

The Ninth Silence
A twisted FFVII fic by Princess Artemis

© S.D.Green, 2000. Square stuff © Square.

See no evil...Hear no evil...Speak no evil...

Seven days before Meteo hits...

Cid paused at the outskirts of Rocket Town. It had been about two or three weeks since he had been there last. Then it had been to recover the Huge Materia...with the added "side effect" of allowing him to fulfill his dream to touch the stars above the sky. Now it was to find his reason to fight, so to speak. Cloud was right; it was a bunch of &^%\$*&@# to say one was fighting for the Planet when one didn't give a damn about the Planet. Cid had never really harbored any delusions that he was out to save the ground he walked on; he started out because he was both bored and because that pretty-boy Rufus' got his hopes up only to dash them again. Later it had been out of a sense of adventure...he had never really left Rocket Town since its founding. Perhaps some loyalty to the earth below him had trickled in, after seeing the Planet so very small in space...perhaps just a duty as part of the Planet and the Lifestream to preserve it for a little while longer.

And now? For Shera. He fought for Shera, pure and simple, from the very beginning. He had only realized it just now... standing here, about to go to his house again, where she was...and feeling a sudden jittery pleasure at the idea. He took a drag off his ever-present cigarette just to calm his nerves. All the way here he had been thinking about everything he knew without Shera, finding it a dull and empty vision.

He smiled to himself for a moment as he began the short walk to his house. He'd have to think about it for a while to pin down just exactly when he had fallen for her.

Just not right now. There was still a whole hell of a lot of air to clear, and not long to do it in. Seven days...not even that. Maybe three, four on the outside. The North Crater still lay ahead of them; who knew how long it would take to get to Sephiroth? Had to be done inside seven days, and that was that. He had, therefore, resolved to be as straightforward as he could...he just didn't have time to beat around the bush. He hoped she would, with time, forgive him...

~*~

Shera pushed aside a curtain, looking at the familiar figure walking toward the house. Her stomach suddenly twisted, accompanied by a hot rush of nervousness. What she was about to do...there would be no turning back, no time for regrets. She blinked hard several times, unable to shake the jumbled sensation in her gut. How odd that she would find it somehow pleasant...

She let go of the curtain and went to the kitchen. The time had come; the time to do what she had wanted to do for so long...but what had only recently become a possibility. Her hands began shaking hard as she prepared the tea.

~*~

As soon as he came to his door, Cid opened it as slowly and as silently as he could. It didn't seem right to fling open the door as was his wont. He peeked in, hoping for a glance of Shera before he came in all the way. He did see her, standing in front of the stove, preparing a pot of tea. With a faint grin, Cid walked in and went to the kitchen. When he arrived at Shera's side, she jumped, startled, and nearly dropped the container of tea leaves she was holding. Cid took the container out of her shaking hands and said, almost shyly, "Let me fix it for you."

Shera blinked, motioned to snatch back the leaves, but then thought better of it. She smiled nervously and stammered, "Oh, yes, uh, sure...th-thank you...." She quickly moved aside, allowing Cid to prepare the tea. After a moment, Cid waved her over to the table; the way she was staring was making him nervous. She went quickly.

Cid went about his task with a single-mindedness that was unusual in its intensity. Making tea seemed to afford him a few extra minutes to stall, for it was much harder in practice to be forthright, thought Cid, then it was in planning. He took

some of the leaves from the package and put them in a tea ball, then put the ball into the pot. The leaves had a sweet and sour sort of aroma. A few silent minutes later, the tea was finished and he carried it and two cups to the table.

He set the pot down and served a cup for Shera and one for himself. She took it in a white-knuckled grip. Cid frowned as he sat down. "Are you OK, Shera? Yer shakin' like a damn leaf."

Startled again for some reason, Shera looked frantically around the room, then down at her cup. Finally she muttered, with a strange flash in her eyes, "Nothing, uh, nothing a cup of tea won't cure." They both put their cups to their lips at the same time. Cid took a long drink; it had been bloody long enough since he had had a good cup of tea. And it was good, although there was a bite to it the first second or so.

"Are ya sure?" Cid asked as he set his cup down.

Shera stared at his cup, holding hers up in her hands, as if to hide her face. And still her hands were quaking. "Um, yes, yes, I'm fine."

Cid took another gulp of tea, unsure as to whether he should believe her or not; he hadn't seen her so shook up since the time he had stopped the Shin-Ra 26 launch. She had seemed calm then, until that night...then she had cried for a long time, shaking so hard...

Cid shrugged, not wanting to ignore her nervousness but not knowing what to do about it since she said she was fine. Then he shook his head, trying to rid it of a sudden swimming. Must be his nerves.

That reminder brought him back to the matter on his heart. He fidgeted for a bit, draining his cup. Then he cleared his throat a few times. Shera was watching him closely, but in his preoccupied state, Cid never noticed. Finally, after wiping his face one more time, he decided to just come out and say it. "Shera, I...I'm...damn...I'm sor—"

Shera didn't let him finish. She moved over to him and put her hand over his mouth. "Don't say it," she said softly.

Cid blinked a few times, his vision deciding to take a swim right along side his head. After a second to shake what he thought was a sudden tiredness, he took Shera's hand from his mouth and held it. "I just...wanted to tell you...," he began, but broke off when his whole body suddenly felt as though it had become lead. His hand released Shera's on its own. Why had Shera not touched her tea? She hadn't drunk any of it? "...just tell...Shera...I ll—I..." Just as he spoke, a sudden flash of panic flew through him. It wasn't tiredness...or nerves... "What?...help...me..." His head fell back as all his strength fled him.

He dimly saw Shera move away for a moment, then return, just as he fell out of his chair onto the floor. Dusk had fallen... followed by a dull pain in his arm, then came twilight. As darkness gave way to blackest midnight, he wondered dimly when the dawn would come.

It never did.

~*~

Cloud waited on the deck of the Highwind, which was tethered near the spot where he had commanded everyone to go seek their own reasons to fight. He had been surprised when Vincent returned, though not at all when Yuffie did the same; her purpose for fighting was wrapped up in the materia the group carried, or so he guessed. Barret, Red XIII, and Cait Sith had also returned, the last with a new partner; Reeve had decided to join them in the battle personally. Tifa had never left, so that made eight fighters.

And it looked like they were going to need Reeve, even if he was poorly trained. Strangely enough, Cid didn't show up. Cloud was surprised; he had thought of all of them, Cid would be the last to beg out at the end. He had, after all, joined them more out of boredom than anything else. But that was water under the bridge. It was time to go meet destiny; there wasn't any more time to wait. Cid had made his decision and Cloud would honor it—Cid had already made one contribution to AVALANCHE without which they could do nothing. They had the Highwind, Cid's baby, and the only way possible to reach the North Crater in the time they had left.

Cloud scratched his head while attempting to decipher the controls on the airship. Then he shrugged and left the piloting to the full-fledged Pilot, whom he had callously never learned his name. Perhaps, Cloud thought, he would rectify that matter later; but now was not the time for courtesies, but for battle, and to battle the pilot took them.

It didn't take long for the Highwind to travel to the North Crater. When the airship reached its berth, the eight fighters disembarked and made their slow, halting way to the very center of the great Crater.

The travel down the steep slopes of the crater was difficult, and the monsters they faced fierce, but they made it intact. Reeve trembled as he fidgeted with his small pistol, his face bloodless. Yuffie bounced from foot to foot, looking around nervously. They were both deep in a foreign element, unused to fighting for their very lives at every step. Cait Sith, though it was Reeve in part, was also its own being, and so bounded about cheerfully, trying to rally the troops. Barret slumped against a wall, sullen, perhaps wishing he had chosen to opt out, and spend his remaining days with his daughter. Vincent was cool, as he was wont, but a bit more so as well. There was a new frost to his red-eyed glare that had not been there previously. Tifa merely stood, hugging her arms to herself; inside she quaked, but as always, she feigned calm, never wanting to seem weak. Red XIII's long tail flicked, and his bared teeth glinted. The silence about them was oppressive.

Cloud stared ahead for a long moment, then down into the depths of the Planet. For a while he was silent. Then he heaved a great sigh and turned back to look at the ragtag team of fighters, the seven people and one robot who stood between the Planet and its horrific fate.

He motioned with his hand, and pointing his Ultimate Weapon forward, he said, "Let's mosey."

Barret rolled his eyes, while Yuffie groaned. But no one broke the silence.

Finally, at the last, they reached Sephiroth, or what seemed to be him; rather it was a bizarre, overwrought green thing that resembled Sephiroth. Atop its head was the image of the evil Jenova, her fair face finally seen by the eyes of AVALANCHE; and she was frightening in her beauty, for her black heart was plainly reflected in it.

They fought, all eight of them, in concert to bring the monster down. And they did, eventually; but to their horror Bizzaro-Sephiroth was replaced by a more powerful foe, one whose form mocked the holy angels.

And again AVALANCHE fought, and again they won. Safer-Sephiroth fell, and Holy began to stir; Cloud and the others all knew they must escape now, or die in the fury of Holy's coming. So they ran, up the winding rocks, as far as they could go, but then the path stopped. For a moment, all hope was lost, until by a welcome turn of fortune, the Highwind plummeted nose first into the crater, coming to a stop near enough to the eight that they could board her.

Before they could even attempt to pilot the Highwind out, Holy burst forth, carrying her high into the sky like a tiny pebble beneath a torrential geyser. And as suddenly as she flew skyward, she began to fall, in a dangerous earthward spiral. The pilot was not skilled enough to turn the Highwind from her suicide plunge through the icy air, however he was able to pull her up enough that when the airship crashed down in the forest near Bone Village, she broke in half, instead of crushing herself nose-first.

That perhaps was the only reason there were any survivors. When the Highwind finally hit the ground, the occupants were tossed about; some flying up then falling to the deck, as Yuffie and Cloud did, while others less fortunate were thrown through the glass cockpit and out into the forest. Tifa was by far the least fortunate, for she had landed in the path of the Highwind, whose momentum was still carrying her far along the ground, crashing through the trees and carving a deep trench in the earth. Her last act alive was to let out a strangled, horrified scream...and then the Highwind took her with a loud slick crunch.

Barret had also been tossed from the deck of the airship, and although his end was not as gruesome as Tifa's, still, it was an end. Red XIII fell back to the deck, but with his feline reflexes, was best able to weather the Highwind's destruction. When the airship finally came to her final resting place, all told, the pilot and the crew had died, as had Tifa, Barret, and Reeve, who was unfortunately a fragile man. Cait Sith died when Reeve did, unable to continue on without his soul. Cloud was relatively uninjured; he had nothing more alarming than some nasty cuts and scrapes. Yuffie had broken both her legs, but was otherwise unhurt, while Vincent, who had in fear for his life transformed into Chaos, was without a scratch.

Yuffie sobbed quietly in the corner of the broken cockpit. "Gawd, it wasn't supposed to happen this way!" She cried, almost forgetting her pain, knowing that several of the people she had grown to care about had met their fate today.

Cloud shook his head; Yuffie was right. Emptiness such as he had never felt before gnawed at him. He gingerly gathered himself and stood, then walked to the huge viewport at the front of the cockpit. He looked down at the ground not far below him, clenching his fists on the rail. He was grateful he couldn't see the long smear of Tifa's blood along the bottom of the Highwind. He knew that is how she died, he had heard the sound of her death, something he was not likely to ever forget. It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

Chaos landed on the slightly tilted floor of the bridge and became Vincent again. He made no sound at all. His eyes were cold, red as blood but almost lifeless. He bowed his head and jumped off the side of the Highwind, floating down slowly to the ground.

Cloud watched as he walked away, aimlessly, empty. The swordsman didn't know why Vincent had left without a word, nor did he really care at this point; he was at the moment consumed in hate for Sephiroth, dead though he was, the thief of all things he loved. Cloud silently added Tifa's blood to Sephiroth's sins. And Barret's blood, Reeve's blood...all charged to the black-caped man, murderer of innocents, destroyer... Cloud clenched his eyes shut. Tifa was gone...

Red XIII padded silently to Cloud's side. The fiery beast nudged the swordsman's leg with the top of his muzzle, then pushed his head against his blue pants, nuzzling him like a cat would. Red XIII felt nothing but empathy for Cloud, for them all.

The flash of Holy meeting Meteo and the Lifestream's heaving swell illuminated the dark bridge of the broken Highwind, marking the final success of AVALANCHE's long journey and the end of its existence.

~*~

No, dawn never came. Cid finally came to, somewhere blacker than night, where the only noise was the rushing of blood in his ears. All he felt was horrific pain everywhere. He tried to find with his fingers the reason for the sharp pain and burning cold in his nose, but when he did, his hand fairly exploded with agony. He inhaled sharply, which only increased the icy sting...

There was no way for him to track down the source of any of his pain, for every attempt invited a new wave of dark hurt upon him. Even the tears his pain evoked stung him.

And it went on into seeming infinity in the silent black world he found himself. Time ceased to hold any meaning in the darkness. Soon thirst joined pain, and hunger after that, and time crawled on from nothing to nothing until he had to find some relief. And though it was hurt to move, he had to...he found a little water, a very little, in a basin of some sort. Too little to dip his hands in, he had to instead try to slurp it up...and that perhaps hurt more than anything else had yet. He cried out, not thirsty enough yet to endure the torture of slaking it.

Ponderous time slipped into the darkness, hours, days, he didn't know, couldn't mark its passing except with growing pain. Not long...or forever after, he couldn't tell, his thirst was bad enough he had no choice but to drink. And he did, sobbing.

There was only enough to take the edge off his thirst. He curled up very small in the blackness, wondering why...

Why...

...why...

~*~

One year later...

Cloud rapped softly on the door, then stepped back with Vincent and looked around while he was waiting for an answer. Cid's house was pretty run down; the stained wood walls were dirty and covered with cobwebs, while the steps up to the

front door were shaky and splintered. Heavy curtains blocked the windows. It had been quite some time since Cloud or Vincent had been here last; in fact, it had been over a year. Cloud occasionally berated himself for not looking in on Cid sooner; every time he called the house, which was admittedly not often, Cid was gone for this, or that...it had become decidedly suspicious. But even then he didn't come for six more months...he had other things on his mind at the time.

For Cloud it had taken him this long to come out of his despair enough to even act on his guilty conscience. Guilty because he hadn't looked in on any of the survivors he had spent so long with and named his friends for over a year, guilty because he had spent so long alone with his dark thoughts. At least with Red XIII and Yuffie he had called and talked to them for a little while. Vincent he had just run into when he had recently been in Nibelheim. Cloud hadn't gone to Nibelheim to look for Vincent at all, but to attempt one last break with his scarred past, to visit all that was left on this Planet of Tifa, or his mother, and say one last goodbye. But Vincent was there, newly returned to the land of the living after a very long sleep under the Shin-Ra mansion. The first thing Vincent did was ask after Cid, and when Cloud had no answer for him, they both agreed to travel together to Rocket Town, since it was not very far away. And that was that.

Finally someone came to the door; Cloud heard the sound of several bolts, chains, and locks being unlatched before the door was opened. The form revealed by the open door was not what Cloud expected. Rather than Shera or Cid, it was a skinny, nervous weasel of a man with stringy brown hair and rumpled clothing. Cloud blinked a few times then asked, "Is Cid here?"

The weasel man shook his head quickly. "He isn't here, no."

Vincent stepped over, asking, "Is Shera here then?"

Another negative. "She doesn't live here any longer."

Cloud scratched his head; he had spoken to her just yesterday morning, at this address. "Do you know where she went?"

"No, I don't. She just left."

"Do you mind if we wait inside for Cid? We've been trying to get a hold of him for a long time."

The man suddenly became nervous, but after a long moment of waffling, a decision was reached and he haltingly opened the door. "I don't know when he'll be back," he warned.

Cloud shrugged a little and walked through the open doorway with Vincent following. It seemed the inside of the house was in as bad a shape as the outside: the furniture was filthy and there was thick dust everywhere. It seemed to Cloud that there was a sense of disuse about the place; not much of the dust in the house was disturbed. The only part of the area that looked at all occupied was the kitchen, where there was a small pot over a fire.

The weasel man walked over to the pot and lifted the lid, stirring the contents with a wooden spoon. He looked back at the two visitors and called, "You can sit down if you want."

"Uh, thanks, I think," Cloud muttered to himself. A glance at Vincent confirmed that the taller man didn't think much differently than Cloud did about the prospect of sitting on the dirty furniture.

"I don't think anyone lives here," Vincent whispered to Cloud. The swordsman nodded, then walked into the kitchen.

He looked over the man's shoulder, causing the resident to twitch uncomfortably. "You don't live here, do you?" Cloud asked.

The nervous man ducked away from Cloud and distanced himself from the stove. "Uh, um...no, no, not really," he answered, the spoon and lid in his hands shaking. Cloud looked into the pot; inside was what looked like thick porridge of some sort.

"Whatcha making here? Looks pretty bland."

The man fidgeted again. "Well, yes, I suppose it is." He looked to be considering something, flicking his eyes from the pot to Cloud to Vincent and back again. "I, well, you see, it's not for me...it's, uh, it's for the poor creature Shera keeps here."

Vincent walked in from the living room. "Creature?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well, yes. It came down off the mountain, or so Shera told me before she left. She said it was one of those poor things that Hojo had stuck in the Mako pods." The man wiped his face on his shirt cuff. "From what I understand, those things were human once. Shera asked me to take care of it; I could hardly refuse..."

Cloud narrowed his eyes a little. "Where is it?"

"Heh, uh, it's, well, Shera built a basement for it...said it was too dangerous, poor thing was quite mad...said it was too dangerous for there to be a way for it to escape, but it was human once, so she didn't feel right shooting it."

"I guess we could go with you to feed it...since we're waiting for Cid," Cloud stated, his tone not really one of asking. Something wasn't adding up right; something that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

The man looked as though that was the last thing he wanted, but then a dangerous glint lit his eyes and relented. He shrugged and set the lid down. Then he grabbed a plate and spooned some of the porridge onto it. "If you insist," he said while handing Cloud the laden plate. "Follow me."

Cloud and Vincent followed the man out the side door and around the back of the old house, where they found a set of shutter doors leading to what must be the basement. The man grabbed the large handles and swung them open; apparently the doors were rather light. There was a flight of stairs below the doors.

"Can't be too dangerous if that's all that holds it in," Cloud remarked as they descended the stairs.

"No, Shera made an enclosure for it. It can't get out." The man shrugged. "Just as well. I've never seen it, really. I hear it has white eyes and sharp teeth. It makes the most horrid noises."

Vincent wrinkled his nose. "It isn't very clean down here." Cloud nodded in agreement. The basement smelled old, musty, and spent. A few mushrooms peeked out of one dirt wall, Battery Caps perhaps, or maybe mosfungus. Definitely poisonous.

The man stepped forward and grabbed a small lantern from the wall and flicked it on, then started walking into the basement. Vincent and Cloud followed for a moment; it wasn't very long until they reached the far end of the area. The basement actually seemed longer than the house above it. The light that filtered in from the doors never quite made it to this end.

The man set the lamp down next to a metal wall and knocked softly on a steel door. Or at least, it appeared to be a door; closer inspection revealed that the edges had been welded to the jamb, rendering it impossible to open without a torch. There was a thin slot on the bottom of the door, just tall enough for a plate to pass under.

"See, it can't get out," the man said, then knocked on the former door a little harder. Something stirred behind the metal wall, then banged against the door. Whatever it was in that small room beyond the metal wall whined and scabbled its fingers through the slot at the bottom of the door. Vincent growled softly, but when Cloud turned to him to see why, his face was blank.

The man mumbled to himself and shoved the plate under the door, where it was snatched up violently. Cloud could hear the thing slurping up the porridge with an intensity he was certain was borne of deep hunger...and he heard faint sobbing as well. The sound made Cloud singularly uncomfortable.

"Maybe," Cloud offered quietly, "maybe that monster wasn't so far gone as Shera thought...I mean, it sounds like its crying...."

The man's face hardened considerably. "No, it hasn't been human for quite some time."

Before Cloud could respond, he heard the creature behind the wall whine plaintively as it slowly pushed the plate back out. The man fairly sneered as he grabbed the plate. "Enough, that's all for today!" he shouted, causing the creature to pound on the wall and scream.

Cloud blinked in surprise. "You have plenty left! It's obvious it's still hungry, why can't you get it some more?"

Angrily, the man stood and growled loudly, directing his voice to the enclosure, "Because it doesn't even deserve what I gave it already! It should rot in there; I only feed it because Shera told me to." Then the man stalked away, toward the exit, leaving the lamp by the metal wall. The monster behind the wall half-sobbed half-whined as the man walked away, still sticking its fingers under the door.

Cloud knelt down to get a closer look at the creature's fingers, for reasons he wasn't sure of. The fingers he saw were very pale and thin, crooked, as if they had been broken before, and tipped with jagged nails. Vincent also knelt down, and as soon as he was sure the man had left, he extended his human hand and touched the creature's white fingers.

The creature yanked its fingers back with a startled gasp, then could be heard moving away from the door. Vincent's red eyes flashed with an inhuman glow, and then he lowered his head in an attempt to peer under the door.

"What is it, Vincent?"

Vincent turned his head to look up at Cloud. "Smells familiar." Then he turned back and tried sticking his own fingers under the door and wiggling them to get the creature's attention.

It didn't seem to work at all. Vincent hissed a little, then got up and started examining the welds on either side of the door. Cloud asked, "Gonna let it out?"

The ex-Turk nodded in reply. Cloud understood; he knew somehow that the monster behind the wall wasn't so far gone as that man had claimed...if nothing else, he heard the anguish in its cries and knew it couldn't be merely a monster. There was something human left in it, even if only a little bit. "So how do we do it?"

Vincent thought for a moment, then examined his armet and pointed to one of the yellow materia. "Enemy Skill," he explained, then motioned for Cloud to move away. Cloud did so, then watched as Vincent gathered his magic to cast Laser. The blue beams shot out around him and struck the doorjamb with a loud spark. It was a good shot; the door shuddered, then Vincent punched it with his clawed arm, causing it to fall in.

When it fell, it was a good bit shorter than Cloud had expected. The ceiling of the room behind the door couldn't have been more than five feet high. Cloud looked into the doorway and frowned deeply. The room was very small, so small that he wasn't sure that he could have lain on the floor without bending his knees. And in the farthest corner of the small room huddled the creature, curled up in a tiny ball with its painfully thin arms over its head. It was covered in rags that hung loose on its skeletal frame, and its light hair was so long it obscured its body somewhat, yet the hair was also very thin and tangled.

Vincent growled again, deeper this time, then pushed Cloud out of the way. He stooped and moved as best he could to the far side of the room, next to the creature. Cloud peeked back in; the monster hadn't even moved, as if it were completely unaware of Vincent's presence. He whispered something that Cloud couldn't hear.

When Vincent's speech garnered him nothing from the creature, he reached out and nudged it softly with his human hand. It screeched and swung its head around to face Vincent while at the same time finding a way to hug itself even closer to the wall. Then it whimpered, breathing quickly in fear.

Its hair obscured its face too much to get a good look at it, but from what Vincent could see, its hooded eyes were white... except, that wasn't their natural color. The white covered the irises and was milky and thick, as if it were a scar instead of a natural occurrence. It was obvious the creature was blind.

After a moment, Vincent ventured to push some of the yellow hair away from the creature's deathly pale face. It seemed

too afraid now to even move.

Carefully, Vincent moved the creature's long hair, exposing more of its hollow face. It then became clear that it had a long beard, but that wasn't the most striking feature, or the most frightening. Where a nose would have been on a human, there was instead a dark, triangular hollow, not at all unlike the nostrils on a skull. Vincent pushed the long hair farther back, and revealed the side of the creature's head. It was missing an ear, or so he supposed; there was no ear canal, so it might be that it never had ears to begin with. In appearance, both the lack of ears and a nose coupled with its sunken blind eyes and hollow cheeks gave the impression of a strangely living death's head. Cloud couldn't help but to contort his face in disgust.

The creature flicked its blind eyes around and covered the hollow on its face with one twisted hand. Cloud was right in his first assumption, it seemed; the creature's hand had been broken in several places in the past. It apparently never healed properly. Faint lines like cat scratches lined each of its fingers; some of the scratches trickled a little blood.

"Damn that is a sorry sight," Cloud commented to himself, thinking for a moment that he might kill the thing, put it out of its misery. He couldn't imagine it being better off alive the way it was.

Vincent hissed again. "Yes, it is a sorry sight," he replied, his voice tight with rage. As gently as he could, he grabbed the creature by its arms and tried to get it to move. After a long moment of frantically pulling away, it gave up, for it was obviously overpowered. It muttered something as it began crawling toward Vincent, something that might have been words long ago, but were incomprehensible now. Cloud noticed the thing probably couldn't walk even if it wanted to; its feet had been broken as well.

Vincent led the creature out of the small metal room and into the basement proper. He continued his gentle pulling until he was nearly to the exit. Cloud picked up the lamp and followed them.

When Vincent reached the edge of the light from the doorway, he let go of the creature's arms and sat down. As soon as he did that, the creature started moving around slowly yet fearfully, this way and that, until it finally moved far enough to reach a wall. Then, hugging the wall, it moved toward the doorway until it found a corner to settle in. Vincent and Cloud followed it the short way to the corner it now occupied.

In better lighting, Cloud was disturbed to discover that the creature looked more like a badly disfigured human than a Mako-created monster. The more he looked, the more this was true, until the creature started whimpering and crying as it had before, its voice so full of anguish that it was undeniably human. Cloud's stomach turned itself in knots, wondering in horror how anyone could do something like that to a human. It had been disturbing enough when the creature...the man... had been an 'it'. "Who is it?" Cloud asked, his voice cracking. "Who could do something like this to someone?"

Vincent sat down next to the man and said, "The answers to both are bound together, Cloud." Vincent moved his face much closer to where the man's ear would have been had he had any, then spoke in a loud voice, "I'm going to cut your hair. Do not be afraid."

The man jumped a little then shook his head. He said something that came out sounding like a cross between a soft wolf's call and a gurgle. "Oouu c-cannnn-nngh, ooouuu ghuuuff fweinn ou huwff me...." His voice was very garbled, faint, as if he hadn't spoken in a long time, but it was also somehow familiar.

Vincent just sat stiffly for a moment, his jaw clenched beneath the tall collar of his red cloak. Then he carefully grabbed a bunch of the man's blond hair and cut it off using the sharp edges of his clawed fingers. He set the long tuft of cut hair aside and grabbed another bit of the intact hair. As he cut, the skeletal man sat very still, clenching shut his blind eyes, ignoring the entire thing in a very pointed manner. It was obvious even without the benefit of a clear expression to Cloud that the man was trying to pretend nothing at all was happening. Not long after, a few stray tears trickled out of the corners of his damaged eyes.

Soon Vincent finished shearing the man's hair, leaving it perhaps a little longish on the top. Then he set about clipping his beard, until it was short enough that it could be shaved. This revealed a likely enough reason for the man to be crying; his lips were bleeding freely. Cloud saw the tips of his teeth, sharp as daggers; as he set his jaw and squinted shut his eyes, they cut into him. Vincent hissed yet again, and with his human hand tried to wipe some of the blood away, and perhaps

keep him from biting his lip any more. It looked as though it had suffered the same fate many, many times before.

Suddenly the man screamed and pulled himself away from Vincent, flailing his arms wildly and shouting, "Ngo, ngo, 'eav me a'ouunng!" Vincent moved back, allowing the man to howl in relative peace. After a while, the man crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his head back against the wall, sobbing quietly. Every now and again he would drop his head and wipe his eyes with the back of his broken hand.

There was something so familiar about that gesture, Cloud thought. He looked over at Vincent, who wore a peculiar expression on his narrow face; it was one of both unbearable sympathy, bitter as a needle, and extreme anger kindled by that empathy. Cloud squatted down next to Vincent and asked, "Who is it?"

Vincent growled a little. "You don't know yet? Look at him."

Cloud thought he had been, but shrugged and did as Vincent said. He took a long, hard look at the man, examining every feature to see if there was anything to tell him who he was. His now short hair was ash blond, from what he could see through all the dirt matting it...the long stubbly beard Vincent had left was the same color, as were his sharp, upswept eyebrows. Black eyelashes framed unusual Wutaian eyes, at least unusual for such a fair complected man. There was no way to tell what color his eyes were originally. Cloud avoided looking too long at the cavernous thing that was all the man had left of his nose. He wondered briefly about the old saying, 'Cutting your nose off to spite your face,' suddenly realizing that someone had done that very thing to this man. That someone had also done something worse, as he suddenly saw; the man only had his front several teeth, sharpened to points, and no tongue. No wonder he couldn't speak!

It wasn't until the man sensed Cloud's examination and turned to face him, spearing him with his sightless eyes, that all the pieces fell together. Cloud gasped when he realized what Vincent had figured out long before: that this man, though horribly disfigured and nearly insane, was Cid Highwind.

"Cid?!" he shouted in shock. The man flinched and shrunk back into the corner even further. Apparently, as Vincent had guessed, he could still hear, just extremely poorly, since whatever was left of his ear canal was covered. Someone must have taken great care when they mangled him...

Vincent nodded silently. "That perhaps answers your second question as well."

Cloud nodded dumbly. He just couldn't get his mind around the answer. But it was the only logical conclusion; Shera must have committed this atrocity. As inconceivable as it was, there was no other solution. No one else had the chance. And if they did, Shera still knew about it. She had to. "But why?! She always seemed so gentle!"

"I intend to find out just that," Vincent replied darkly. "But first...I think we should feed him...."

"Well, yeah...," Cloud had to agree. First things first...it would be a long time before he would be able to put aside the desolate, half mad sounds his friend had made before, while he was eating the porridge....

Vincent stood up then went to pick Cid up and carry him. He wasn't really in any condition to drag himself into his house. When Vincent lifted him up, Cid stiffened, squinting his eyes shut again and biting his lip. Cloud wondered what he was thinking, and how long he had been shut up in this basement. Long enough to drive him insane? It seemed so.

Vincent strode quickly up the stairs, and went into the house. Cid whined the whole way, looking as though he would try to pull out his hair if he could get a proper grip on any of it. Cloud followed them, and as soon as he entered the house he went to get some of the porridge for Cid. The other weasel man was nowhere to be seen. Fortunately, he had neglected to clean up; the pot was still there, although its contents were cold.

Vincent set Cid down on the floor in the middle of his living room floor while Cloud served up some of the porridge. As soon as Vincent let go of Cid, he immediately set off hunting for a corner. It seemed to be very hard on him that a corner wasn't readily at hand...which was understandable given that he had lived in a room so small it was nothing but corners for who knows how long. After a short while, he gave up, instead settling for curling up into a tight little ball and shivering.

Cloud walked in and set the plate of porridge in front of Cid. When he didn't move for a moment, Cloud realized it was

probably because he had no idea it was there, so he took one of his hands and dipped Cid's fingers in the porridge. It only took Cid a second to snatch the plate and begin voraciously eating the food by scooping it up with his fingers. He hid it under his body, but it was clear he had a tough time eating. It looked like he had to nearly gag himself to get any food down, and when he cleaned his fingers, thin, bloody scratches appeared on them. That he was silently sobbing the entire time didn't help any.

Cloud nearly wretched at the sight himself. It completely flabbergasted him. How on this Planet could a human do such a thing to another human? "How could this happen?"

Vincent shook his head, then went to search the cupboards for food for Cloud and himself. Cloud watched in sick fascination as Cid tried his hardest to get every last bit of the porridge in his mouth. When he finally despaired of getting any more with his near useless hands, he slowly pushed the plate away and whined.

Just as Cloud reached down to take the plate, Vincent roared, his voice only half-human and full of fury. Cloud spun around and instinctively drew his sword. But there was no immediate threat; Vincent stood alone, shoulders heaving in barely restrained rage. Cloud returned the sword to the scabbard on his back and stood still, watching.

With a visible effort, Vincent calmed himself enough so that he would not change into one of his monstrous forms. Then he turned to face Cloud, holding up a small brown bag in his brass claw. He tossed it to Cloud, who caught it easily. Cloud examined the bag, noting with disgust that it greatly resembled the usual container for shipments of a certain hallucinogenic drug derived from Battery Cap venom. He had seen such things often enough in his career as a guard for Shin-Ra; in fact he had helped bust a few dealers back then. He sniffed the bag; the sweet scent was just that of the powdered venom.

For a moment he didn't see what Vincent was so angry about; it didn't surprise Cloud in the least that Shera or the weasel man may have been addicts, all things considered. Hell, those mushrooms on the wall in the basement had looked just like Battery Caps; they probably made their own powder. Then Vincent held out a plastic container full of dry porridge mix. Cloud walked over and looked inside. He saw some of the very same drug in the mix as he had smelled in the bag. He narrowed his Mako eyes and looked to the pot.

Vincent nodded. "As if what they have done is not enough, they drug him as well."

Cloud grimaced. The tale of what Cid had been up to since he left the Highwind before AVALANCHE faced Sephiroth was just getting worse by the second. The swordsman looked over at Cid, huddled up in a tiny ball, and pitied him.

~*~

After crawling for what seemed like hours without moving, Cid finally reached the wall of his tiny cell. He cursed Gaze as he had always cursed it...it wanted nothing but to make him miserable. Why else would Gaze take it upon itself to make up such staggeringly real hallucinations...even now the walls of his cell felt wrong, as did the clothes he wore. Why Gaze would conjure up the blue jacket, the leather gloves, and the scarf Cid couldn't begin to grasp.

Cid didn't believe it at all, or tried not to. He hated it when he gave in to Gaze's evil games. He moved another several subjective miles until he found his favorite corner to curl up in. Cid knew that the only world left for him was the tiny metal cell with its horrible black emptiness. Whatever he remembered outside of it was...false...dreams...that Gaze inflicted on him. Gaze, Shera, and a few others were the only ones who bothered to speak to him. And they never touched him, except for Gaze, sometimes...

"Shera, why does Gaze do this to me?"

At least it speaks to you. It's a nice sort.

"You always say that. It poisons me sometimes."

No it doesn't. Gaze is kind, all it wants is to fill the black world with things...

"But they aren't real. It confuses me, it hurts me. Doesn't Gaze know that?"

Of course it does. It likes to try to make your life hell.

Cid choked at that, as he always did. Sometimes he wondered about Shera. Sometimes she was almost as bad as Gaze was. At least she never touched him.

You know, Cid, I didn't do this, Gaze claimed.

"Yes you did! You did! You always do, you always make me think there's something else!"

You disgust me sometimes. Since when is the world only the metal room?

Gaze laughed. Since the dawn of time. Cid Highwind doesn't exist without his room. The metal is the universe. We've been over this.

Yes, why do you think there is anything other than this?

Cid clenched his fists and shook. "I hate you...confusing me..."

Hah, maybe that really was someone touching you...maybe there is Someone Else...

"I'M NOT LISTENING! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Do you feel that...? The wall...?

Cid clenched his jaw, drawing blood. Tears trickled from his eyes as he felt an overwhelming compulsion to run his hands along the wall. But he refused, refused because he knew Gaze was only going to torment him more... But, unable to resist any longer and with a strangled whine, he gave in...felt the texture of wood, not metal. Like he had in his home before... before...

Maybe it is. Remember, I lived with you then.

Just imagine it...just imagine it. Could it be that those lies you remember are true...?

"No...no...you're trying to hurt me again...like you always do..."

Of course I am. Pain lets you know you are alive. But maybe I'm telling the truth. The truth hurts, sometimes.

Has Gaze ever made up something as realistic as this?

"Yes," Cid snapped bitterly. Very often, when he was fed, he would get sick and his head would spin, and then Gaze would make up things that felt as real as this...except the things it made up were always full of colors. This time it was black the way it was supposed to be.

Maybe the world is black because you are blind.

"NO!" Cid shouted. "No. Because that would mean you did this to me and I know you wouldn't."

I'm bored of this. I always tell the truth.

Listen to Gaze. It never lied to you before. Black is the way its supposed to be, of course. No one would ever take you out of your cell.

I'm bored.

I'm bored.

I'm bored, too. Let's do something...

I'm very bored...

Cid dreaded what Gaze and Shera would do to relieve their boredom. It was never pleasant...and there never was a way to escape.

It wasn't long before Cid began clawing at the walls and himself, pounding his arms and his head on the wall, desperate far beyond the point of madness to escape the voices in his head and the terrible games they played.

And if anyone from the Outside came in, he didn't realize it, for that was nothing but another one of Gaze's cruel games...

~*~

In the dark night, under the bright moon, a lone figure moved stealthily around the run down house that Cid used to live in. The figure tipped a small bucket or a can, spreading its liquid contents around as much as he could. The liquid soaked into the ground and into the old wood slats. The shadow did this all around the small house, sometimes splashing the liquid high on the walls. A rope soaked in the liquid was tossed up onto the roof, with the end dangling down.

Satisfied with his work, the thin figure fished an object out of his coat pocket. It was a small, reusable lighter; a thin dragon with bird's wings spiraled around it, ending with its fierce snarl right at the striker. The man grinned, almost as fiercely as the dragon on the metal lighter. He struck the lighter, igniting it. He then carefully set the fire to the end of the rope, until it caught.

Then he ran as the rope exploded in flames.

~ ~ ~

Vincent sat bolt upright upon the couch he had slept on. He looked around suspiciously, trying to find the source of his sudden apprehension. It didn't take him long. One sniff of the air was all he needed.

The dark man scrambled off the couch and ran full speed into the room in which Cloud slept. He shook the snoring swordsman sharply. Cloud snapped up, shouting, "Hey, whatsa big idea?"

"The house is on fire," Vincent hissed.

Cloud's eyes went wide as he glanced out the window. It was like looking into a furnace, or the gates of Hell. Yellow and red flames licked at the window. Cloud nodded and jumped out of bed and took up his sword as soon as he reached it. "Now were is Cid?"

Vincent didn't respond; he had no answer. Instead, he rushed around the house, looking in every corner and under every table to find him. Cloud tried to get into the garage, but his way was blocked by the roaring conflagration that had all ready consumed that side of the house.

"Damn!" Cloud shouted, shutting the door to the garage before the fire could get any closer. He backed into the living room looked around frantically for Cid, finally finding him curled up in a corner under an end table. Cloud crawled under to retrieve him, fishing around until he finally grabbed hold of Cid's ankle. Not a second passed before Cid was wide-awake and flailing around, trying to pull his foot out of Cloud's grasp. Cloud exhaled in irritation, then started pulling the weak pilot out from under the table. This just made Cid screech and kick, but fortunately, Cloud was by far the stronger and was able to complete his task.

When Cloud backed out from under the table, he almost made the mistake of letting go of Cid's foot, but caught himself just in time. He set his sword down and lifted Cid over his shoulder then grabbed his sword again. Then he turned to the front door, in order to escape. Vincent joined him just then, and the three rushed over to the door. Under the door, smoke began billowing into the room in great waves. Vincent tried to open the door while holding a hand over his nose and mouth. Before Cloud could do the same, Cid let out a high-pitched shriek and bit Cloud's neck. Cloud cursed loudly and tried not to drop his charge as Vincent began throwing himself against the door.

It was jammed tight. Cloud growled, and after prying Cid's jaw off his neck and passing him off to Vincent, he readied his sword. Vincent tried his best to restrain Cid, who by now was nearly hysterical. A bright red light flashed, and Cloud performed a quick Cross Cut on the door, splintering it and sending large bits in every direction. As soon as the door opened, the two rushed out of the burning house.

Before Vincent and Cloud could get more than a few feet from the flame-engulfed home, several gunshots rang out. With no way to know what direction the gunner lay in, the two were sitting ducks. They ran across the street, as far as they could get from the fire, knowing the light would make them easy targets. They didn't get very far. Vincent felt two hot bullets hit, one in his side and one in his shoulder, while Cloud, with a cry, stumbled and fell behind him.

Vincent nearly fell himself, for Cid had suddenly jerked hard, momentarily causing Vincent to lose his balance. He had probably been hit as well. But he stood, and made a break for one of the nearby houses. Just as he made it to the door, he felt another bullet hit him, this time in the back. He fell forward, knocking into the wall of the house.

By now, the gunshots and the fire had roused the entire neighborhood. Some people stood in their doorways, watching the spectacle, while others raised the alarm and started hefting their hoses over to Cid's house, to put out the flames.

Vincent shook his head and staggered up, still holding on to Cid, who was shivering slightly. After a second to regain his footing, Vincent stumbled over to the door and knocked on it; it was answered quickly. The old man who had loved the rocket so much stepped aside and let Vincent enter.

"Watch out!" the old man shouted, and Vincent snapped his head around. The lanky weasel man stood at doorway, his pistol trained on Vincent.

"Turn around," the man hissed. Vincent just looked at the man over his shoulder, glaring, his eyes beginning to glow a demonic red.

The man swallowed hard. "Y-you don't scare me, freak. Just turn around, and I'll leave you alone."

Vincent carefully set Cid on the ground, allowing the pain in his body to further flame his rage. Weasel did not know what he was dealing with.

Just as Vincent began to stand, and the red glare of his limit flared out, the man cackled and aimed his pistol down at Cid. Vincent flexed the strong fore arms of the Galian beast, then turned just in time to see the man both fire his gun and fall unconscious from a blow to the head. Behind him stood Cloud, holding the pommel of the black sword Ragnarok in two fists. Blood covered his hands.

The Galian beast reached down and grabbed a fistful of the weasel's filthy hair, dragging him into the house and back to another room. Cloud limped in after, then dropped like a rock into a chair, his left leg leaking blood. The old man was nowhere to be seen.

After a few short seconds of rest, Cloud got down on his hands and knees, dragging his injured leg, which had been shot and was what caused him to fall, after him, until he was next to Cid. The pilot had passed out, probably from shock. It looked as though he had been hit twice, once just where his shoulder met his neck, and once in the stomach, on the opposite side. There was a lot of blood on his mouth, but Cloud figured he knew where that was from as he rubbed the rather painful bite on his neck.

Wiping the blood off his hands, Cloud examined his armband then the hilt of his sword for a Cure materia. He wasn't entirely

sure a Cure would work properly without removing the bullets, but it was better than nothing. Unfortunately, there wasn't one equipped, so he went through his pockets for one. Then he paused. A thought occurred to him, one he really did not feel comfortable considering...but it came, just the same. Would it really be the best thing...the best thing for Cid, to heal him...? Maybe letting him die would be the best for him...

As he searched, Vincent returned, fully healed and as human as he could be. He tossed the three bullets that had hit him into a nearby waste bucket. There were some perks to his inhuman nature. Then Vincent searched his own armband for a Cure materia. He found one quickly enough.

Vincent squatted down next to Cid, who was obviously in shock. After a few moments of thought, Vincent sat down and began carefully examining Cid's bullet wounds. As he cut open Cid's shirt and looked over the bullet holes, he said, "We'll need to get these out before we cast Cure, or else they will stay forever."

Cloud scratched one ear then spoke in a small, quiet voice, "Is that the best thing? I mean, should we try to save him? I hate to ask, but then I hate to think of Cid like this for the rest of his life...."

Vincent glanced up, searching Cloud's face with his blood-red eyes. "If you let him die now, he will be like this for the rest of his life." Then Vincent turned his gaze back to Cid. After finding one of the bullets, he carefully used two claws to cut away some of the flesh around it and remove it. Cid never flinched. "I do not intend on giving up on my friend so easily. He is stronger than you realize."

Cloud nodded, satisfied with the answer, allowing him to put that thought away. "While you're doing that, may I use your Cure materia? The hole in my leg went clean through, so no bullet to remove, but it still needs some repair work."

Vincent nodded as he went to retrieve the second bullet, the one in Cid's stomach. Cloud easily plucked the green orb from the Death Penalty and slid it into a slot on his armband. Then he called on the Ancient power to cast Cure 3 on himself. As the clean breath of the Lifestream flowed into him, Cloud could feel the wound closing up. It was a strange sensation, but not at all unpleasant. Still, the injury had not fully healed; there was only so much Cure magic could perform.

"There," Vincent proclaimed, "I've got the last one out. Cast the magic; I am concerned that he hasn't stirred at all since I laid him down." Cloud nodded and cast Cure 3 on Cid. His wounds closed as well, but not so thoroughly as Cloud would have liked.

Vincent frowned slightly. "Not enough. But that is all we can do for now. I think we should restrain him somehow so he does not hurt himself in his confusion."

"Ugh...but yeah, you're right. I'll go ask the owner of this house if we can stay for the night." Then he went to find the owner.

~*~

It didn't take very long to get permission to stay there. The old man who loved the rocket so much was extremely hospitable, even offering Vincent a fairly rare gun he had found nearby. Vincent took it gratefully, not because it was a better weapon than his Death Penalty, but because of the man's generosity.

After securing permission, Vincent and Cloud carefully carried Cid to one of the beds and tied him down. By now he had woke up some, enough to attempt escape, but he was far too weak. Cloud was surprised someone so frail could survive two bullet wounds, but Vincent was not.

When that unpleasant task was completed and the door to the room closed, a sudden deathly stillness came over Vincent and he went to retrieve the weasel man who had shot them. To make sure the man didn't escape, the ex-Turk had tied him up. Now it was time to ask some questions that needed answering.

Cloud sat in a chair next to the wiry man and asked point blank, "Why did you do this to Cid?"

The man grimaced. "What says I had anything to do with it? I would rather it died. Why do you think I let you release it?"

The swordsman clenched his teeth and barely suppressed the urge to strike the bound man. "He, not it, he."

A dark sneer crossed the man's dirty features. "It was never more than a monster to me."

Cloud's expression was as dark as a storm. "We know you have been poisoning him. We know Shera was involved. If you value your life, you will tell us what's going on."

"Isn't it a good thing I don't?" the man said with a shrug. "But fine, if you must know, my name is Dr. Morre, and I am a plastic surgeon. Shera was my lover. She deserved better than that waste of flesh. She wanted to hurt it, it was all her idea, but I helped her. What more do you want to know?" Morre's expression was almost arrogant.

Cloud clenched his fists, resisting the overwhelming urge to strike that cruel doctor. "Why did you set fire to the house?" Cloud growled through clenched teeth. Vincent however stood stock-still, cold as stone.

Dr. Morre snorted. "Why else? To kill you. To kill it," at this he jerked his head to indicate Cid. "The Planet needed a cleansing."

Vincent shook his head. "What would you know of cleansing?" Vincent asked with a steely calm. The dark man lifted the Death Penalty with one hand and aimed it at the weasel man's head. "If I thought you capable of guilt, I would let you live." Then Vincent pulled the trigger. The Death Penalty took the man's life swiftly and with a preternatural silence.

Cloud blinked in shock. He looked at Vincent blankly, for while the blond man had been very angry, he had not yet gone so far as to murder in cold blood. Vincent looked back without expression. Then without a word he tore the dead man from the chair and carried him outside, to the still burning house, to let him burn in the pyre he had intended for Cid.

~*~

Cid slept fitfully, curled up as much as he could, restrained as he was. Sometimes, when he was weak, when he was unable to push the memory away, visions of his last moments under the sun would torment him. At these times Cid was certain of one thing, as he was never certain of anything in his black world...certain that this one dark memory was real. Even Gaze was incapable of imagining something darker.

And it was always recalled with a clarity of mind he no longer possessed...Gaze was not there, but Shera was, the real Shera, the one who so mangled him. Her words had been like knives, touched with the heat of madness he would soon come to know, poisoned by bitterness beyond human endurance...

After Shera had drugged him, she had injected him with an anesthesia of sorts. Curare, and something else, so the pain would be deadened yet leave him fully aware of what was happening. Someone he had seen around Rocket Town but never formally met came into the room. He came to Shera and kissed her, then helped her drag Cid out into the garage and onto a long workbench.

"He can hear me, right?" Shera whispered, her voice shaking.

The other man, a ratty, unkempt sliver of a human being, nodded.

Cid was aware of all this, though he could not move, and felt nothing.

Shera leaned over him, looking into his face with such a look of hatred it made Cid quail. She growled, then motioned to the rat-man. A few moments passed, then the man nodded, ready for what ever they had planned.

The man jerked Cid's mouth open, and reached in with a large scalpel.

Shera spoke, malice dripping from her every word, and madness as well. "For the evil words you flung at me, I deprive you of speech." As soon as it was said, the man made a quick slashing motion, and withdrew Cid's tongue.

Sometimes at this point Cid would awaken, if it had been a dream that brought back the memory, or he would cry out for the memory to stop, to leave him, but it never did. The voices would return, and force him to relive the harrowing experience, heedless of his cries...

He remembered everything, remembered how Shera and her doctor lover broke his hands and his feet, remembered them blinding him, remembered how they removed his ears and his nose with cold surgical precision...and how careful they were that the injuries healed without infection, because they didn't want him to die.

They wanted him to suffer.

Shera wanted him to suffer.

And he did.

~*~

Cloud woke with a start, whatever nightmare that had assailed him flitting into the darkness of the night. He sat up and shook his head. Any nightmare he could have now was nothing compared with the waking world. Somehow even the dreams that brought back the last vision he had of Tifa falling from the cockpit of the Highwind could not compare with the horror of what he had seen the day before. The sound of her death was horrible...but it had been an accident. This wasn't.

He had thought he had seen the depths of evil in Hojo...he had never imagined that he would experience anything that could compare with him, but he had. And of all people, that sadistic madness had to be in Shera's blackened mind, egged on by her jealous and equally insane lover.

Cloud winced, and stopped his ears, for Cid was screaming again, weakly, almost silently, and yet with enough voice to be heard in the next room. The swordsman feared Cid's gibbering and the horrific sight of his tortured form would never let him sleep soundly again. It twisted his gut, chilled him to the bone.

Sighing heavily, Cloud stood up and shuffled into the next room over, where they had tied Cid to the bed. It had been entirely a safety precaution; the bullet wounds had to be let alone, and the pilot's incessant need to curl up into a tiny ball or flail around would only serve to damage him more. It had been a very difficult to do, and the sight of Cid helplessly bound and struggling against the ropes only heaped one horror atop the rest.

Cloud looked down in pity on his friend. He seemed to be taken in his own nightmares; Cloud wondered silently if it would be a kindness or a cruelty to awaken him. His waking life seemed no more bearable than his dreaming. The swordsman could hardly fault Cid for his madness; Shera had made damn sure life was a living Hell for him, nudging his eroding mind along the path of insanity by drugging him often enough that it would be nearly impossible to separate the hallucination from the reality. Cloud was certain that in Cid's deranged thinking, he was still in that black cell, and all of this was just another drug induced fantasy meant to torment him.

Finally deciding that waking Cid would be the better thing, Cloud reached over and shook him softly. Cid woke up quickly, becoming very still. For a while he stared unseeing at the ceiling, breathing hard. Then he closed his eyes and clenched his teeth, drawing fresh blood. A very faint quaking began in Cid's hands, and passed down his arms. Whispered pleading joined the tremor; Cloud leaned in close to see if he could understand what was said.

Unfortunately, he could not. Cloud sighed and sat down on the floor next to the bed, leaning against it. For some reason he was not entirely sure of, he set his left hand on Cid's forearm. He was somewhat surprised that Cid didn't resist the touch, but not much. He was too drained to really feel much of anything right now.

So, lost in his own dark thoughts, Cloud passed what little remained of that night seated next to the bed, with his hand on Cid's arm.

~*~

Several days later...

The three had been traveling over the mountains that stood around Nibelheim, south of Rocket Town. Vincent and Cloud intended to take Cid to the Mount Nibel Memorial hospital that stood near the old ruins of Nibelheim. A small town had started there, and they hoped that perhaps the doctors there could do something for Cid, both physically and mentally. If nothing else the doctors should be able to perform some sort of reconstructive surgery.

Vincent had constructed something of a sled to carry Cid upon; although he had become less violent over the past few days, he was still prone to biting and scratching if someone carried him. Weak as he was, it didn't really matter; he was still very unwieldy when he wasn't cooperating, which was most of the time. They had the pilot bound to the sled as best they could. Unfortunately, they had to tie him down rather tightly, since he was prone to jerking around, trying to escape. But Vincent insisted on letting him up whenever they stopped for a break, as he felt that Cid must soon grow accustomed to some freedom, even if he hated it and feared it.

It was sad, but Cid seemed more comfortable completely restrained than he did otherwise. Perhaps it was that his world had been nothing but a tiny enclosed space for so long he couldn't handle anything else. Cloud shook his head, still baffled as to how anyone could do something like that to another person.

So they traveled, Vincent and Cloud taking turns dragging the travois behind them, trying hard to ignore it when Cid frequently cried out, his voice so full of hurt and pain. Both could hear in Cid's howling the voice of a man driven far beyond his ability to comprehend or adapt to what was going on around him.

Cloud would never forgive Shera for that. Cid had been a strong man, with a good heart, despite the exterior he showed. He wasn't any longer; now he was nothing more than a broken, pathetic madman, according to Cloud's sad thought.

Soon, however, any forgiveness would be a moot point. As Vincent and Cloud crested a hill, fairly high up the north side of the Nibel Mountains, they came to a clearing, one with a single twisted skeleton of a tree clinging to the earth with dead roots. It stood stark against the gray sky, strangely bright under the cloud cover. Upon one branch hung a body, a thin, tall woman, with a white lab coat and a dirty orange dress.

The two stopped, both silent for a long moment as they looked on the final end of Shera Stargazer. The faint smell of death hung in the cold air. Cloud broke the silence with a shuddering sigh. What horror had bitterness wrought, its works seeming finished now. Cloud approached the hanging form, covering his nose, while Vincent, guessing that a long pause had come to their journey, went to let up Cid.

Cloud looked at Shera's dead form with a sullen gaze. It seemed as though this end was fitting, and yet, it was empty...at least, it was empty of any resolution, of any sense of vengeance achieved. A solitary raindrop struck Cloud's grim face.

A weak breeze fluttered a sheet of paper nailed to the tree, catching the swordsman's eye. He took a few steps to get a better look at the sheet: it was a suicide note written in pen, left for whomever should pass this way. Cloud held a corner to stop the fluttering and began to read:

Your blood it burns me, it cuts me, it cries out from the earth, it kills me...
For the evil words you flung at me,

I deprive you of speech.

For the hard glares you gave me,

I deprive you of sight.

For the deaf ear you turned to my cries,

I deprive you of hearing.

For the coldness of your heart,

I deprive you of sensing.

For the ungratefulness of your soul,

I deprive you of the sky.

For the years you took from me,

I deprive you of freedom.

For the cage you thrust me in,

I deprive you of your sanity.

And in this will I be revenged upon you,

I deprive you of your love.

Maybe once I was human. Long time ago, before the rocket crashed, I think we were both human then. And then you broke, and lost that part of you...and for a long time it was a monster I lived with. I died slowly after, and I guess after awhile I became a monster as well. I a bitter, caged, sullen and pitiable beast, you almost as bitter, and perhaps as pathetic. I thought I loved you for a little while, and maybe I did, but that was when I was human. I thought I found another to love me, but he was no more human than I was.

I was going to die on the Shin-Ra 26. Blown up on Meteo. It didn't happen. I wanted revenge, for then, for now, for ever that you were so cruel to me. I had intended to make you on the outside what I felt I was on the inside. My poor monster lover was to help me. But damn you, you had to be human again. And I was so lost and angry and full of fury...

I never shed innocent blood. You were never innocent. But I shed human blood, and that is too much for me to bear.

As Cloud finished reading the note nailed to the tree, a gentle rain started to fall. Letting his hand drop loosely, he glanced up at the sky for a moment, looking at the gray clouds overhead and letting a few of the raindrops hit his upturned face. Then he looked back down at the suicide note. The writing, hasty and nervous, began to fade, the raindrops wetting the ink and making it run. It didn't take long for the shower to turn a little stronger, the larger raindrops hitting the ground and the travelers with a soft pattering sound. Cloud moved back slowly and sat down next to Cid, his expression dim.

The pilot sat on the ground just as Vincent had left him, with his legs bent, holding his knees with both arms. Something about his entire demeanor changed slightly, and he lifted his head to the darkened sky. A slight wind ruffled his hair.

Cloud blinked the rain from his eyelashes while he watched Cid with guarded eyes. Cid covered part of his face with his left hand, perhaps to keep the rain out of what was left of his nose. His sightless eyes gazed upward toward the sky, letting the falling rain merge with the silent tears he began to shed.

Vincent cut the rope that held Shera's dead body, then let her down on to the ground. Cloud watched him for a moment, seeing Vincent shake his head, not knowing exactly what to do or where to go from here. Then the swordsman looked back at the note Shera had left. The rain had nearly washed everything away; all that was left of the note was long streaks of ink bleeding and merging together as one.

When he looked back at Cid, Cloud was surprised to find a faint glimmer of a smile just touching his features. A little spark of hope, flickering silently, a very tiny flame, but present nonetheless. Cloud narrowed his eyes, thinking at first that it was because Shera was dead. But then he realized Cid had no way of knowing that. He couldn't see her...couldn't smell the faint odor of death, hadn't touched her cold form...and neither Vincent nor Cloud had gathered enough strength of voice to proclaim her death loud enough for Cid to hear.

No, it was something else. Cloud watched the raindrops gather on Cid's pale skin, dripping down in little rivulets...then he suddenly realized what it was. Cid was in his element. The slight wind, the rain, the cold air upon the Nibel Mountains...it

was where Cid felt most at home. And for a very brief space, for now, those natural things that he loved and knew so well had brought him out of the darkness he had been trapped in for so long.

It was a faint glimpse of something more, something outside the black cell. Vincent was right, and Cloud had been wrong; Cid was a stronger man than the swordsman had realized. And though he was darkly shattered, still it seemed now that not all of what was human in him had been utterly ruined.

Perhaps, dark and silent though it may be, there was still a dawn to see.

~ The End ~