast. Sweet like mead, like the touch of a gentle lover, comes the voice of light and love. There in the darkness looms a beacon. The silvery glow of an angel's wings sweeps through the hues of pitch. He speaks with the voice of despair and hate. Go not with the unholy one to his dark land of fire and misery, of shattered hope and lost dreams. Come with me child, for I am the mother of all. All things are born of me and all things good to me shall return.

Yet another tempting offer, too much for this little girl's mind to comprehend. Both better than this empty limbo. Or both lies? Who can say? What does it matter to one grown so weary? Perhaps oblivion would be sweeter still, an end to shattered hope, a balm for lost dreams. Perhaps it would be best to just fade away.

No sweet child, you mustn't. There is much love, much life left in you. Succumb not to this numbness, succumb not to the words of the serpent lord. My power grows weak sweet child, weak with all your doubt. Soon I can do no more for you. Sorrow, and longing echo in the voice of mother, the silvery angel wings grow dim.

No dark child, you mustn't listen to the lies of the mother. She is no angel. She created all, both the light and the dark. Her essence will ever be tainted by her capricious nature. Come dark child, ride the currents of the Styx with me. Surrender to sweet oblivion, for all you have loved is lost and can never again be. Smug and brutally wounding drips the venom of the serpent lord's words. A battle well fought and well won. The mother has no hold on the soul of this innocent little girl. The darkness deepens, the shades of night merge into one.

No serpent lord, you'll not have her sweet soul. With the last of my power I will save her. If she will not be mine then she will not be yours either. I am the mother of all, the creator of all, and thus I shall recreate. Mother's voice holds the keen kiss of steel, the smoldering inferno of volcanoes erupting. Open your eyes sweet child of light. Open them and see your life as it was, remember and return there.

I cannot, mother. I will not. I no longer wish to bear the pain of shattered hope, the ache of lost dreams. I no longer have anything to go back to. I am sorry mother, but there is nothing there for me now. Oblivion beckons the girl, and the waters of the Styx rise up to engulf her.

But you do, sweet child, you do. Open your eyes and remember him, his sparkling blue eyes...

A psychic gasp echoes through the void, pushes back the waters of the Styx. One word, one name fills the void despair has left. And with that name comes a flood of love and hope. With that name the dam of memory breaks.

The little girl feels warmth for the first time in what seems an eon, the warmth of the earthly waters upon which she floats. And from her ruby lips comes a voice gentle and harmonious, sweet and sighing like the summer breeze dancing through a field of wildflowers. With that voice she speaks but one word, but one name, the name that has restored her hope and dreams, and brought her back from the very brink of oblivion.

“Cloud...”

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With some effort the girl pulls herself ashore, her mind muddled, her limbs stiff and aching. There she lays for a long while, gazing up at the dim evening sky, what little is visible past the bone like structure beside her. She feels old, older than time itself. She is so very tired, her body weary as though pushed too hard for far too long. Yet at the same time she feels like she has been asleep for centuries. Slowly she drifts into a hazy world of waking dreams. Not quite awake yet not yet ready to surrender to sleep, she lies upon the cold stone and dreams.

*A great city lies before her, a great bustling metropolis. The shouts of hawkers and the murmur of traffic pervades every nook and alley. Nervousness flutters in her stomach like rambunctious butterflies. She hates being in the middle of all the noise and pollution, all the crime and danger. For the thousandth time she wonders why she must live like this. Clutching her cache of flowers tighter to her breasts, she moves slowly into the throng of milling people...*

**Ting...ting...**

The girl cracks open an eyelid, gazes upon the muted fire of the sunset, at the budding points of fresh starlight. So peaceful, so quiet, the perfect place for dreaming...

*Drumbeats echo in tribal salute, reverberated back from the strata walls of the canyon. Man and beast dance together around a roaring fire below, a spirit fire to be sure. It's peaceful here certainly, despite the smoke of war in the air.*

*“I've known him since we were children. You've known him less than a month,” speaks a feminine voice edged with anger and barely concealed disappointment. “I don't see why you gaze so wistfully at him when you think no one's looking. He would never take an interest in you. You're too much of a good little girl!”*

*The girl turns from the firelight dancing below her, pain and insecurity plain in her eyes. “How can you say that? What have I done that is so wrong? He's like the prince I've always dreamed of, the hero that I've always awaited. I just wanted someone to take me away from the tedium of my life in the city. He's done all that and more, and I'm sorry but I can't help the way I feel inside every time I look at him.”*

*“Pathetic. Will you spend all your life chasing after him? I sure as hell won't. If he wants me he can come get me. That's what I say! I care about him deeply, but until he finds himself there is little I can do for him. Until he starts to care about himself then he sure as hell won't care about me! But if that day ever comes when he does start to care I'll be right there beside him! I won't let you or anyone else stand between us!” With that the woman storms away, gloved hands clenched into fists at her side.*

*The girl turns back to the firelight, tears glistening in her eyes, tracing tracks down her pretty face. Below, a young man stands beside the fire gazing up at her, concern apparent on his face. The girl savors the chilling blue of his eyes, the stark gold of his hair. She smiles faintly and lifts her hand to him, just to let him know all is well. He returns the gesture with a faint smile of his own and a nod of his head before turning back to his companions at the fire.*

*“I'm sorry Tifa. I know you were there for him first, but I can't be content to just sit by and watch as you worm your way back into his heart. It will be his choice. I won't force myself upon him, though likely you would! I will make my feelings known, though. Someday...”*

*With those final words, the girl dries her eyes and lays back to gaze at the starry heavens, to dream of a night not so long ago. 'Twas a night of peace among many nights of war. 'Twas a night to never be forgotten, spent in the company of the man she'd grown to love...*

**Ting...ting...**

The next time the girl opens her eyes, night has fallen in full. It is akin to waking from a dream and wondering if you are really awake or dreaming still, for the starry sky above was much like the sky of her dream.

Slowly she flexes her fingers, finding much of the stiffness gone though the fatigue still remains. She rests her hands upon her stomach and lets her eyes drop half closed again.

**Ting...ting...**

"What is that sound," she whispers. "No matter. It likely doesn't concern me." Her hands close around her waist, smoothing the fabric of her dress, fabric now well dried. Slowly she kneads the material between her fingers, savoring the texture after what seems an eternity of no feeling at all. Her hands cease their movements though when they touch upon the cool expanse of smooth flesh between her breasts.

"What's this? Why is my dress sliced open?" The girl scrunches up her face in confusion. Once again her fingers begin their kneading, this time moving gently across the tender flesh of her breasts. And suddenly they stop again. The look of confusion on the girl's face deepens as her fingers trace the puckered line of scar tissue beneath them "What happened? How did I injure..."

**Ting...ting...**

"No! Oh no! I...I-I...NO!"

*His eyes are like pools of liquid sapphire, radiant with love and hope, the confusion of a moment before gone. He's so beautiful, the sweep of his fine features, the stark gold of his hair framing that fine visage. How could she feel anything but love and trust for him? And now he has come to save her.*

*The girl reaches out to him, reaches out with her heart as well as her hand. Words of love upon her lips, she prepares to welcome her wayward prince.*

*Just then burning fire erupts in her midriff. Pain unlike anything she has ever known assails her. And all she can see are his eyes, those crystal blue eyes now so full of horror. She is a dead girl now and she knows it. Without looking she can see the length of cold steel protruding from between her breasts. In that one moment before death claims her she thinks, this is what death feels like. And just as the crystal sphere of light slips from her hair, her hope shatters and her dreams slip away...*

**Ting...ting...**

"NO....Nooooo.....," She screams in a voice gone hoarse, screams until her throat is slick with blood. And then she collapses back against the rocky ground, and oblivion has its way with her after all...

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The sheet of steel she was trying to lift slipped from fingers gone numb with fatigue. It clattered to the rocky ground leaving a trail of grime and blood across her lacerated palm.

"Son of a bitch!" Tifa sank down on a nearby boulder to rest a moment. Methodically she tugged her mangled work glove off, careful not to get anymore dirt into her most recent wound. "By Sephiroth's black heart, life just doesn't get any easier."

The clatter of shifting rubble distracted her momentarily from her bitter speculation. Cursing soon ensued, and Tifa was forced to smile despite herself. At least Barret was decent enough to accompany her to this accursed place. With a sigh she gazed distractedly at the remains of the ruined mako reactor before her. Someone had done a real number on the place since her last visit. Not much was left standing, and sifting through it all was starting to look like more trouble than it was worth.

With an exasperated sigh she returned her attention to her torn flesh. She deftly popped the cap from her canteen with her good hand and poured water between the jagged edges of her wound, cleansing it as best as she could. She bound her hand with a strip of cloth taken from her already torn and bloodied shirt. "This would be a lot easier if I still had a good cure materia," she mumbled aloud.

Of course she didn't have one though. She wouldn't be in this forsaken place otherwise. The majority of the materia they'd been in possession of had gone mysteriously dormant when Holy was unleashed, almost as if the powerful magic had leached the power from materia in the proximity of the threat it was fighting to fuel its own power. What little was left working was currently in Cloud's possession, and no one seemed to know where exactly he'd gone off to, with the likely exception of Cid who'd also disappeared recently.

Tifa, meanwhile, was left searching through the remains of this burned out mako reactor for a few scraps of precious materia to sell. Her hometown, Nibelheim, wasn't fairing so well since the fall of Shinra

Inc., and a sizable portion of its already small population was beginning to migrate elsewhere. Most of the people who currently lived there were former Shinra employees planted there once the town was rebuilt years ago, this following Sephiroth's mad rampage, which had destroyed the original town. The materia hunt was the only thing she could think of to increase the town's income and hopefully allow more people to keep their homes. She knew in her heart it was probably a lost cause, but she simply couldn't bring herself to give up hope for the only place that she'd ever called home.

"Damn piece of shit Shinra machinery! Never could build anything that worked better than half right!" Barret's booming baritone echoed across the mountainside.

Tifa truly was thankful to have the man along, despite his surly demeanor. Monsters still infested the mountain, making it dangerous to travel here alone. Finding an unexpected pile of rubble that needed to be dug through would have spelled the end to her treasure hunt had Barret not been along to help as well. Still, she wished Cloud could have been here with her instead.

Tifa sighed and let her head drop. A sudden sadness gripped her, a feeling that was becoming all too familiar as of late. Images of a pretty young flower girl drifted through her mind, a girl no longer with them. Suddenly she wished desperately that she could take back all of the harsh words she'd spoken to the girl not so long ago. It was far too late for that though. She just wished that those words had been spoken as fact and not as a jealous rebuke. That wasn't and would never be the case though, and her mistakes would be hers to bear for a lifetime.

Aeris's death had been painful for them all, but it was Cloud most of all who'd suffered, and that was what hurt Tifa the most. She'd always loved Cloud, even though she'd never really admitted it. It seemed for a while that Cloud had shared those feelings, though she couldn't be certain. His veil of secrecy and confusion had always kept her guessing. Aeris it seemed had seen something in Cloud that no one else could though, and through that understanding she'd somehow come to mean more to him than any of them had suspected, Cloud included. When she'd died, impaled on the Masamune, Cloud had been broken. He would always carry the burden of her death for he truly believed it had been a result of his own inaction. He would also carry a place in his heart for the innocent young flower girl for the rest of his days. Tifa wasn't sure if there would be room in his heart for her as well. Even if there were, she'd constantly wonder if she would ever mean as much to him as Aeris had.

"Damn girl, you ever coming outta dat depression?"

The smell of sweat and gun oil drifted around Tifa letting her know Barret was just behind her. He could certainly move quietly for such a big man, she mused. She threw a wistful smile back to him, unshed tears sparkling in her eyes. "Someday I will. But the pain is too fresh to forget just yet."

With a shake of his head Barret stomped over and plopped down on the boulder beside her. "Seems to me like the pain's still fresh 'cause it's still being inflicted. That spiky headed bastard oughta know better than to mess with a woman's 'motions!"

A wane smile briefly touched Tifa's lips before fading away. "Don't be too hard on him. I know he can be rather callous sometimes, but he's probably even more confused than I am right now. I can't deny him his pain and grief anymore than he can deny me mine."

"Pfft! Yeah whatever. If there's one thing that boy's damn good at it's being one confused motherfucker." Barret hung his head, shaking it emphatically. Tifa never cracked a smile so he knew she was feeling really low this time. He let it go at that and they just sat in silence for a while, gazing out at the lowlands below.

His gaze finally settled on the lights of Nibelheim, just now coming to life. "Sun'll be settin' soon. We best be settin' up camp," he commented. Tifa continued to gaze distractedly at the distant town. "I'll see to it. You just relax a bit." With that he got up and started toward their pile of equipment.

With Barret some distance away, Tifa finally gave in to the pain and let her tears flow unchecked. After a few moments she returned her reddened eyes to the horizon. "Where are you Cloud? Why aren't you with me right now?" She could only shake her head in resignation. It was quite likely he'd never be there for her and she wouldn't waste her entire life waiting. But she knew that letting go would hurt even more.

Tifa sat staring at the horizon long after the sun had made its fiery descent. Then she lay gazing at the beautiful stars long into the night.

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The chill northern winds sang forlorn and melancholy through the dale below, echoing the empty ache in Cloud's heart. He gazed solemnly at the tree-lined valley, unshed tears near to overflowing his brilliant blue eyes. His mouth crinkled into a tight line as, chin shaking, he pushed the empty feeling deeper into his convoluted psyche, swallowed his tears as he'd done a thousand times before, as he'd do a thousand times more. Cloud hadn't cried once in his life. It simply wasn't his way to be so open.

With a sad sigh he lifted his head, turning his eyes to the horizon, a horizon slowly turning pink with the sun's descent. Soon the stars would be out, beautiful pinpricks of light on a canvas of pitch. With sudden irony Cloud thought, those stars are much like the hopes and dreams shared by all the people of the world, slowly being swallowed by the darkness of inevitability that surrounds us all. Cloud let slip a bitter little laugh at the hopelessness of it all.

Just then the wind picked up, a chill gust of arctic air off the Great Glacier that penetrated Cloud's meager clothing with fingers of icy death. He shivered violently, wrapping a borrowed cloak tighter around his bare shoulders. In a vain attempt to ignore the freezing cold he turned his attention to the sounds of an excavation crew at work in the distance. The thump of pick axes on rock soon lulled him into a deeper depression.

### **Kaboom!!!**

The blast shook the ground below Cloud's feet, but he managed to hold on to his footing. Soon enough the rumble receded into distant memory, just like a dozen other such blasts he'd witnessed since his recent arrival here. Apparently not everyone shared Cloud's lack of concern though.

"Son of a flea infested bitch hound's hairy ass!" A thoroughly annoyed voice came to Cloud's ears, carried by the chill evening breeze. "Those goddamned archeologists don't have nothing better to do than blow shit up and play in the dirt and chocobo shit all day! They could at least shout a fucking warning before they go detonating a goddamn warhead!"

Cloud was forced to chuckle despite his gloomy mood. He glanced back over his shoulder to see a cloud of dust settling over Bone Village, and an irate Cid staggering toward him covered in dust, still spitting profanities.

"I thought you had bat ears, Cid. You should have heard the fuse burning down and had plenty of time to outrun the blast," Cloud mocked, entertained as always by the offbeat antics of his cohort.

"Wrong again shit for brains! If anyone has bat ears it's Vince, not me! Besides, I'm too goddamn old to outrun a nuke like that!" More cursing ensued as Cid beat the rock dust out of his clothes.

"Yeah you must be getting old. You can't seem to tell the difference between a nuke and that fly fart that just blew you over on your baggy old ass." Cloud managed to mouth his little joke in a perfectly serious tone of voice, which only served to piss Cid off even more.

"Spiky headed little punk motherfucker," he muttered under his voice. "Little cock sucker oughta show a little more respect to his betters!"

Cloud smirked as the wind carried the words faintly to his ears. "It'll be dark soon. I should be going now," he said on a more serious note.

Cid looked up at his compatriot, worry evident in his eyes though he tried his best to hide it. "You sure you don't want me to come along?"

"Do you have a reason to come along?"

Cid spit rock dust before cramming a crumpled cigarette into his mouth. He struck a match on the bangle he wore, shielding its flame from the gusting wind. Soon enough he was puffing contentedly. "Nope guess not. I suppose you can take care of yourself seeing the way you tote that damn big ass sword around. But if you get in trouble don't you come crawling back wanting good old Cid to change your diaper and wipe the shit off your ass!"

Cloud barked mocking laughter. "I wouldn't let you change my diaper anyway old man. Your hands are too rough and I'd be afraid you'd try and do more than wipe the shit off my ass!"

"Bah! Go suck your own cock you little punk! I sure as hell wouldn't touch the shriveled up little thing! You'd think a guy that swings a sword like that one would have more in his pants to brag about," Cid spit back. "Maybe when we get back to Nibelheim I'll give Tifa a hand changing her diaper though! There's a job I wouldn't mind doing!"

Cloud's mouth tightened into a thin line and his brow suddenly furrowed. "Yeah whatever," he retorted vehemently. He then fell into a sullen silence, no further rebukes forthcoming.

Cid, realizing he'd pushed Cloud a bit too far, which was exactly what he'd been trying to do, turned and started back to the village. "Well then, I'll be seeing you in the morning."

"Cid," Cloud called out.

Cid stopped abruptly and turned back to face him. "Yeah? What is it?"

"Be ready to head out early tomorrow. My business here will be finished soon and I'm in a hurry to continue our journey."

"Mind telling me where we're off to next," Cid questioned, fearing the response he was certain would be forthcoming.

"First stop is the Icicle Inn. From there we're gonna snowboard down into the glacier," Cloud replied.

Cid shook his head and sighed. "I thought as much. And from there we head into the goddamn crater, or what's left of it. Right?"

"That's right. That a problem?"

"Pfft! Is it a problem! Of course it's a fucking problem! I was damn glad to get out of that place with my ass in one piece last time. It even cost me the best damn vessel I've ever flown!" Cid threw down his half-smoked cigarette and ground it beneath his boot heel. "I know you're dead set on going back to the godforsaken shit hole. I just want to know why. Sephiroth is dead. We made damn sure of that. What the hell are you going back for?"

Cloud ran his fingers across the beaded ridges of fresh scar tissue covering his forearms. Those scars were reminders of his last battle with Sephiroth. They tingled now, giving Cloud the impression that a creeping death was stalking him. "I'm going back for the Masamune."

"What!" Cid declared. "Why the fuck are you going back for that cursed thing? Exactly what are you trying to pull you spiky headed little prick?"

"Sephiroth may be dead, but his sword is still whole. It's there in the crater somewhere, unbroken. And it's waiting for something. Don't ask me how, but I can feel its presence, its evil aura. There is something more to that sword than we suspected, Cid." Cloud cast his eyes to the earth below his feet. "I won't just let it lie there for anyone to stumble across."

"Ah, shit!" Cid spit disgustedly. "Who the hell is just going to go strolling around in the fucking crater and stumble across it? Maybe the best place for it is buried under a few million tons of rubble in a place no one's likely to look for it anyway!"

"I'm not going to take that chance, Cid."

"Yeah I know you're not. Once you've got your mind set on something there's no talking you out of it. Hard headed little shit!" Cid turned and resumed his walk back to the village. "I'll be ready to leave early in the morning. I'd like to get this shit over with as soon as possible."

As Cid disappeared into the shadows of the twilight evening Cloud silently mouthed the words, "Me too my friend, me too."

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Later that night, Cloud stood staring out across the placid waters of a small lake deep inside the City of Ancients. He'd been there for nearly an hour already. The place was oddly still, holding an aura of ancient magic and immortal mysteries.

With a sigh he blinked away unshed tears. "I'm sorry Aeris. I'm sorry I let you die. I could have saved you, but I was just too damn weak. Your blood is on my hands as much as Sephiroth's. I won't ask for your forgiveness. I'm not worthy of it. I've failed in all I've set out to do."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be the person you wanted me to be. I was never kind and generous. I never did anything for the good of others. It was always me I thought of first. Even saving the planet from Meteor was done in my own self-interest. I didn't care if I died. I didn't care if the whole world died. I just cared that Sephiroth had killed you when I could have saved you. I went after him because I felt that by defeating him perhaps I could atone for some of my failings. Saving the world was just sort of a side effect of my quest for vengeance I guess."

Cloud made to say more, but suddenly found he was at a loss for words. With a sad little laugh he dropped his eyes to the shore before his feet. "I suppose there's really nothing more to say is there? I'll not make any excuses for what I've done, and none for what I've failed to do. Farewell Aeris. May your soul find peace."

Even now he couldn't bring himself to utter the words he truly longed to, the words buried deep within his heart. Slowly he began to turn and walk away.

Just then his eyes caught sight of something unusual. He turned his attention back to the lakeshore and crouched down to closer inspect it. Now he could see clearly the lines in the sand, the scuff marks on the rocks. Gazing around he noticed that what little plant life grew at the lake's edge was also in disarray. Someone or something had definitely been here recently. It looked as though whatever it was had clawed its way awkwardly out of the lake.

Cloud's breath suddenly caught in his throat. He peered intently into the depths of the crystal clear water, but it was too dark to make out anything. "Stop it you fool. She's dead. You know she is. You're the one that let her die, and you're the one that let her body slip beneath the waters of this very lake."

What then, he was forced to wonder. Had a scavenger of some sort gone in and drugged up her body? Cloud shuddered at that thought. He quickly calmed though, realizing there would likely be some evidence of that scattered around the shore.

The white materia perhaps? Had someone gone in after it? He just didn't know. The only way to find out for sure would be to dive in and have a look. Again he shuddered at the thought. To dive into the water would likely be suicidal in these frigid temperatures. He also silently admitted that he didn't want to come across Aeris's body at the bottom of the lake, to have to look upon her face again, especially in the condition she was likely in by now.

Cloud jumped to his feet and turned away from the lake. He quickly made his way toward the city's exit, unable to push the images of Aeris's cold dead eyes from his mind, and longing for the warmth of the morning sun. The mystery of the lake would be someone else's to solve. It was a task he couldn't bear to undertake.

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The rock formations were beautiful in their natural splendor, a dozen different hues of blue and gray in the near total darkness of the cavern. Their cool colors were soothing to a troubled soul, as was the chill moist air of the cave complex.

Slowly he unfocused his eyes, willing the images to blur before him. With his dark orbs in this state he initiated what had become an innate ability to him. As his eyes began to refocus, the rocky outcroppings of the cavern ceiling came into view once again, but this time they were even more varied in hue, though still displayed in a multitude of cool colors. The cavern was just as beautiful in the infrared spectrum as it appeared in the ultraviolet. He let the red glow dim in his eyes, shifting back to his normal vision.

"You just gonna lie there all evening brooding again," a feline voice rumble from not far away.

Vincent shifted on his stony bed, slowly turning his now dull eyes to face the entrance to the cavern. Silhouetted in moonlight filtered dim by a few twists in the tunnel beyond, crouched a strange beast. The creature was feline in shape, apparently some sort of great hunting cat. Its deep voice and the feathers adorning its body bespoke a much greater intelligence than any normal cat, however.

"What else do I have to do?" Vincent tuned his unnaturally keen ears to the sounds now emanating from the tunnel beyond the feline creature. The song of tribal drums was beginning, just as it did every evening here. "Sorry if I've been a bore these past few days Red."

Shining cat eyes flashed with low light vision as Red XIII lay down in the cave entrance. A halting rumble echoed from his chest, what passed as laughter for him. "Don't worry about it. You haven't exactly had many people to talk to for the past few years. I don't expect you to be overly friendly."

A grim smile creased Vincent's face as he turned and sat up. "True enough I suppose."

"You're thinking of her again aren't you?" Red spoke the question softly, uncertainty in his purring voice. He cocked his head inquisitively, aware that there was no way to take the question back now.

Vincent grimaced. This was a touchy subject for him, but he understood that it was only concern that prompted Red to ask. "Yes, I'm afraid so. Now that the fighting's done she's all I think of. This is why I went to sleep for so long to begin with."

"Not thinking of taking another prolonged cat nap are you," Red murmured, more at ease now that he knew Vincent hadn't taken his prying badly. He began licking his forepaw distractedly, feigning nonchalance.

Vincent let forth a resigned sigh. With a shrug of his weary shoulders he said, "No, I suppose not. I can't sleep forever. I can't hide from the truth forever."

Red stopped his grooming and returned his paw to the ground. After a moment's silence he spoke. "You're going to see her again aren't you?"

Vincent's eyes narrowed in indecision. Distractedly he caressed the butt of the gun at his side, Lucretia's last gift to him. "I don't know, Red. She's not the same person I once knew and I'm certainly not the same person she once knew. We've both made our choices, good and bad. I doubt there is anything left for the two of us together now."

Red rolled his shoulders as he considered. "No, perhaps not. But perhaps you need to find some sort of closure, something final before you can put her memories to rest?"

"Heh...heh. Closure?" Vincent laughed mockingly. "What closure can there be that hasn't already been? There is no reason for me to return to her save one. She knows how I feel about her, Red. We both know that being together happily is no longer an option. For all I know she may have already passed from this world anyway."

Vincent stretched fluidly and leapt down from his rocky perch. "No, I'll not go to her just yet my friend. For the next time I do, it will be so that we may die together. Perhaps then we'll find our peace at last."

"And if it's too late then? If she has already passed on?"

Vincent paused, a distant look in his eyes. "Then I fear I shan't have the heart to follow her alone. I'll live an eternity of pain and loneliness."

Red mewed sympathetically.

"Fear not, my friend. Eternity shan't last forever, and I've grown accustomed to the burden I carry." Vincent smiled and took a deep breath. "Let us go now to join the others. I suppose I've been in this cave for too long. It's only served to remind me what I am and that there's no turning back in life, dreary thoughts both."

Red leapt to his feet and turned to walk out into the tunnel behind him.

"Red," Vincent questioned.

Red paused and tossed a look back over his broad shoulder. "Yes, Vincent?"

"Do you ever wonder how the others are faring now?"

A low rumble of affection escaped Red's toothy maw. "Sometimes I do. Often actually. Any particular reason you ask?"

Vincent tossed back his shaggy midnight mane and stroked his chin in consideration. "I think its time for me to get out a bit. I've been cloistered here far too long. I might as well go pay them a visit, see how they're doing."

"Aye, Nibelheim isn't far and some of them are bound to be there."

"Yes I was thinking that myself. You're welcome to come along of course, though I don't expect you to leave here just for my sake."

"I'd love to accompany you Vince."

"Tomorrow then?"

"Tomorrow," Red echoed. With that the two strolled from the cavern and out into the firelight of Cosmos Canyon.

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The fire snapped and crackled as pockets of resin in the wood burst open, sending acrid smoke spiraling towards the night sky. That sky was darkly beautiful this night. No moon was visible, so only the stars lent their sparkling light to the veil of darkness. The girl sat gazing up at that glittering canopy for a long while, basking in the nighttime song of the crickets.

Inevitably, she was drawn from her silent musings by a violent shiver. The night was growing quite cold and she had little to protect her from its icy chill. She quickly pulled her dark cloak, stolen from a tavern in Kalm, tighter about her and moved as close to the meager fire as she dared.

She sat thus for nearly an hour before the cold once again forced her from her considerations. She rubbed her hands together briskly beneath her cloak, trying futilely to force some warmth back into them. Her empty stomach chose that moment to voice its complaints as well. She sighed wearily in her misery and clutched her grumbling stomach, half numb fingers closing around the badly stitched fabric of her slashed dress.

Suddenly her head jerked up as she went on the alert. A creeping sensation spread across the back of her neck, giving her the impression that she was no longer alone. She gazed intently into the pitch black surrounding her dimly lit camp. After several moments, she sighed in frustration. Nothing seemed to be hiding out in the bitter cold night, yet the feeling that she was not alone would not depart.

As she brushed unkempt brown hair away from sparkling hazel eyes, sudden realization struck her. She gently parted her cloak and turned her eyes to the objects resting in her lap. One was a milky white orb glowing softly with a weak inner light. The other was a similar orb, though this one was darker than the night around her and hummed with a powerful presence, the same presence that had obviously just put her on edge.

She gently stroked both orbs. The white one was icy chill to the touch, dead in her hand. The dark one was slightly warm and pulsed in time to her heartbeat. She cupped the dark orb in both hands hoping to draw a little heat from the strange object. Gazing at the orbs caused her once more to begin dwelling upon how she'd come to possess them. Before she could consider too long however, a sultry voice echoed faintly within her head.

You are cold child. Let me warm you...

"Who are you? How will you warm me?" Uncertainty was apparent in the girl's voice. She had no idea with whom if anyone she conversed. She did know that the voice was coming from the dark orb, however.

I am your protector, your guardian. You are my charge now and it is my duty to keep you safe.

"Then tell me who I am, what my purpose is in being here. Why can't I remember anything before waking in those eerie ruins?" The girl's voice quivered with fatigue and cold. Her mind was growing muddled and she feared she would fall asleep soon. Likely she would never awaken if she did.

Hush child. All will be made clear in time. Right now we have other concerns, keeping you alive for one. For that we need to make you warm.

"Yes, of course. You're right. I'll worry about such things later. Right now I'm just so cold and so very tired." Her head drooped and she began to nod off. She knew she'd fall into slumber soon, and then the cold would take her. "Please help me. I can't stay awake much longer."

Have faith in me child. I have summoned help for you. A man will arrive here shortly. You must do exactly as I tell you if you are to survive the night. Do you understand?

Footsteps echoed through the still night air, headed steadily toward the fire. "Yes I understand. I hear him coming I think. Tell me, what must I do?"

Yes child he is nearly here. Now close your eyes and blank your mind. Let me take over from here...

"Yes I'll let you take over. I'm sure you know what to do better than I." The girl's words began to slur together as her eyes dropped closed.

Just then a rather average young man stepped into the circle of firelight. "Ma'am? Are you alright?"

The girl didn't reply, just sat with her head down, facing the fire.

"Ma'am? I saw your fire. I don't mean to disturb you, but I thought you might need some help. It's not a good idea to be out on a night like this." The man looked around the camp, seeing only the strange young girl and the fire. "Why you don't even have a tent, or a bedroll for that matter. You'll freeze out here tonight."

The girl finally lifted her head, eyelids slowly lifting to reveal pitch black orbs of purest night. The man's breath caught in his throat. He hadn't noticed at first but the girl was radiantly beautiful. "Ma'am?"

"I'm so cold," she spoke, her voice sultry and inviting, yet still carrying a note of fatigue. "Please help me. I've lost my way and have no supplies. Please help me grow warm again."

The man's knees almost buckled. The seductive helplessness in her voice stirred passionate emotions out of place for this situation. He stumbled over his words as he pulled the bedroll from his back and began to spread it out by the fire. "Of course I'll help you Ma'am. Here you just climb into these nice warm blankets while I stoke up the fire."

The man threw a few branches on the fire and prodded it until it blazed a bit higher. Still the girl hadn't moved. He turned to her questioningly. "Ma'am? The blankets?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm so weak. Could you help me to them?" She shifted slightly as she spoke and her cloak fell partially open, revealing the pale white flesh of her calf and part of her thigh.

The man gulped, eyes riveted to the tender white flesh revealed. He shook his head rapidly in a vain attempt to clear it. "Of course," he said, rushing to her side.

He stooped down beside her, and gently placed his arms around her, willing his hands to stay away from certain places they seemed likely to stray. As he lifted her he noticed how cold and limp she felt, a fragile little doll in his hands. He slowly carried her to the bedroll and gently eased her into the warm wool blankets.

"Thank you so much," the girl said, her voice barely more than a whisper. Her eyes were mere slits, but they glowed with allure none the less. "I'm so very grateful. If there is any way to repay you, you have but to ask. All I have is yours."

The man gulped yet again, eyeing the curve of her breasts outlined by the coarse woolen blankets. "Umm...really it's nothing. I could do no less," he stammered.

She reached one pale hand up and weakly closed icy cold fingers behind his neck. "Please, lie down beside me. I'm so cold. I just want you to hold me for a while."

The touch of her icy flesh sent chills of delight down his spine. After another quick glance at her blanket sheathed figure it didn't take the man long to decide what to do. Quickly he tugged off his boots and slid into the bedroll beside her, wrapping her in his warm embrace.

"Mmm...that feel so much better." She nestled up against him, reached chill arms around him, and drew his mouth down to hers.

The man leaned heavily into the kiss, his emotions in a jumble. His hands began to rove, pulling at the girl's tattered dress, seeking to free her cold flesh from it so he could make her warm again. He pulled his mouth from hers and began to nibble fiercely at her neck, his hand finally finding its way beneath her skirts.

The girl gasped in surprise and delight as the man's hands touched upon forbidden places, as she pulled his face tighter into the crook of her neck. Her eyes flashed open, dark orbs full of malice. Her hand closed tighter upon the dark sphere in her palm. The white sphere pulsed in protest from her pocket, but she ignored it. She rubbed against the man fiercely, clung to the dark orb as though to let go were to die. The orb pulsed in her grip and she pressed it under the man's shirt, against warm flesh.

The sudden chill of the dark orb against his side startled the man. He jerked his head up quickly and stared into her eyes. Something seemed different this time, something utterly wrong. Still, he couldn't resist her as she pulled him on top of her, as she wrapped her legs around him and pulled his face down against her breasts. He could feel her hard nipples beneath his cheek and suddenly the chill orb was forgotten as he fumbled to open his trousers.

The girl let forth a primal growl just as the man began to press against her. The dark orb flared to life in her hand and the man went suddenly rigid. She smiled as glorious warmth began to spread through her body, even as the stranger grew limp and cold in her arms. Malicious laughter bubbled up from deep inside her.

A few moments later, once the stranger had collapsed dead upon her, she callously pushed him aside, out of the bedroll. With a contented smile she snuggled deeper into the blankets, her dark eyes fading to hazel once again. The dark orb remained firmly grasped in her hand, lending her warmth all through the night.

Angel Fallen

A Final Fantasy VII Side Story

By GideonD

Volume I

Chapter I: Mako Jade

It was bitter cold, always bitter cold. The mournful howl of the wind over snow-swept peaks lent an air of surreal aloneness to the place. Even with a friend close at hand one would inevitably feel lost in a void of solitude here. Many were the unwary travelers who had once braved the cliffs to see this place, to gain one more notch on their belts, one more deed to boast pridefully of. Many were the bones buried beneath the tons of ice and snow, all that remained of those many travelers. So lost could one become in the overwhelming solitude of the crater that it was easy to stand and gaze out across the awe inspiring landscape from dawn till dusk, easy to forget the mournful howl of the wind as well as its frigid bite. Alas for those poor souls, frozen by the northern winds as they contemplate the paths of their lives.

Cloud blinked the ice from eyes frozen half shut. Steeling his will, he pulled his eyes from the spectacle before him, so different since the cave-in that had buried half the crater floor, yet so very much the same. Shivering in the chill air despite his cold-weather gear, he quickly turned and ducked under the flap of a small tent, his only shelter from the northern wind's certain death.

Glancing around the dimly lit interior of the tent for but a brief moment, Cloud hurriedly peeled open his heavy cloak and huddled close to the small fire Cid had finally gotten to light. Head down he sat staring into the fire, shivering.

Cid sat across the fire from Cloud, his eyes having never left the forlorn young man since he'd stumbled into the tent. Distractedly, he spit off to one side and took a draw off of the cigarette he held with fingers too numb to feel the smooth paper. After a moment of silent contemplation he tossed the remainder of his smoke into the fire and pulled the small kettle from the flames.

He paused a moment, and Cloud glanced up briefly. "Drink?" Cid inquired, holding up the kettle.

Once more Cloud glanced up, this time nodding his assent.

Cid poured a generous portion of steaming coffee into a battered tin cup and passed it to Cloud. He then filled a second equally battered cup for himself and set the kettle back over the hot embers of the fire. Cloud eagerly sipped his coffee, letting it warm his insides as the fire could not, whilst Cid pulled a dingy silver flask from the folds of his heavy winter parka. He began to uncap it and looked questioningly to Cloud.

Cloud only shook his head briefly before returning his gaze to the fire. Cid was just about to pour a generous portion of liquor into his coffee, when Cloud stopped him with a few quick words. "Wait, is that alcohol?"

"Yeah, some of the best brandy you can find now days." Once again he held the flask out toward Cloud. "Sure you don't want a bit? It'll warm your toes."

Again Cloud shook his head. "You shouldn't drink that. Alcohol may make you FEEL warmer, but it really just makes it easier for you to freeze to death. It causes the veins near the surface of your skin to open up more, to let more blood flow. The hot blood makes you feel warmer, but it also allows your body heat to escape through your skin more quickly." Cloud turned his gaze back to the fire once again.

Cid quirked an eyebrow and regarded the flask longingly. After a moment he capped it and replaced it in his coat with a resigned sigh. "They teach you that in SOLDIER?"

Cloud cringed a bit and shook his head. "I was never in SOLDIER, remember? It's just part of the basic survival training I received."

Cid was nodding his head before Cloud finished, having remembered that little detail almost as soon as he'd spoken the words. Cid sat back and sipped at his coffee, while Cloud sank back into his melancholy.

After a few moments of silence, Cid once again spoke up. "So, have you decided what we're to do next? I hope this damn wind hasn't affected your brain too much. That thing ain't in the best damn shape as it is."

Cloud looked up to Cid and smirked wryly, shaking a bit of his foul mood as he focused on the task at hand. "Yeah, the sun will be up in full soon. We'll break camp and head on to the heart of the crater in a few minutes. I figure we can either set tonight's camp there or head back early after a preliminary scouting if you're uncomfortable staying down there."

Cid barked out a short fit of laughter. "Of course I'm uncomfortable staying down there. Shit, I'd rather not be anywhere near this hellhole. Even being this close makes my damn skin crawl." It wasn't just the chill northern air that made Cid shiver this time.

"I know, but it can't be helped. Hopefully we'll either get lucky and find the damn sword just lying there on top of all that snow, or we'll find that it's securely buried deep below tons of ice." Cloud shrugged apologetically. "Either will satisfy me, so long as I'm sure it'll not be causing any trouble anytime soon."

Cid tossed Cloud one last resigned look and started pulling on the rest of his gear. "I doubt we'll find it just lying around, and I hope the hell you don't get it in your spiky head to try digging the thing up. Let's move out."

Cloud nodded his agreement and likewise started packing up his gear. It would be a long hike and he took one last longing look at the fire before dousing it and ducking back out into the frigid arctic air.

* * * * *

One hour and a thousand of Cid's constant profanities later, the unlikely pair finally set foot on an ice shelf no more than twenty feet below the top of the small peak they'd found at the crater's heart.

"Almost there. Stop your bitching for a while would you Cid? You'll start an avalanche." Cloud smirked back at Cid as the pilot pulled himself securely onto the ledge.

"Bah you ain't heard real bitching yet you little punk ass shit." Despite his surly mood, Cid was indeed glad to be so close to their goal, and quicker than expected too. That meant they could get out of the place a lot sooner as well, or so he hoped.

After a few moments of rest, Cloud motioned to the top of the peak. "We should be able to get a good view all around from up there. If it's just lying around hopefully we can spot it. Ready?"

Cid shrugged resignedly and motioned Cloud ahead.

A few minutes later Cloud hooked his gloved hands over the ice covered rocks of the peak's summit and pulled himself up to the top. Staggering to his feet he shook the loose snow from his hair. He glanced around briefly as he turned to help Cid up the last part of the climb, but saw something that immediately stopped him in his tracks.

There, in the center of the plateau, was the Masamune. It stood upright, its blade embedded firmly in the rocky snow dusted ground, and its hilt aimed skyward. Bathed in the morning sunlight, it appeared as nothing so much as a fairy tale image, the sacred sword that would be the prize of the brave knight who dared to save the world perhaps. But were that the case it would be a fairy tale steeped in darkness, twisted and broken, for even from more than thirty feet away Cloud could feel the intense evil radiating from the blade.

This was the sword he had come in search of, the object of power he had sworn to find and guard with his very life in an attempt to keep the world free of its evil influence. Against all reason, here it stood, out in the open atop a small mountain peak, for all the world seeming as if it had dug itself free from a few tons of rock and ice and was merely waiting for its master to come wield it once again. This was the object he had raced across the frozen tundra to snatch up before it could fall into evil hands once again. To Cloud's ultimate horror, he found that he was simply too late.

A man stood calmly beside the sword, patient as if waiting for something, or perhaps someone. He was cloaked all in black and his long hair cascaded around him, tossed by the wind. The sun was at his back liming him in an eerie halo of flame, and casting his features into deep shadow. Though his facial features were lost in the gloom, his liquid green eyes seemed to glow with a light all their own.

Cloud stumbled and almost fell, his mind caught in a vortex of memories. Those pale green orbs held him riveted, their chill bored into his soul. He looked on helplessly as the man reached forward and grasped the Masamune by its hilt. Even as he watched the man begin to slowly pull the magnificent sword from its prison of rock and ice, he found he could not move, could not turn his gaze from those malicious

emerald pools. Cloud knew terror, and as those fiercely glowing eyes stripped the veil from his soul, his horror only deepened.

Ting...ting...

Out on the open prairie not far from Midgar, a scared young lady awakened from a rest troubled by dreams of icy green eyes and the promise of death those glowing orbs held for her. With a cry of panic, she threw back her blankets and stumbled to her feet, only to trip over the corpse of a young man sprawled on the ground beside her, his features frozen in a mockery of lust and fear. She stumbled up from scrapped knees with one hand clutching tightly to the warm black sphere she held and the other covering her mouth in disgust and horror. Those awful green eyes drifted through her thoughts once again, mocking and cruel. Buried memories churned sluggishly just below the surface of conscious thought. With a strangled cry she turned and raced toward the distant ruins of Midgar, the unknown young man all but forgotten.

Ting...ting...

A bank of dark storm clouds suddenly obscured the sun over Nibelheim just as Tifa and Barret stepped through the town's rear gate. A sudden memory of buildings sheathed in flames flitted across the surface of Tifa's thoughts, causing her to shiver in unexplained anxiety.

"Yo, Tifa! You a'ight?" The concern was heavy in Barret's voice, but not nearly so much as the panicked surprise in his shouted "Ah, FUCK!!", as she fainted into his arms.

Ting...ting...

"Do you feel that?" Vincent's brow creased in concentration as he turned his questioning gaze to Red XIII. Seeing that Red's hackles were raised menacingly, he didn't pause to await the needless response before turning to survey the looming strata walls of the canyon they were traversing. The day had been bright and sunny but a moment ago, but now the variegated rock formations were layered in menacing shadow, every indentation promising possible threat.

"I don't like this Vince. Something feels terribly wrong..." Red's words trailed off into a rumbling growl as his tail blazed a bit brighter with the anticipation of trouble to come.

"Neither do I, my friend. Neither do I." With a last cursory scan of the vacant landscape, Vincent began walking once again in the direction of Nibelheim. "Come on. We'd best make haste to Nibelheim. Perhaps our friends can lend some insight into this strange feeling we seem to share."

Cloud's breath came in short labored gasps. Cid's grumbles came from far away, forgotten in the tumult of long buried emotions. It was all so surreal. The Masamune just lying there atop a mountain peak was unbelievable enough, but now this.

Cloud wiped frozen snow from his eyes and blinked several times. Still the dark specter grasping that horrid sword loomed before him. One thought screamed through his mind, *How can this be? How can he still be alive after all our efforts?*

Then another more horrid and insidious thought scraped across Cloud's consciousness. *Was her sacrifice in vain? Did she die for nothing? Did I let her die for nothing?*

Just then the screech of tempered steel sliding free of its rocky prison brought Cloud's mind back to reality. "Careful Cid, we aren't alone! The damn swords right here and Sephiroth has come to claim it!"

Cid's muttering came to a sudden stop. "What the hell are you ranting about? Are you fucking for real?" He heaved himself onto the plateau and stopped dead in his tracks, seeing for himself that apparently Cloud was 'fucking for real'. "By Sephiroth's black heart....er...that is...well, guess that's pretty fitting," he finished with a mumble.

The darkly clad figure let forth a fit of low rumbling laughter. He stepped to the side, swinging the lengthy Masamune effortlessly through a series of practice maneuvers, as if getting a feel for the weapon for the very first time.

Cloud, hand on the Ultima Weapon's hilt, paused in drawing the blade from its scabbard. With the sun no longer at the man's back Cloud could now clearly see that he had erred in his assumptions. Cid too let out an audible sigh of relief.

The man standing before them bore a striking resemblance to Sephiroth, but was by no means the man who had become the monster of children's bedtime stories. He was roughly the same size and build as the infamous arch-villain, and his facial features, though a bit broader, were much like Sephiroth's as well, but his long flowing hair was deepest midnight in hue, with a streak of silver gray showing on each side of his head. He had an air of youth about him, but also the melancholy sadness of great age. His eyes however, glowed with the inner light of one who had been doused in mako, the telling mark of SOLDIER. Those eyes also gave the feeling that they could cut into one's soul like a scythe. It was the same feeling Cloud remembered having whenever he looked into Sephiroth's eyes.

"Who are you?" Cloud pulled his sword the rest of the way from its sheath. This may not have been Sephiroth before him, but judging from the striking similarities and the mako glow in his eyes, it was quite possible that he was another one of Hojo's clones, possibly a more successful version.

The man gazed intently at the sword he held in his hands, his focus solely for the weapon. He ignored Cloud's question completely, seemingly unaware that he wasn't the only person on the plateau.

"I said who are you? And what business do you have here, especially with that sword in hand?" Cloud stood defiantly, despite the fact that the stranger still seemed to be ignoring him. "I tell you now that I cannot allow that sword to remain in your possession. It is evil, and I have come to destroy it."

For the first time the stranger showed some outward sign that he acknowledged Cloud's presence. His features darkened like storm clouds and his visage drew together into a mask of grim distaste. He shifted slightly, his heavy black cloak catching the wind and whipping out behind him. If not for the secure hold of the deep ebony shoulder guards he wore, the cloak likely would have been lost to the wind completely. With fluid grace, the man thrust the Masamune over his shoulder, securing it in a sheath that seemed to be made specifically for the sword.

Cloud tensed nervously, noticing for the first time the hilt of another katana protruding from over the man's other shoulder. This sword's onyx grip was carved in minute detail, and even from this distance Cloud could see that it bore motifs of seraphs being slaughtered by demon kin. What gave him real chills were the glowing orbs of materia embedded in the hilt. He could see four different materia on the visible side of the grip, the first three, a green, a red, and a yellow, pulsing with such power that they could only be master materia. The last visible materia struck true terror in his heart however, for though its aura of power was weak and barely noticeable, its color was distinct. So dark was it that it was almost impossible to separate from the rest of the sword's grip. The last materia was the deepest black of midnight.

"I'm asking for the last time. Who are you?" Cloud's voice was low, but even. Despite his sudden fear he would not back down from this stranger. He could feel Cid take up a position beside him, the Venus Gospel at the ready, and took some comfort in that.

The man turned those penetrating green orbs upon Cloud, ignoring Cid as if he were a mere insect. Cloud could feel his knees tremor slightly as the man's sibilant voice cut across the plateau. "My name is Seth, if you really must know. And I'm afraid I'll be taking care of the sword from this point forward."

Cloud swallowed hard, his mouth gone dry. How much that voice sounded like Sephiroth! If this were a clone then Hojo had outdone himself. Mustering his courage he spoke up once more. "As I said, I cannot allow that."

"Yeah, this spiky headed punk has done gone and dragged me out in this snowy hell for that damn sword and I'll be damned if I came along for nothing," Cid spat boldly. Cloud noticed the tremor in his companion's voice and felt his insides churn at the realization that Cid was just as unnerved as he was.

The stranger, still ignoring Cid, smiled maliciously. "Them I suppose you'll just have to come take it from me."

In an instant the Masamune was free of its scabbard and the stranger was in their faces with a flurry of magnificent sword work. Cid, caught by surprise, took a vicious hit and stumbled to the side. Cloud immediately jumped in front of his companion to ward off the ensuing flurry of blows from the stranger. He took several minor hits but managed to block all the major blows. It took every ounce of skill he had to do so however, and he couldn't come close to getting in a counterstrike.

Suddenly, Seth stepped back, at the ready and smiling all the while. Cloud quickly cast a curative spell on Cid and helped him to his feet. Cid wasted no time in enacting a regeneration enchantment. Then Seth was upon them again, the Masamune trailing a shadowy wake behind it, making it hard to perceive exactly where the deadly blade was. Cloud parried well, while Cid sidestepped to get into a position better suited to his longer weapon. Cloud almost froze in fear as the Masamune came forward in a lightning fast maneuver, slipping cleanly through his defenses. He took a wicked hit from it but sighed in relief as the majority of the blow was absorbed by a Big Guard barrier Cid had just managed to throw up.

Seth only laughed and stepped back into a ready position again. Suddenly he too began to glow with the red magic of a regenerative spell. The air before him likewise rippled briefly with some sort of protective magic. Cid made a wild dash forward and plunged his pole arm towards the stranger's heart. Seth was amazing quick though and deftly dodged the attack at the last instant, never once relinquishing his sardonic smile.

Cid jumped back cursing. "Son of a bitch is good. And fast as an oil fire."

Cloud nodded grimly, realizing they may be in trouble here. Thinking Seth temporarily distracted, he went into a mad rush of his own, delivering a flurry of well timed blows, his massive sword moving faster than it would seem possible. Seth picked off most of the blows cleanly, and the few that made it through were deflected by his barrier, dealing only minor damage. With his superior skill Seth was quick to deliver a counter attack, but his blow was dampened by Cloud's barrier and deflected harmlessly off of a materia-laden bangle.

Seth returned to guard and concentrated briefly. The Masamune began to glow with a faint green light, and suddenly he was upon them again. He moved so fast that it was impossible to follow his slashes. The first two blows caught Cid cleanly, the de-barrier magic now active in the Masamune shearing through his barrier like it was paper. Cid screamed in agony and dropped to the ground, two deep sword slashes across his chest.

The distraction of seeing his comrade downed cost Cloud dearly. Seth's next two blows were as fast as the first two and just as magically enhanced. Cloud felt the burn of cold steel sliding through his gut and chest, and he fell back clutching his wounds. Seth meanwhile returned to his guard position laughing wildly.

Cloud was in trouble, and he knew it. His lifeblood was seeping away and he felt so very weak. He could feel the regenerative magic of Cid's enchantment at work, but he knew it would fade soon and that he didn't have time to wait for it to heal him anyway. With despair came grim resignation, and more than that, rage.

Cloud stumbled to his feet, a growl of primal hate ripping from his bloodied lungs. With a call to whatever god's would hear him, he lunged at Seth. Faster than a striking cobra he was upon the wretched man. His weapon, glowing with a life of its own, slashed wildly in powerful, cleaving arcs, each blowing through Seth's meager defenses. Not even the stranger's amazing speed and still active barrier could save him from the full brunt of the awesome Omnislash attack.

Staggering with fatigue Cloud fell back. Cid was still down, but he was trying to struggle to his feet. Seth kneeled not far away clutching at his wounds and no longer smiling or laughing.

"Cid, use a mega-elixir. Quickly, before it's too late." Cloud could barely gasp the words through bloody lips. Cid shook his head trying to clear it and groped for the vial he needed. Seeing that Cid was coming around, Cloud turned his attention back to Seth. He didn't like what he saw.

Seth was standing again, his feature twisted with rage and the Masamune flickering with a hellish chaotic glow. The air around him shimmered with power and Cloud came to the horrific realization that the stranger was about to unleash his own limit break in response to Cloud's last attack. For the life of him, Cloud simply couldn't grasp how any mortal could survive the might of an Omnislash attack, no matter its dampened power. He could comprehend that unless Cid used that mega-elixir soon they'd likely not survive Seth's no doubt powerful break technique.

Fear clutching at his heart, Cloud tried to brace himself for the attack to come. Suddenly there was a sweet and refreshing taste in his mouth, and indeed he did feel quite refreshed. A soothing coolness quickly spread through his body and his wounds ceased to ache. Cloud realized that Cid must have finally quaffed the mega-elixir, and that they had a bit of hope left after all. With his strength returned, Cloud settled into a better guard position and tried to think of the best way to attack. Thinking to strike before Seth could manifest the full power of his limit break, Cloud took a step forward, but he had hesitated a moment too long.

Seth's gaze slammed over Cloud like an ocean's worth of water, holding him in place. The weight of power was palpable as Seth flicked aside his midnight locks and drew forth his other katana. With a primal scream of hatred and rage Seth plunged both katanas into the ground before him. Black lightning arced between them, complimented by sparks of various colors, the powers of the materias combined.

Cloud found himself suddenly reeling as all sound drained away and the landscape faded to shades of gray. The silence was unbearable and totally unreal feeling. It was by no means a peaceful silence, but instead the stealthy approach of a stalking predator. Then he realized he could hear one thing, the frantic beating of his own heart. Its noise quickly became deafening in its intensity. He glanced over briefly to see Cid reeling in a similar state of agony. Then, just as suddenly, the intensity decreased leaving him with the haunting echoes of Seth's voice.

How dare you defy me fool boy? Can't you see this is my right! You will one day bow to me as God!

Cloud turned his gaze back to Seth, who was now standing calmly with both swords in hand, bathed in the pearly gray radiance of the northern sun. Though he seemed at ease, Cloud could feel an explosive power building within the man. He managed to gasp defiantly, "You are no god!"

Seth only smiled evilly. *No, perhaps not,.....but I will be.* Deep malicious laughter echoed through Cloud's mind. *And I'd like to see you try and stop me, puppet!*

Once more Seth let loose a primal scream, but this one fell as silent as death in the still gray light of dawn. He drew his blades together in a cross and quickly slashed them back apart, sending a shockwave of energy in Cloud's direction. *Feel my power human! Fugue Disjunction!*

Cloud felt the wave of energy wash over him, blowing apart all the enchantments currently in effect on him. The ribbon tied around his arm pulsed with power for only a moment before crumbling into dust. His mind instantly scrambled, sending contradicting signals to his body. He felt his sword drop from fingers no longer coordinated enough to hold it. He felt his knees go weak as he collapsed, convulsing, to the ground. It felt like his body was tearing itself apart and he was powerless to stop it. He realized he was even bleeding from his every pore. Looming above it all was the specter of Seth, now in full charge and bearing down on the two downed companions, swords blazing with a hellish silvery glow.

What happened next was beyond Cloud. Later he would remember nothing of what happened in that split second before he expected to die, and Cid's mind was too scrambled for him to have born witness either. Whatever happened was Cloud's salvation, and his damnation.

When the trailing edge of Seth's energy wave rolled past, Cloud's mind snapped instantly back into focus. To his surprise he found that his body had reacted even quicker. Somehow, amazingly, his sword was in hand and its crystal blade was held vertically in front of him at the perfect angle to intercept Seth's attack. And intercept it he did, for the blade of the Masamune slammed home against the Ultima Weapon, driving at least two inches into the crystalline edge.

A jolt of power shot through Cloud and he caught a glimpse of Seth being thrown backwards from the force of the blast. A good four-inch chunk of crystal was vaporized by the concussion and the Masamune fell free of Cloud's sword. Instinctively Cloud reached out and caught it by the hilt before it touched down.

All was suddenly dark, and Cloud could neither see nor feel his body. He had the strange impression of being removed to another dimension. In the background he could hear what sounded like children singing sadly. Like mercury the song oozed around his consciousness, bringing with it images of horror and despair.

*Why am I here, all alone,
I don't know anymore,
Do you care, about me,
Like you did so long ago,
Why am I here, all alone,
I don't care anymore,
Troubled thoughts, and troubled dreams,
Unlock these ancient doors.*

*When I look, into the sky,
I see your troubled eyes,
And when I look, into your eyes,*

*I see the darkened sky,
Battlements, of dripping bones,
And sin which hangs unshed,
Only now, can your eyes see,
These lies of mortal men.*

*Cherubs dancing, sing their songs,
On harps of broken threads,
Skipping gaily, past the blood,
And fonts of rolling heads,
And when the angels, come for you,
With dripping bloodied fangs,
Can your soul, bear these dark days,
Or be now torn away.*

With a start, Cloud snapped his eyes open. He was kneeling on the plateau with the Masamune in one hand and the broken remains of the Ultima Weapon in the other. All was white and gray, with a tinge of golden sunlight, but he could tell that he was no longer in the gray realm Seth had created. Seth stood before him with his other katana in hand.

"You see Cloud, the sword is indeed evil, though it wasn't always so." Seth's voice slid liquid and silky into Cloud's ears. "No, that evil is a legacy of its last wielder, a legacy I mean to claim."

Cloud dropped the shattered remains of his sword and gripped the Masamune in both hands. He could feel the malice radiating from the weapon and he could also hear the ghostly singsong echoes of the horrors it had shown him. He glanced quickly to his left, where he last remembered seeing Cid, and froze. The site that greeted him nearly made him swoon.

Cid was in about the same place as before but he was down again, and this time Cloud wasn't sure he'd ever be getting up. Cid lay in a spreading pool of crimson, his chest sliced through nearly to his backbone. Blood continued to bubble up from his horrific wound as failing lungs tried to pull in oxygen. The last glimmers of his regeneration spell, drained by Seth's limit break, flickered faintly around him, but Cloud knew it wouldn't be enough to save the brave pilot. Perhaps if he could get to him with an elixir he could help, but with the threat of Seth looming over them he doubted that was an option either.

Cloud slowly turned his head back towards Seth, his gaze passing over the Venus Gospel lying at Cid's side, its haft sheared in two at about chest height. As his gaze settled on Seth he thought to attack and end it all in a blaze of glory. He knew he'd need something spectacular to take Seth down, something like another Omnislash, but he also knew that he could not make that happen. Such a maneuver demanded the pain and rage of the user to fuel its power, and though he was immersed in pain Cloud felt only tired and empty.

Seth dropped the point of his sword to the ground and leaned on it heavily like he would a cane. For the first time Cloud noticed that Seth wasn't in the best shape either. The dark stranger was battered and bruised, but he still had an aura of strength Cloud couldn't hope to match.

"I grow tired of this Cloud. I do not wish to fight you now. Give me the sword and I will leave you be. You can walk away from this with your life, and possibly that of your friend's." Seth's intense green eyes bored holes into Cloud's soul.

Cloud rose to a standing position, the Masamune before him in his customary guard position. He felt himself falling into Seth's gaze, but he refused to allow himself to become ensnared by the man's lies. He forced himself to look deeper, seeking the half-truths and charms this man employed. What he found instead, was sincerity. Suddenly, Cloud was forced to realize that if he handed over the sword Seth would indeed keep his word and let him live. He realized that it might be within his power to save Cid after all. But he was also forced to wonder, at what cost?

Seth smirked, seeing the turmoil written plainly across Cloud's face. "Go ahead then, Cloud. Take up that sword and plunge it through my heart. Surrender to its evil wishes and give it the hold on your soul it desires. The choice is before you, Strife. You can give me the sword, and you and your friend may yet live through this. Or you can kill me with that sword, let your friend die, and surrender forever to the darkness and uncertainty you've carried with you for your entire life."

Cloud shuddered, realizing the truth in Seth's words. There was indeed a darkness and uncertainty inside him, one he'd carried all his life. Seth could see it as plainly as if he'd lived his life right along side

Cloud. With that realization came fear and despair unlike anything the scared young man had ever known. He suddenly came to realize that he was beaten. He simply could not win against this man, not now. He hadn't the courage or the strength to fight anymore. No matter what choice he made, he was done for. But one choice offered him eternal damnation, while the other offered the faintest glimmer of future redemption. Seth knew, and he knew it too. There really was no choice to make.

"Another time, Seth."

The Masamune clanged loudly on the rocky ground and skidded to a stop at Seth's feet. He stooped down and gingerly picked up the evil artifact. Straightening, he slid both blades home in their respective sheaths.

"You really are weak Cloud. You could've been strong, tried to end it like a hero, but you chose the practical course." Seth smirked maliciously.

Cloud winced and turned away, headed for Cid.

"You are so worried about your own soul, that you are afraid to sacrifice yourself for the things you believe in, and the ones you love." Seth's voice was razor sharp but compassionate and no longer mocking. "That's why you couldn't save her, you know."

Cloud stopped dead in his tracks, despair and grief overwhelming him. *Aeris!*

"Ah, poor pitiful puppet. Now I can see why it was so easy for my father to pull your strings." At the sound of these words, Cloud's head slowly began to rise, both horror and realization mounting in his eyes. "Even now, with those ties severed, you still dance willingly to our tune."

With one last chuckle, Seth spun on his heel, midnight cloak and midnight hair flowing wildly, and leapt from the plateau.

Cloud was left feeling cold and afraid, and very, very alone.

Angel Fallen

A Final Fantasy VII Side Story

By GideonD

Volume I

Chapter II: Duty & Honor, A Betrayal of Trust

The last embers of the dying fire hissed in protest as a sneaker clad foot kicked a light dusting of snow over it, dousing the hot coals for good. With a disgusted sigh, the person who had delivered the kick stepped back to look once again at her surroundings.

It was early in the day, the first rays of the sun just now starting to crest the horizon. It had been a bitter cold night and a thin blanket of snow had fallen, covering the barren and rocky ground. Off to the east, daybreak provided a silvery backdrop for the craggy ring of cliffs encircling the large bowl shaped depression in which the woman and her companions stood. Faint columns of smoke could barely be seen in the distance, marking the location of Kalm. The west remained blanketed in darkness, and to the south the dark outline of mountains could be seen, their peaks glimmering in the morning sunlight. To the north, the towering wreckage of huge buildings and other unidentifiable structures rose towards the sky, a myriad of multi-colored lights winking on and off throughout the chaotic jumble. That wreckage was all that remained of the once mighty metropolis called Midgar.

With a sigh, the woman turned her attention back to her immediate surroundings and the task at hand.

"Any thoughts on what may have happened, Miss Kisaragi?" The words were spoken by a large unshaven man with deep brown eyes and a tangled growth of chestnut brown hair just starting to go gray at the temples. He fidgeted with the collar of his homespun woolen tunic as he respectfully awaited an answer.

Yuffie took a deep breath and looked around the campsite once again.

There was little to see, and few clues to what may have transpired here the previous night. The only features of the camp were the blackened firepit and a woolen bedroll to the side of it. That bedroll contained the frozen body of an unknown traveler who had been discovered here very early this morning.

Yuffie stroked her chin in contemplation and brushed a few stray strands of her shaggy brown hair out of her eyes. She pulled her new cloak tighter about her and shivered in the chill morning breeze blowing in from the ocean to the west. She couldn't help but stop and think about her home in Wutai. It was always a lot warmer there than it was here, due in large part to the proximity of the fire caves located in the Da-Chao mountains just north of the village. She was use to wearing shorts and a tank top year round, and this bitter cold was starting to wear on her nerves. The fur lined cloak and her newly purchased woolen trousers and heavy sweater were barely enough to make this unfamiliar weather tolerable.

"Ma'am?" Concern was apparent in the man's voice.

Yuffie turned her thoughts away from memories of better days and focused her attention on the man addressing her. "Well Sergeant Elno, I'm really not quite sure what to say."

Sergeant Elno was the leader of a small guard patrol that had stumbled across the body of this unfortunate traveler frozen to death in his bedroll very early this morning. Not knowing what to make of the situation they'd sent word back to their headquarters in the refugee town of Midgar requesting that someone be sent to investigate the rather suspicious occurrence. Yuffie had been staying in the town trying to help the refugees as best she could. Upon hearing about the incident in question, she'd jumped on the chance to do something other than care for those wounded when Meteor had torn Midgar almost entirely apart. The role she'd played in saving the world from Sephiroth and his sinister plans had earned her the title of hero and guaranteed her a good deal of respect from the citizens left in the shanty town. As a result, when she'd asked the Captain of the newly formed City Guard to be assigned as an investigator of the incident her request had met with immediate approval.

Now, Yuffie found herself regretting her impulsive decision to come out here and solve this mysterious case. To be honest, she had to admit to herself that she was at a loss of how to explain the odd scene.

"It's rather odd that someone would decide to camp out here with so few provisions on a night like last, especially when Midgar is only another hours walk away." Yuffie was thinking out loud, trying to sort through her jumbled thoughts.

Sergeant Elno nodded his agreement. "Yeah, only someone who was either unfamiliar with this area or who was trying to avoid Midgar would try something like that. Judging from the man's dress I'd say he probably hails from Kalm, so he should be very familiar with the area. Also he doesn't seem to be carrying anything illegal on him and so far as I know he's not a wanted man, so I can't really see why he'd be trying to avoid Midgar either. It just doesn't make much sense."

Yuffie scrunched up her face in confusion. "Is a lone traveler between Kalm and Midgar an unusual occurrence? Especially during the night like this?"

Sergeant Elno stopped to scratch at his coarsely bearded chin. "Not really. We've been doing a lot of scavenging in the ruins lately and some of the things we've found are in high demand. This fella here was carrying a decent chunk of gil on him so I'd wager he was coming to town to snag himself one of those types of items before they're all gone. The people of Kalm are an industrious lot and work hard to make a living. That means they don't stop work till late in the day for the most part. It's not unthinkable that this here fella just got a late start on his trip. Given the time the shops usually close in Kalm, he still should've been able to make it to Midgar no more than an hour past sunset. That would also explain why he was traveling light. He probably had no intention of camping out here."

Once again, Yuffie frowned in consideration. "Then why DID he camp out here? And furthermore, if he was headed to Midgar straight from Kalm, why did he set up camp to the south of the city?"

With a resigned shrug the Sergeant hesitantly replied. "Good questions, both. Ones we don't seem to have answers for."

Yuffie reached over her shoulder to adjust the strap holding the Conformer to her back and also tightened the straps securing a long shield-like piece of armor to her left arm. With that done, she glanced back towards the body wrapped in the heavy blankets. "So what about the body? Anything unusual there?"

The Sergeant was nodding before Yuffie had even finished her questions. "Yeah, there is something odd about it, which is why I sent for someone to investigate this more thoroughly."

Elno walked over and crouched down beside the pile of woolen blankets before continuing. "It's the oddest damn thing. There's not a mark on his body and he's frozen solid as a brick. He had to have frozen to death, but that explanation just doesn't make sense either. We found him in a pile of blankets and not two feet from the embers of his fire. Those embers still had plenty of heat left to them as you could see for yourself, and these blankets would help him retain that heat. Despite the unpleasant cold weather he should have been able to survive the night with only a mild bit of discomfort." The sergeant shook his head in bewilderment. "Even on the off chance he had a heart attack and dropped over dead, his body wouldn't have had time to freeze to the core like this, especially not under these conditions."

"So you're saying this is unnatural to say the least," Yuffie queried.

"Yeah, without a doubt," Sergeant Elno replied. "I'd be tempted to say someone hit him with a blast from an ice materia, but even though that would explain the state his body is in, I can't see how that would be the case. There is absolutely no sign of a struggle, which means if someone did ice him then they'd have had to do it while he was asleep in his bedroll. If that were the case you'd see a lot of frost around here and all over the body as well. But there is nothing of the sort. If magic was used it seems more like someone drew the heat out of his body instead of blasting him with ice."

Yuffie frowned in concentration. "I've never heard of a materia that can do that"

"Yeah me neither," Sergeant Elno said as he rose to his feet.

"So you think there was someone else here with him then? Someone who did this to him?"

Yuffie gazed thoughtfully at the ground. "Any tracks to support that theory?"

The sergeant was already shaking his head. "No tracks at all. The ground is too hard. It's mostly rock around here. The only tracks would be in the snow, which didn't fall until just before dawn. Whoever did this, and I'm convinced someone else was here, would likely have been long gone by that time."

"So we really have no way of knowing what happened here do we, Sergeant?" Frustration was evident in Yuffie's voice.

"I'm afraid not. We just don't have enough clues to go on." The Sergeant shrugged apologetically. "When we received word they were sending a veteran adventurer like you to investigate we sort of hoped you might have a better idea of what was going on here, or at least have a few tricks with you to find out."

Yuffie smiled wanly. "Sorry I couldn't be of more help to you, Sergeant. Some things are beyond even us veteran adventurers."

Elno gave a hearty laugh. "Well you can't expect everything in life to be easy!"

Yuffie returned the good-natured laugh with a chuckle of her own. "Well, Sergeant, if it wouldn't be too much trouble you might want to send a messenger to Kalm to see if anyone odd has shown up there this morning. I'll ask around in Midgar as well when I return there, though it's a pretty big place and anyone wanting to sneak in should be able to pull it off pretty easily. Its about all I can think to do though."

Elno was already nodding his approval of the plan. "I'll send one of my men right away Miss Kisaragi. With any luck maybe we'll catch the culprit after all." With a salute he turned and walked away.

Yuffie was left standing alone by the firepit, feeling ill at ease and not a little dejected. Her adventures with Cloud and company had forced her to do a bit of growing up. Now more of a young woman than a flighty little girl, Yuffie found she truly appreciated the respect afforded to her as a hero of the recent conflicts. She also found that she was uncomfortable with the thought of living on that reputation for the rest of her life. She wanted desperately to further her reputation and make a real name for herself in the world. That was one of the reasons she'd wanted to solve this little mystery so badly. She had viewed the task as a starting point on her quest for fame and world renown. Now, with her inability to solve the case apparent, she felt far from her normally cheerful self.

With an irate huff, she turned her attention to the ruins of Midgar. It was a long shot, but the idea she had presented to Sergeant Elno did hold some merit. Perhaps with a little luck she could solve this case after all. She'd certainly feel a lot better about herself if she could pull it off.

Once again pulling her cloak tight about her, Yuffie set off towards the distant lights of Midgar. No one was near enough to hear her last mumbled words as she trudged across the lightening landscape. "GAWD! I just wish I had a good Luck Plus materia. I think I'm gonna need it."

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The wind howled bitter and mournful, creeping between the chinks in the logs that made up the walls of Icicle Inn's only true inn. Cloud sat brooding over a cup of hot tea in the establishment's café. It had been three days since his encounter with Seth and the man's parting words still haunted Cloud's dreams and more often than not his waking moments as well.

"The son of Sephiroth..." he mumbled under his breath. Was such a thing even possible? When did Sephiroth ever have time to sire a child, much less one of Seth's apparent age. Thoughts of Vincent flitted briefly through his mind and Cloud was forced to admit that with the immoral technology Hojo had developed such things weren't entirely outside the realm of possibility.

Just then a creak sounded from the steps leading up to the inn's second floor, where guests spent the night hours. Cloud's head snapped up and his eyes focused on the figure making it's way slowly down the steps, his grim thoughts forgotten for the moment. He let out a sigh of disappointment as he took in the kindly features of a middle-aged woman in a homespun dress of brown wool. She returned the sigh with a brief smile of sympathy.

"No change?" Cloud asked, though he already knew the answer.

"He's stable so far as I can tell, but no real changes in his condition I'm afraid. Certainly none that would have him trouncing down the stairs to see you," the woman replied. She took a seat across the table from Cloud and patted the hand he was clasping his mug with reassuringly. "I'm sure we'll think of something dear."

Cloud gave a bitter little laugh as he reflected grimly on the desperate situation at hand.

Once Seth had departed the scene of their battle Cloud had quickly pulled himself from the brink of despair and rushed to give Cid what aide he could. He'd grabbed the Restore materia from Cid's armband and showered him with as many curative spells as he'd had the energy to cast. He'd then poured as many restorative items as he could find into the man. It would take a week of Tonberry hunting to replenish all the elixirs he'd used. Cid had still remained only partially healed however. Something about that accursed sword that had stuck him seemed to cause the wound to rebuke a good portion of the healing magic directed toward it.

His efforts hadn't been totally in vain however. The small amount of healing energy that did make it through was enough to bring Cid away from Death's Door and set him tentatively back in the world of the living. Thus Cloud had treated the remaining wounds the old fashioned way and spent the remainder of the day and most of the next slowly carrying Cid out of the crater and down to Mr. Holzoff's cabin. Mr.

Holzoff had done what little he could to help, mainly by providing a wagon for Cloud to transport Cid back to Icicle Inn. He'd arrived there just the previous night, near sunset. After a night spent in fitful slumber while the local midwife treated Cid's wounds as best she could, Cloud had spent the majority of the day sending restorative magics into Cid as well as himself to try and heal what damage was left.

Cloud now felt fine physically, if a bit fatigued. Cid was still in bad shape though. Restorative magic didn't seem to be doing anything for him anymore. With another bitter sigh, Cloud looked up at the midwife who'd spent the night caring for Cid as though the pilot were her own son. "So can you tell me anything about his condition that might be useful?"

She shook her head sadly. "It's like nothing I've seen before. I'm sure you've noticed that restorative spells don't seem to be doing any good for him and conventional medicine just isn't nearly advanced enough to do him much good. I'm at a loss Cloud. There simply isn't anything else I can do for him."

Cloud hung his head in defeat, having expected just such an answer. "So now what am I to do? Do you know of any place I can take him where someone may be able to help him?"

A serving girl placed a fresh mug of warm tea in front of the woman as she leaned away from Cloud for a moment to consider the situation. A frown of concentration creased her features. "Well, I've heard that the majority of the world's leading scientists, those who survived the destruction reeked by Meteor at least, have been gathering in what's left of Midgar over the past few weeks. Seeing as magic and conventional healing are both failing you in this situation, these scientists may offer the only other option available to you."

Cloud frowned, not liking where this was going at all. "And how do you think these scientists could help me?"

"Well, they use to work for Shinra of course, as the majority of those who specialized in cutting edge technology did, and most people have heard stories of the amazing if somewhat immoral technology Shinra has developed over the past few years. If the stories I've heard are true, you journeyed with an individual who was restored to life by these same technologies, a former Turk if memory serves. Other stories say that you yourself were likewise brought back from the brink of death with similar technologies."

Cloud's fingers tightened reflexively around his mug, causing it to clatter against the table as his fist trembled. Unpleasant memories warred with concern for his companion in his narrowed eyes.

The woman paused to take a sip of her tea before hesitantly continuing. "Look, I know you aren't fond of Shinra, and I know you distrust the strange technology they employ, but they aren't all monsters like Hojo was you know."

The woman felt her breath catch suddenly in her throat as Cloud turned eyes blazing with mako energy toward her.

"Yes they are," he growled passionately. "They're all monsters, every last one of them. What they did to me was wrong. What they did to Zack was wrong. Vincent, Nanaki, even Aeris were all exploited by Shinra dogs that sought nothing more than to line their pockets with gil stolen from innocent people who didn't know any better than to trust them. We've all been used and discarded by them, time and time again. Every last one of them is a monster in need of slaying!"

Cloud turned his eyes back to his mug, which still trembled violently in his fisted hand. It took another moment for the midwife to regain her composure and continue. "Aeris's father wasn't like that you know."

The trembling in Cloud's arms suddenly stilled and the tension drained off of him like water. His shoulders slumped in a melancholy sadness. "Professor Gast you mean? He lived here for a while didn't he?"

The woman relaxed visibly as Cloud calmed down. "Yes, yes he did. He was only here for a few years before the Shinra came and took his beautiful wife and sweet little girl away from him."

"What...what was he like?" Uncertainty was clear in Cloud's voice as he considered the possibility that even Shinra might be home to at least a few good souls.

The woman smiled wanly. "He was a good man, pleasant to be around and considerate of his neighbors. He was definitely a scientific minded sort. That much was apparent in anything he did. He wasn't cold and cruel in his profession though as so many others are. His primary research was focused toward the Cetra, the people Aeris and her mother descended from. He never sought to exploit his wife or child though. All of his studies were done with Ifalno's permission and cooperation. He was a kind and loving husband. He was a caring father."

"I'm glad to hear that Aeris had such a loving family, even if she never had the chance to really get to know them." Cloud smiled a little sadly as he continued. "But what makes you think these Shinra scientists are the same as Gast was?"

The woman sat back to gather her thoughts for a moment. "Well a few travelers have been through here recently and most of my information has been gathered from their gossip so bear in mind that there is always the possibility that none of this is true."

Cloud nodding his understanding and motioned for her to continue.

"Well, from what I understand these scientists are gathering to try and salvage as much of the technology and equipment left in Midgar as they can. Evidently not all of those scientists agree on what that technology should be used for. They seem to be divided into two separate groups concerning the matter. There are those that follow the old Shinra ways and thus the ways of Professor Hojo. They are known as the Hojo Faction. Then there are those that believe the technology recovered should be put to use for the betterment of all people. These scientists belong to what has been tentatively dubbed the Gast School of Thought. If anyone can be of help to you it would be the Gast School of Thought. Furthermore they'd probably be the only ones that would want to help you." The woman leaned forward to hover over her mug of tea like a worried mother. "I can't really tell you much more about the situation in Midgar, not having been there since the world was turned on its head. I'm afraid my only suggestion is to seek out those who belong to the Gast School of Thought and ask for their assistance. I'm sure if they truly do follow the ways of Professor Gast that they would do anything in their power to help you."

Cloud drained his mug in one last gulp and heaved a profound sigh. "Okay, let's assume that these scientists are my best bet and let's assume that I'm willing to give this plan a shot. How am I supposed to transport Cid there? It was pure hell getting him out of the glacier in that wagon. I don't want to subject him to that sort of travel again. I don't know if he could handle it in his current condition."

The midwife was nodding her agreement before Cloud finished his line of thought. "I'd considered that. Land travel is obviously out considering you have to cross the sea to get to Midgar. Air travel is virtually non-existent now. Most of the flight machinery available was military stuff and went down with Midgar. There may be a transport plane left in Junon, but you'd waste precious time getting there and back, especially if you find there are no aircraft left there. And there is no way that you can transport him in that condition via Chocobo. That leaves only one option, by water."

"A ship you mean?"

"Yes a ship," the woman agreed. "It wouldn't take too long if the ship is a fairly fast one and barring bad weather it should be one of the smoothest rides you could hope for."

Cloud was nodding his agreement with the reasoning as she finished. "So you have such a ship here?"

A sheepish grimace crossed the midwife's face. "Ah, no we don't. This town is landlocked and there isn't a port anywhere on the continent."

The other patrons of the café glanced up in surprise at the loud crack Cloud's skull made as it smacked into the top of the table. Cloud raised his head to reveal a dumbfounded and hopeless expression. "Then why even suggest such a course!"

"Don't get ahead of me!" The woman shook her head impatiently. "We may not have a ship but that doesn't mean no one around here does. There is a weapons trader in town right now. He came from somewhere in the south with a big shipment of weapons and armor to trade with our local shop. He'd have to have something to transport all that heavy material in and I'd wager the most efficient means would be via a ship."

"So what's that got to do with me?"

This time it was the woman's head striking the table that caused the startled glances. "He's headed back to wherever he came from tomorrow. Go talk to him and see if you can get a ride, numbskull!"

Now it was Cloud's turn to be sheepish. "Of course, that makes perfect sense. I don't know why it didn't strike me right off."

The woman just shook her head again as she got to her feet and headed for the stairs. "I'm going to check on your friend. You go find that weaponsmith and see what he can do for you. He can usually be found at the weapon shop when he isn't here."

"Thank you," Cloud called after her as she made her way up the steps.

He hurriedly got to his feet and headed for the door. All the confusion and despair of the last couple of days seemed to be evaporating from him now that he had a set course in mind. Thoughts of Seth still nagged at him, but he determinedly pushed those thoughts aside. Those issues would have to wait until

after he'd taken care of the more immediate problem of Cid's wellbeing. With a determined tug, he adjusted the position of the Ragnarok's sheath on his back and trudged out into the cold.

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