

Volume VII



A NEW THREAT

FINAL FANTASY VII

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Since its release in 1997, Final Fantasy® VII has sold more than 10 million copies worldwide, making it one of the bestselling and most critically-acclaimed titles in video game history. Its success encouraged developers Square-Enix to continue the saga, telling the tale through various mediums.

The author of this novel (also known by his online alias ‘S and G’) has reproduced the saga in written form, basing the work closely on the Compilation of Final Fantasy® VII as a whole.

All material without exception derived from Final Fantasy® VII (1997), Before Crisis: Final Fantasy® VII (2004), Final Fantasy® VII: Advent Children (2005), Last Order: Final Fantasy® VII (2005), Dirge of Cerberus: Final Fantasy® VII (2006), Dirge of Cerberus Lost Episode: Final Fantasy® VII (2006), Crisis Core: Final Fantasy® VII (2008), On the Way to a Smile: Final Fantasy® VII (2009), and all official publications is property of Square-Enix Holdings Co., Ltd.

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This book is intended for private use only and is not for sale.

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PROLOGUE



The Flower Girl

It was a cloudless night above the city of Midgar, the darkened winter sky dotted with a thousand burning stars, the cold air numbing and penetrative. Gazing up, the young flower girl rose from her crouched position by the leaking Mako generator in the damp alleyway, and began towards the crowded metropolis street of Theatre Avenue. Her long pink dress, moistened by the round cobbles on which she had knelt, had become uncomfortable against her bare ankles. She glanced cautiously about her before raising her pale green eyes once again to the heavens, pulling her red denim jacket tighter around her chest. A nearby group of men whistled at her, waving as they stumbled drunkenly through the haze of people. She swung the basket of white and yellow lilies she carried back and forth across her body – a nervous habit she had adopted since her last flower cart had broken down – and, waiting patiently for the car to pass, she crossed the street.

As she stepped onto the low kerb on the opposite path, there came a terrible sound of thunder. Everything around her shook, throwing her mercilessly to her knees. The windows of Robson's Playhouse behind her exploded, scattering shards of glass over the pedestrians below. Long, rigid cracks appeared on the thick walls of the surrounding buildings, small chunks of their façades plummeting to the pavement. The frightened screams of many women rang out into the night, slicing through the air like wailing sirens. In the distance, above the rooftops, heavy black smoke

had begun to soar into the sky, sending its starry face into an eclipse.

The flower girl picked herself up. She groaned as she brushed the grime from her hands and dress, looking out over Fountain Plaza from beneath its sandstone archway entrance as she listened to each gasp and startled cry. In a corner of the space, a short way from where she stood, there emerged a party of five from a small lane hidden by the shadows. They were clad in unusual clothing, their voices hushed and secretive. After a few moments, the group dispersed, and all but one sped off across the square.

The lone man kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, as if deep in thought, his blonde hair drooping haphazardly over his handsome face. She began towards him, drawn by an uncontrollable urge; the coincidence of his likeness too great. *The hair...the outfit...that sword.* Taking quick, delicate steps, she pushed through the hoards of panic-stricken civilians to reach the man, her desire to speak with him a necessity in her mind.

“Excuse me?” she said softly as she drew near him. The man turned, his sparkling blue eyes passing once over her. “What happened?”



The Fight for the Planet

Cloud Strife heard the piercing whistle and sat up sharply, his eyes darting around the unlit carriage for traces of movement. The sound had dragged him unkindly from his thoughts; the murky world he had entered as he listened to the gentle rumble of the cargo train's engine. He scolded himself for allowing his concentration to drift, and exhaled, letting his tense body fall back into its slumped position against the shuddering wall once more. With a single rub of his weary eyes with the back of his brown, fingerless gloves, he lowered his hands to his knees, resting them on the baggy, dark blue combat trousers of his old uniform. Beneath him, he could feel the train gradually slowing, watching the dusty wooden crates of the hold tremble each time the brakes of the MK600 were applied.

“Crap!” he muttered in a low voice, pulling himself from the hard floor and adjusting the spiked armoured pauldron on his left shoulder.

He braced himself as the train pulled into the Sector1 industrial station, his body emitting a faint moan as he leant forward to grasp the thin handle of his Buster Sword. The great silver blade was made of a hard, durable steel alloy, trimmed at its base with gilded carvings around two circular holes, its parallel edges unequal in length; the shortest of which ended after four feet, but growing half a foot farther in order to meet the other at a deadly point. Cloud snatched the heavy weapon from the floor and held

it aloft for a second, the taut red leather around the handle a comfort against his fingertips.

As soon as the locomotive had drawn to a halt, he slung the greatsword over his back where it clung to its magnetic holder on his braces, and crossed the carriage to the shutters on the far wall. The doors were weak and rotting, and opened easily. He stepped out into the shadowy depot, the night air cool against his tired face. The nearby broken bodies of two dead guards were sprawled awkwardly on the grey concrete platform, the neck of one badly twisted. Ahead, he could see the enormous figure of Barret, the team leader, hastily climbing the steps to the depot's north entrance. Cloud scoured the compound, preparing himself for a possible assault on whatever security remained. When at last ten uneventful seconds had come and gone, he moved swiftly into the open.

“Hey?” came a shrill whisper from above. Cloud turned to see Wedge, another of the mercenaries, perched on the curved roof of the train, and again cursed himself under his breath that he must quickly regain his acute vigilance.

Wedge was short and heavy in build, his features highlighted by the tight yellow t-shirt he wore beneath his utility belt. Cloud guessed he was a couple of years younger than himself, possibly eighteen or nineteen. Wedge had been the least outgoing of the five-member team for the brief minutes Cloud had spent with them, listening silently as Barret had dictated exactly how he wanted his operation to be executed. Now, as he gazed up at Wedge, Cloud saw the teenager point a grubby finger beyond him to his left, towards the tall, arched exit a short distance from the head of the train.

“Area's secure. Head for the Reactor. I'll clean up here.”

Cloud nodded, and began to jog across the platform, the dull thumping of his large army boots echoing in the stillness of the yard. The station opened onto a wide, cobbled pavement, the round stones shimmering in the brilliant green glow of the lampposts. The factory buildings and warehouses on either side of the street appeared old and unkempt; their graffiti-laden walls

chipped and grimy. In the distance, west of the depot, stood the high gates of the Reactor complex, their menacing silhouette looming over the paths like ever-watchful eyes. Keeping to the shadows, he stealthily edged along the street, creeping in and out of the green light. As he approached, he could make out the shapes of Biggs and Jessie huddled together at the side of the gates.

He had encountered both previously, but had heard their names only in passing. Biggs was a youngster who, unlike Wedge, had made his presence at their briefing known. His thick, black hair was tied back with a red bandanna, his brown-eyed gaze cocky and arrogant. Jessie was the only female of the group, in her mid-twenties, and had been identified as the team's computer expert; a skill their leader had seen as crucial.

She was fiddling with the small, black laptop she had managed to connect to the control panel on the large doorway when Cloud pulled up behind them. He waited, without sound, for a long while, studying Jessie's efforts to gain entry to the Reactor closely. A series of meaningless binary codes flashed back and forth over the screen as the decryption program hacked the system, the pulsing digits almost a blur. Jessie swore, running her hands anxiously through the auburn hair she had thrown casually in a ponytail.

"You used to be in SOLDIER, right?" asked Biggs after a short time, the note of suspicion evident in his tone. He continued to stare at the laptop, tapping his foot rhythmically against the damp street, caressing his thin goatee. "Not every day ya find someone like you in a group like AVALANCHE."

"SOLDIER?" squeaked Jessie. "Aren't they the enemy?"

"Ex-SOLDIER. He quit and is one of us now." said Biggs, choosing this moment to turn around. He gave Cloud a quick half-smile. "Hey, I didn't catch your name."

"Cloud."

"Cloud, eh? I'm..."

“I know who you are.” Cloud grunted. “Listen, I don’t work for either SOLDIER or AVALANCHE. I’m only being paid to get this job done, and once it’s over...I’m outta here.”

“Whatever, man.” Biggs mumbled, tightening his bandanna. There was a tense silence, the teenager’s expression one of ridicule as his eyes returned to the screen.

“Hey!” hissed a gruff voice from behind them. The three turned to see the operation leader storming down the deserted street towards the gate.

Barret Wallace was an unnaturally tall, muscular man, his broad shape gargantuan in comparison to most. Clad in dark green combats and an unbuttoned, brown leather jacket whose sleeves had been torn from the shoulders, his dark-skinned chest exposed above a silver waist-guard. He had a short, black crew-cut and a thick beard of the same shade, and the constant growl of his fierce sunken eyes always seemed to threaten the party; but it was not his furious glare nor the deep scar on the right side of his face that intimidated them most.

Barret had long since lost his right arm but, in its place, grafted to his bulging limb slightly below the elbow, was a six-barrelled gatling-gun. Its ammo was compressed into the wide disc between the weapon and his joint, the coil of bullets wrapped within its greasy walls. He held his arm high as he charged, the stained metal dark and grey. It was his symbol for rebellion; for his war against Shinra.

“What the hell’re ya doin’?” he spat again, his wide nostrils flaring.

“We’re breakin’ in.” replied Biggs sarcastically.

“I thought I told you never to move as a group?” Barret snarled as he neared them. Wedge could be seen stumbling behind, struggling to catch his breath. “Idiots!”

“But...” started Biggs.

“Shut up.” snapped Barret. “How we doin’?”

There was a *bleep* from the control panel and Jessie took a step back. From within the complex, there came a faint rumble of machinery, and with a great groan, the gate began to part.

“Doors opening.” she whispered.

“Good work, Jessie.” said Barret. “Right, I’ll go over it one last time. Our target’s the North Mako Reactor. Meet on the T-junction bridge at its entrance. Security shouldn’t be very tight, given the time, but be careful. If anyone gets caught, you’re on your own. Okay, move out!”

The group warily entered the dark enclosure, Barret commanding the route he wished each of them to follow. As they separated, Cloud found himself glancing up at the shell of the main building. Its exterior was shaped like an enormous fin, housing an entire office wing, and acting as the casing for the industrial furnace. He clenched his jaw as his eyes fell upon the red Shinra Diamond painted at its height, and remembered his days in the Shinra Army, swearing his allegiance to the Company, and all they stood for. *How times had changed: a once-loyal member of SOLDIER, returning as a mercenary to haunt the very people who had deceived him.*

Trailing a north-westerly path, Cloud came to the bridge quicker than he had anticipated, encountering only a few Shinra guards as he slipped silently through the black maze of crates and chemical containers. He had covertly knocked most of them unconscious, leaving their still bodies hidden in the shadows. The bridge was not really a bridge at all, but a suspended metal grid connecting the outer shell of the facility to both main exits. Several hundred feet below, Cloud could see the Sector1 Slums spreading out from the belly of the Reactor. The ruined landscape was a slur of brown and grey from this height, disappearing under the Plate to his left, and towards the outskirts of Midgar to his right, as if in a great effort to remove itself from the upper-city’s leering glare.

He chose to stay in the dimness of the passage, delaying his crossing of the walkway until he was certain it was secure. *I’ve already made two mistakes tonight...there won’t be a third.* Minutes passed as he remained in the exit, peering out over the bridge as he waited for the appearance of another of the group. All that could be heard were the distant cries of disturbed birds

and an occasional drunkard's holler from the sector's suburb a number of miles off. He observed the thick bursts of smoke as it escaped the domed head of the Reactor's chimney, and stared, mesmerised, as it soared into the cold night air in unsynchronized spurts of pale green mist, obscuring the midnight sky.

Cloud's gaze shot back to the narrow tunnel opposite him, the sharp *clang* alerting him to his senses. He saw Barret and Jessie waiting in the opening, their voices lowered, and stepped momentarily out from the darkness to reveal his position. Barret nodded in acknowledgment of his presence and, scanning the area carefully, he motioned for Biggs and Jessie to follow him. Cautiously, they made their way towards the centre of the grid. Cloud hung back for a second, but moved out as they reached the perpendicular junction, knowing that if they had been seen, an ambush would have already taken place.

"Hey, newcomer, hurry up." ordered Barret. "It's this way."

They marched hastily across the bridge, quickening their step as they passed through the entrance of the plant. Cloud turned to see Wedge signal to him, remaining stationary in the tunnel as lookout. The four continued down the wide unattended hallway, a series of orange filament lamps their only light, until they came to a dead-end, a single electronically-locked door their only means of proceeding farther into the facility. Jessie looked up at Barret as she crouched next to the doorway and, when his nod of satisfaction finally came, she pulled her laptop from the battered and bruised rucksack she carried and began to work at the security panel.

"This your first time in a Reactor?" Barret asked as he and Cloud stood over her, counting the seconds before their next move. Cloud snorted.

"I used to work for Shinra." he said coldly. "What do *you* think?"

"The Planet's full of Mako energy." said Barret, frowning. "People here use it every day. It's the lifeblood of the Planet, but the suits at Shinra keep suckin' it out with these weird machines.

The more they suck out the Mako, the weaker the Planet gets. It's only a matter of time before..."

"Look, I'm not here to listen to your speeches." Cloud interjected. "Let's just hurry and get outta here."

"Ex-SOLDIER, huh?" growled Barret. "Tifa's old friend don't cut it for me; I don't trust ya. You're comin' with me from now on!"

"Figures." he muttered.

"Code deciphered." said Jessie, redirecting Barret's attention as he opened his mouth to reply. There came a thunderous *clunk*, and she and Biggs stepped forward to heave the heavy doors apart. They opened into a second, slimmer hallway, many corridors and stairways branching off from the polished tile floor.

"Which way?" asked Biggs.

"Straight ahead." said Jessie, her eyes locked firmly on the monitor of her laptop, reading from the blueprints of the Reactor's interior. "Take the third turn on your right. Big doors. It's marked 'Machine Room'."

Biggs led them as instructed, carefully checking the relative corridor before disappearing into its shadows. He brought them to a large, spacious chamber, adorned by several tall pipes and oil-stained pistons throughout. The air inside was tight and sticky, irritating to breathe, a few useless ventilation turbines rotating endlessly overhead, the multiple clicks inharmonious. A row of computer panels lined the back wall, the faces of all but one dead, above which hung numerous caution signs, warning of the dangerous gases present in the building's lower levels.

The rusting silver doors to an elevator stood in one corner, the lift seemingly the only other access to the machine room besides the adjacent office. All but Biggs crossed the long room and entered the elevator. The interior was a mass of buttons, their markings letters of an ancient alphabet. Cloud hit the 'down' button by the door and, when all three were safely inside, they began to descend.

"Little by little, the Reactors'll drain out all o' the Planet's life, and that'll be that." Barret continued to lecture. Cloud looked up

at him blankly, shrugging, but made no effort to respond. “Don’t you get it? The Planet’s dyin’, Cloud!”

“That’s not my problem.” came the flat reply. “The only thing I care about is finishin’ the mission before Shinra send in any soldiers or security robots.”

Barret gritted his teeth, his eyes screaming with rage, but said nothing. He turned away from Cloud and pulled the bullet belt from around his waist. Sliding open the slot on his gun-arm, he thrust the belt inside, cursing in silence. Cloud looked up to see Jessie staring at him, but she glanced away quickly, her expression growing nervous. There was a drone from the elevator wires and, with a smooth deceleration, their ride came to a gradual halt. When the doors finally parted, Cloud and Barret moved hurriedly out.

They emerged on a balcony overlooking the pale green pool of liquid Mako that danced around the base of the Reactor. Cloud calculated that they were now beneath the earth; the vibrant streams only in abundance below the surface. Before them, a single walkway extended out over the depths to the core activation system and pressure valve at the centre of the main Reactor. The valve was the control device for the enormous cylinder that was the protective casing to the Reactor’s internal machinery. It grew both high above and low below them, a mass of large pipes penetrating it at many different stages, arcing down to extract the energising Mako from the rivers. The substance swirled around the foot of the cylinder, staining its thick metal walls. Bright mists of the toxic fumes rose up through the tower, seeping onto the walkway where the two stood, and all the platforms they could see on the levels above.

As predicted by Barret, there were no scientists or technicians working at that time of night, a single sleeping guard the only other life. The man sat in his chair by the activation system at the far end of the grid, his arms folded, his red cap pulled down over his face, snoring. On the large monitor beside the guard, Cloud could see himself, captured by the overhead surveillance system.

They would have to be quick now that they were in full view of the enemy.

He began forward, his strides long and purposeful. The twin metal grating lines below his boots rattled noisily as he stalked across the walkway. Drawing nearer, he saw the man stir in his chair. The guard groaned, stretching his arms into the air, and glanced up, his eyes filling with fright. As he reached for his gun, Cloud's fist connected devastatingly with his face, the spray of blood splattering over his uniform.

The man howled in pain and confusion, groping clumsily at his nose as he tried to stand. Cloud kicked him hard in the stomach, the blow forcing him to double over as he cried out a second time. He stared vacantly at the helpless guard, his thoughts cold and merciless, watching as Barret pushed past him and grabbed the man by the throat, effortlessly hurling him backwards into the control system. The panels crackled and died as he smashed against them, a faint smoke escaping as he slumped to the floor.

Barret towered over the unmoving body and grinned; a wicked, vengeful grin; his hatred for Shinra leaking through the glazed expression. After a moment he looked away, his focus fixed on the pressure valve of the Reactor; the machinery's only manual shut-down mechanism. It was placed on a semi-circular panel which extended from the main cylinder, surrounded by a series of diodes and levers. The red diamond emblem had been painted slightly above the valve, the words 'Shinra Electric Power Company' written across it in gold. There came a strange humming sound from within, the noise dull and infectious.

"When we put this place into meltdown, it ain't gonna be nothin' more than a hunk o' junk!" snorted Barret, motioning for Cloud to join him by the valve. "Okay, SOLDIER-boy, you set the bomb."

"Shouldn't you do it?" Cloud asked, puzzled.

"Just do it! I wanna make sure you don't pull nothin'."

"Whatever, man."

Taking the device from Barret, Cloud found the small plastic explosive lighter than expected. He knelt down, concentrating as

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