Reaction
by Megpie71

Summary

Tifa's point of view for some of the early events of the game.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

I couldn't get the stains off my gloves. I remember this clearly. My gloves were stained, they weren't clean, and I couldn't get them clean no matter how much I tried.

It was the first time I'd ever got involved in the terrorism side of AVALANCHE. Oh, I'd let them use the downstairs room as a lair almost from the first day I’d taken over the bar. I'd looked after things while they had meetings with shady figures from Midgar's gangland about getting hold of things for making bombs. I'd passed on the rumours and stories I'd heard from various people to them, to make use of in their planning. I was the one who poured enough cut-price beer into a Shinra worker to get all the ways the accesses to different mako reactors were controlled - before that night, we hadn't known each reactor had their separate access systems. But I'd never stepped any closer – I'd kept a careful distance.

Cloud did more of the actual terrorism of AVALANCHE in one night than I had in over a year. Ironic, considering he didn't even believe what they stood for - he was just in it for the money.

But when I manipulated him into a second run, when I told him I was going along, I stepped across from being a sympathiser. I changed from being someone who agreed with their ideals, but might have disagreed with their methods, to being a full member of AVALANCHE. I became a terrorist to blackmail a childhood friend into danger.

And I couldn't get my gloves clean.
It was the first time I'd used the skills my master had taught me in actual combat against a real enemy. It was the first time I'd done more than throw out the occasional drunk from Seventh Heaven, which generally didn't take more than being able to dodge and breathing deeply to distract them - this chest of mine is useful for more than just earning me tips. I mean, I'd practised against the monsters lurking in the rubbish heaps of the slums, and I'd sparred a few times as I taught them the bare basics. But that's pretty much it.

At first it all seemed a fun little romp. The whole chase through the train was exciting, outwitting the guards, and dodging the pickpockets. Jumping out of a moving train into a dark tunnel isn't something I'd recommend doing for the sake of one's health, but it was still a bit of a buzz none the less. I got scrapes and scratches all over me when I landed, but it felt more like the times I'd been caught in minor landslides up in the Nibel mountains as a kid - and nothing terrible had happened to me during those. Fighting the monsters and rocket launchers along the way was a bit of a challenge, but nothing too terrible. It all changed when we got inside the reactor.

The first punch I threw at a Shinra grunt was waving a final farewell to the innocent little girl I'd been five years ago. I couldn't be sweet little Tifa Lockhart, daughter of the Mayor of Nibelheim, any more. Not with a man's blood on my knuckles. It might have been Cloud's sword which killed the first one, and Barret's bullets which took care of the second, but it was my fists and skills which broke the neck of the third, and I can still remember the cracking sound which accompanied it. Cloud and Barret hustled me on after we'd killed the guards who had spotted us, so I never got to see his face - not behind that huge helmet. He was just a faceless goon. That's what I tried to tell myself.

The machines were easier, in a way. They didn't bleed. They leaked oil everywhere - and that's at least part of what stained my gloves. Oil and lubricants from the machine guns, oil and the horrible grease the Smoggers turned into a blinding smoke. The machines were harder to hurt, but easier for me to attack - they weren't people, they didn't bleed. Even the Blood Taste hounds were easier to attack than the guards.

I wish I knew what to use on my gloves to get the Smogger grease out of the leather. Maybe if I could do this, I'd have a chance of getting the other stains out, and finally getting them clean. Or maybe I'm fooling myself.

I don't know what happened to Cloud as we were coming up to the reactor core. He just seemed to fold up in on himself for a moment or two there, clutching at his head. He didn’t stop until I touched him on the shoulder which wasn’t covered by his big spiky pauldron, and called his name. He seemed to wake up, all dazed and not-quite-with-it, the way someone is when you’ve just woken them out of a bad dream. It was another strange piece in the puzzle of what may have happened to him in the seven years between two children making a silly promise atop the water tower in Nibelheim, and two terrorists killing guards and setting bombs in Midgar Mako Reactor Five. He hadn’t told me what had happened to him in the intervening years, and I hadn’t asked. I didn’t want to ask.

If I had asked him what had happened to him during those years, I would have had to explain to him about what happened in Nibelheim five years ago. I wasn’t strong enough to do it yet. I wasn’t strong enough to tell him Nibelheim was gone, vanished in the destruction wrought by Shinra’s great General Sephiroth for no reason we ever knew, or maybe no reason he could have understood. I wasn’t strong enough to carry the grief when I told Cloud his mother had died in the conflagration which destroyed the town. I knew how devastating it was when you lost your final parent in such a way – after all, I’d done so myself.

I wasn’t strong enough for Cloud.
My gloved hand left a mark on the shoulder of his shirt. It stood out, greasy, glossy wet, against the rough knit. I wish I could figure out how to remove the stain from my gloves. If I could get the stains out of my gloves, maybe I’d have a chance to remove the stain from Cloud’s shirt.

We got through the full process of setting the bomb – it was surprisingly easy to do, scarily easy to do – and got back out to the entry hall, where there was an overly-complicated exit mechanism. Three touch-pads which must be hit simultaneously, together and at the same time – I pitied all the staff who had to try and get out of there at the end of a shift. But of course, there would be fewer of them trying this today than there would have been, wouldn’t there?

We fought guards, mecha and hounds all the way out of the reactor; it wasn’t until we reached the catwalk over Sector Five we were outnumbered to the point where we couldn’t fight back. When President Shinra showed up, and it became clear the fix was in.

Barret and Cloud had been a bit twitchy all the way back from the reactor core for some reason. They didn’t say much, but I caught them exchanging glances on occasion, as though they were each waiting for the other shoe to fall. Maybe it had all been too easy. I know when the President appeared, they seemed to share another glance which implied the thing they were expecting had happened, and we were doomed, just the way they’d expected to be.

I’m not sure it was the best attitude to be going into the whole thing with. But I got caught by the authorities the first time I went out as a terrorist – what the hells would I know?

The mecha-soldier the President sent against us was easy to fight. It crumpled beneath my blows in a very satisfactory manner, sparking and twitching. It didn’t even leak oil on my gloves. Instead, it exploded.

And Cloud fell.

I couldn’t stop him from falling. I wasn’t fast enough. I wasn’t strong enough. I wasn’t brave enough to even watch after his grip slipped. I couldn’t help him.

We escaped from Reactor Five in the ensuing chaos, and fled to the slums. I suggested to Barret we go straight to Sector Five below to try and find … well, I suppose it would have been to find Cloud’s body. I wasn’t thinking clearly enough to take the information in at the time. Barret, however, disagreed – he wanted to make sure Marlene, Biggs, Wedge, and Jessie were all right. He said Sector Five would be swarming with Shinra Military Police; we’d be picked up in no time. We could do more for the Planet if we remained free than we ever would from a Shinra prison camp.

Maybe he was right.

Instead of trying to find Cloud, we went back to Seventh Heaven. We had to explain to Barret, Wedge and Jessie what had happened. It was so silly, though. Wedge turned to me and said “Don’t cry, Tifa. We thought Cloud was dead after the Reactor One run, too, but he showed up again.”

Which is when I walked out of the main bar into the laundry room and began trying in vain to clean my gloves. I don’t think the stains will ever come out, though. Cloud was gone. I was the last survivor of Nibelheim. I was crying over the sink in the laundry room of Seventh Heaven, and I couldn’t get my gloves clean.
Re: the warning about character death - The character who has "died" is, of course, Cloud. Now, as anyone who's played the original game knows, Cloud survives. But Tifa doesn't have this information at the point where this story takes place. So she's reacting to what she sees as him falling to his death.

Oh, and this story was produced as a piece of assessable work for my "Introduction to Writing" unit last year. I love my degree, really I do...

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