

FFVII Too Much In The Sun by Glass Shard

Part One: ECHOES

"What we're going for is total annihilation," said the young technician earnestly, the alarming words sounding strange coming from his thin, mouse-like face, "Unless this weapon can pack enough punch with the first blow to take out the target, than the dragon can easily recover, double back, and attack before another shot can be gotten off. That would rather squash its usefulness." The young man scribbled something onto the over-sized clipboard in his hands, then looked up at his superiors for instruction.

"You sure seem to know a lot about dragons, Neto."

"Oh, of course, sir, we always research our target to the fullest extent before we even think about the weapons we'll use to destroy it. That's the scientific way. May as well give ourselves the advantage." Neto sniggered messily and the two men looking down on him rolled their eyes, his humor lost upon them. The first of them, an aging fellow with rusty-colored hair and bright aqua eyes, lines stretching across his handsome face betraying boredom and impatience, waggled a hand towards the tech hurriedly.

"Well, get on with it, Neto, if you think the damned thing's ready!" he said in exasperation. The tech nodded and walked off, calling signals to his assistants. The man watched him go in aggravation. "I swear, Cloud, sometimes I think all this bullshit isn't worth it. I never thought I would start to hate a desk job."

"You don't hate it, Reno, you're just having a particularly bad day. And so am I, if you want the truth. We need some excitement. Some adventure."

Reno laughed darkly, eyeing his friend in bemusement. "Haven't you had enough adventure to last you your life," he asked.

The other man just smiled. He was dressed strangely compared to Reno. While the latter wore a standard black business suit, slightly frumpled with a collar that never seemed to stay buttoned, Cloud wore roomy black pants with black boots pulled midway up his calves, and a hunter green tee-shirt stretched tight across his chest. A black leather jacket protected him from the chilling AC and green leather gloves kept his hands warm. But like Reno, he wore a pin on his jacket declaring he was co-head of Shinra security, his name, Cloud Strife, printed boldly across it.

"Are you kidding me?" he finally answered Reno, "I haven't had a real adventure in years. Not since Scarlet rose up outta nowhere and tried to take down Reeve. Just constant boredom, signing papers, supervising these damned boring tests, and training new lackeys to do what we say."

Reno grinned, raised an imaginary gun, and fired into the air. "That Scarlet," he reminisced, "She was quite easily handled, if I remember correctly." He fired again, taking out whole battalions in his mind. "Trying to reclaim a little glory, eh, bitch? Trying to ruin what we've all tried so hard to repair, eh?" He fired off a few more rounds, smiling wickedly. "I don't think I've ever seen a sadder funeral than hers. It's pretty depressing when you have to hire pallbearers, because you don't have friends enough to carry you away, don't you think?"

Cloud only nodded, watching the technicians scrambling to set up the massive rocket launcher they'd constructed. The thing was huge, the size of a tank, yet the genius of it was it weighed only a slight three hundred pounds. Neto and his science goons had really outdone themselves. From the look of the thing, it seemed it could take out whole platoons of Da-Chao Dragons. Reno poked Cloud in the shoulder suddenly, pulling his attention away.

"But that's not what I was talking about," he said eagerly, a strand of his red hair falling into his eye, "Before that, in the days of the Shinras and Meteor. That was adventure. Scarlet's lame attempts weren't anything compared to that."

"You mean in the days when we'd bad mouth each other whenever we met?" asked Cloud laughingly, "When we tried to take each other's heads off? Nah, you can have those kinds of adventures, Reno. Those aren't exactly days I think of with fondness." Cloud scratched at his nose, images from his past, images he preferred not to think on, snapping into his mind, flipping themselves before his eyes quickly, like a horrible picture book. Green eyes, fire, mako, and blood. Bodies, a dead friend, betrayal. He shook his head slightly. He'd had thirteen years to heal from that madness, but even now, he knew, thirteen years wasn't enough. His lifetime, however long it extended, wouldn't be enough. But he ignored it, and was grateful when Neto's squeaky, excited voice called for their attention.

Mr. Reno, Mr. Strife, "he addressed them proudly, "This is Dragon Weapon."

"Oh, brother. . . "Reno sighed.

The Shinra technicians, their blue lab coats slapping at their calves as they walked, wheeled the monstrosity into position, then proceeded to load it with a three foot long razor-finned missile, wickedly pointed. Neto gave the signals for the hangar doors to be opened, and the techs rushed to follow orders, the immense, rickety, wooden doors sliding apart with a horrible report. Bright afternoon sunlight poured into the gloomy hangar. It didn't last though. At Neto's word, five young employees entered from outside tugging at the leads of a thirty foot tall Da-Chao Dragon, which immediately blocked the entrance and killed the illumination..

"Son of a . . ." Cloud's voice trailed away as he reached for the handle of his gun. "Neto, you idiot, that thing could take out this place with a single breath!" He looked to Reno who'd also drawn his weapon, a dangerous looking nightstick with a two-pronged tip, and they split up, going automatically into attack stances, prepared to take the creature out, science be damned. Neto approached them quickly, hands held up reassuringly before him. There was a smug grin on his face.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen, sirs! It's not real! It's a model! A duplicate! A fake!"

Cloud eyed the technician warily. Seems someone had gotten a thesaurus for Christmas. He straightened, holstering his pistol away in the flap of his jacket.

"A model?" he asked, "That's a damned realistic model."

Neto beamed, and Reno grimaced.

"Of course, it's realistic, sir. We've researched the Da-Chao Dragons exhaustively. Bone structure, behavior, skin, offensive capabilities, defensive capabilities. We've constructed this replica out of mythril, which is very near to how tough the dragon's skin actually is. It's teeth are actual dragon teeth gotten from the fire caves, as are its claws and scales. Exhaustive, sirs."

"Exhaustive is right. I say you technicians need lives."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reno. Shall we commence with the test?"

Cloud shook his head, not to deny commencement of the testing, but in befuddled disbelief.

"That thing's made out of mythril?" he asked breathless, "It must have cost of a fortune! And you're going to blow it up?"

Neto nodded, not seeing Cloud's point. "Mayor Kisaragi said to spare no expense. She wants a weapon that'll do the job."

"Doesn't sound like Yuffie, "Cloud muttered to himself, "I've never known a cheaper woman. Alright, then, whatever. Fire the thing off."

Neto nodded again, his favorite response, and gestured to the small group of Turks who'd been standing in the corner waiting. They talked among themselves for a moment, then one of them, a lanky, black-haired young man, crisply suited and starkly neat approached Dragon Weapon. He hoisted himself in the seat and put his eyes to the sights.

"Watch your aim, Berk, "Neto called to the young Turk cautiously, "You misfire and it's coming out of your salary."

Reno stifled a laugh.

"Did Neto just tell one of the Turks to watch his aim? Ha, if Rude were here, he'd be furious. Turks don't know how to miss." Cloud didn't answer him, but he marked the tone of Reno's voice. He'd been a member of the organization once. He still kept some of that Turk pride and spirit with him.

"Alright, Mr. Strife, Mr. Reno, behold! Four, three, two, one. . . " At the word "fire", Berk let the missile fly with a vengeance, straight into where the Da-Chao Dragon's heart would be. Having witnessed Neto's thoroughness, Cloud had no doubt if he were to look, a perfectly wrought heart could be found sitting in its proper place in the dragon's chest. But he'd never know. The model exploded violently as the missile did it's work, Berk thrown from Dragon Weapon with the force of the kick-back. Huge plates of nearly indestructible mythril hurdled everywhere, embedding themselves in the wooden walls, sticking there, twanging. Cloud picked himself up, looking around. A shard of the stuff was stuck in his brow, he could feel the warm blood trickling down into his right eye.

"Reno?" he called lowly, looking around for his partner.

"That was an explosion, "the red-haired man said suddenly from Cloud's side, "That enough adventure for you, Mr. Strife? Hey, you're bleeding there, you alright?"

"Yeah." Cloud wiped the blood from his eye absently, then turned to the model. There wasn't a model anymore, just a twenty foot wide crater containing a few smoking debris. A quick survey proved that no one was hurt. The technicians were

in fact, quite thrilled.

"Beautiful," Neto muttered gleefully. His assistants agreed with him whole-heartedly, patting each other on the backs. The Turks remained stoic in the corner, their cool Turk masks hiding all emotions. Even Berk, after he'd been picked up from the ground with a broken arm, only shrugged painfully and, at Cloud's orders, began trudging briskly to the infirmary.

"Is that it, then?" Reno asked in impatience, straightening his hair which had flown out of place with the force of the explosion. "Can we go?"

Neto was conversing earnestly with the other technicians, and looked up at Reno as though he'd forgotten he was there. "Excuse me? Oh, sir, I'm not sure. I'm afraid we may have done our job too well. I think we'll take down some of the oomph from Dragon Weapon. It's too strong. If we could just have one more day. . . "

Cloud smiled at the silly little man. "Too strong?" he repeated, "Yuffie wouldn't have it any other way. Page the Highwind, crate that sucker up, and send it along to Wutai. Reno, do me a favor and call Reeve when you get back to the office. He needs to have someone from accounting accompany this over there and make sure we get paid in full."

"Don't you trust Mayor Kisaragi?" Reno asked, grinning.

"About as far as I can throw her."

~*~

Cloud Strife closed his office door with a silent click, locking it securely before turning away. He took a moment to lean against the stark, white wall, eyes shut blissfully. He was tired. The day had worn on him hard and his forehead throbbed beneath the white bandage the nurse had wrapped it with. He ran a gloved hand through his tangled blonde hair, the spikes popping back into place when he was done. He sighed.

The Shinra building could be pleasingly peaceful at the right hours. It was nearly eleven by Cloud's watch. The regulars had all gone home, and the after hours security guards had all settled down enough so that the atmosphere had lost its official air. Of course, Cloud was supposed to not like this. As security head along with Reno, by rights he should've been out checking up on the guards, making sure they were alert and wary, checking every room at least once every two hours, checking the main exits and entrances hourly, and watching the monitors like hawks. Shinra had developed a lot of widely envied technology in the past years. Competing companies were itching to run their fingers through the development department's files, he knew.

Adjusting his jacket, he began the long walk down the hall to the elevators. It was a lengthy journey from the far east wing of the 59th floor to the train station. The heels of his boots met the cold floor silently, denying him even their companionship. Far away, he could hear the moaning of the air conditioning units. From the floor above, he could hear some ambitious Shinra employee working after hours on a project or a proposal.

Reno had gone home hours before, asking him to go for a drink before leaving, but Cloud had refused. He was feeling a little down tonight. He didn't have the faintest idea why. Things were going well. The weapon that Yuffie Kisaragi, mayor of Wutai after her father's death, had commissioned met her specifications precisely and then some. They were to receive 550,000 gil for it. Cloud got two percent of that in addition to his normal salary, an impressive little bonus. Tifa was thrilled about it. What else? The trainees were coming along nicely, and just last week, they'd promoted a new Turk. Cloud was proud of his Turks. They were efficient, reliable, and hard working. But most of all, most importantly to the man, they were moral. Shinra under Reeve's presidentship was an honest company. They worked for the people, not against them. They developed power sources that functioned harmoniously with the planet, allowing a partnership between humanity and nature for the first time since the hunters and gatherers of the past. The Shinra of today was a far cry from what it had been when Rufus and his father had commanded it. Cloud was proud. Much of it was because of him. Meteor's destruction had given them a clean canvas on which to paint. And they'd painted beautifully. Midgar spread about the majestic Shinra towers in gratefulness, no longer concealed from view by ghastly plates. The slums still existed, yes, but not to the extent which they had in the past. And there were programs now, Shinra-aided programs to help those unfortunates who needed it; help with jobs, family, and money. It was nearly too good to be true, but Midgar was a changed place. Sure, prejudice still existed between the classes, but that was simply human nature and nothing Cloud did could change it. He was still fulfilling his promise to the planet. To life. He did so in small steps, but he was doing it surely. It wasn't as it had been all those years ago, when the planet's future had been defined in such stark terms: life or death.

Things were going great. Why then, the melancholy? Cloud found himself suddenly at the elevators. He punched a button, not really paying attention, thoughts turned backwards to the past. To think it had started with one man. He hadn't thought of him in so long. He preferred not to think of him. His ghostly visage seemed too far away now, like a nightmare of

years ago that had faded with each day. But a nightmare had to be truly terrible to stay in the memory so long. Green eyes, fire, mako, blood. They were a mash of emotions, of images only. They flooded his mind when he let them. Even after thirteen years. Nothing had made sense then, really. It had all happened so suddenly. Years without anything, years of training to be a SOLDIER, monotonous drills, elementary exams, days, weeks, months would go by and nothing out of the ordinary would happen. It had driven Cloud out of his head, but he'd put up with it, that one goal keeping him going. To be in SOLDIER. Of course, fate had kicked him in the head with that one. For whatever reason, he'd failed. And his entire life had instantaneously began to fall apart. One event after another, horrible. Green eyes, fire, mako, blood. Bodies, a dead friend, and betrayal. But years were cold, they'd dulled the hurt. Eighteen of them could do that to you. Cloud thought back on his mother and missed her terribly, but he only thought of the good times, not of the night she'd been burned alive. He thought back on his hometown of Nibelheim and remembered the night by the well with Tifa, the peaceful though lonely sojourns of his into the mountains to think, the few brief memories of his father. The hurt had been shoved away and the joys embraced. That was how the human heart healed. Even after he'd come, bringing the end, bringing his pain, Cloud now only thought on him distantly. He'd killed him then, though he'd had to kill him again later. So he was dead. And that was how Cloud was able to go on.

"Why the hell am I drudging this all up?" he whispered to himself. He stood in the back of the elevator, alone, the annoying tinny music filtering to his ears from the speaker above. Then, with a snap of his head, a blink of his eyes, he remembered. He'd had a dream last night. He hadn't recalled it until now, but he'd dreamt of the past last night. He hadn't let himself dream of the chaos of the Meteor incident for years. He'd forced his subconscious into compliance after it had nearly driven him insane in the months after the destruction of Midgar. Every night the nightmares had slammed at his skull while he slept. Not a night went by that those terrible things didn't attack him. Green eyes, fire, mako, blood. But they'd stopped. Time and his own will had caged them. Until last night.

It'd been the typical dream, but Cloud recalled it now with an unconscious grimace contorting his features. It always started out dark. But dark was such an insipid word. It began black, like tar in his eyes, a velvet sack over his head. He'd blink, making sure his eyes were open, but it would still be black. Then voices began, anonymous things that slowly crescendoed into recognizable tones. Aeris, pleading with him, screaming for help through a voice choked with blood. Tifa, crying, hating him and swearing at him for his betrayal, desperate to know the reason why he'd given away the Black Materia. Barret's curses, hating him for his unstable mind. Cid insulting his actions, his behavior. And Red XIII, growling ferally, snapping out ire in unintelligible snarls. Then silence. Horrible in its emptiness. Then the green. It would begin as a barely discernible curling about the edges of his blackened vision, until suddenly it came to a vicious boil, flooding towards him. He could always feel its heat. It didn't matter that he was dreaming, he could feel the fires burning at his flesh. That was the mako. It would burn him until he was dust, a smudge of ash of the ground, immobile, invisible. Nothing. And then every horrible event played itself out around him. People died, their murderer oblivious to his screaming. The small village burned again, flames reaching so high in the sky, when you would have rightly thought they'd burn upside down, reaching to hell instead of to heaven. Always that black mantled man flitted about, green eyes blazing coldly, arm of silver cutting everything away. Years played back like a bad rerun before him, until the last scene, the finale rolled by, and Cloud saw himself, bloodied but holding Ultima Weapon resolutely, facing the green-eyed warrior. Only for some reason, here, what had really happened was forgotten. Cloud didn't emerge victor from the final duel. He would slash out, Cloud would watch himself slash out, but the blade never met its mark. His opponent never even had to move, and the sword missed again and again, butted away by some invisible field.

"God damn you, hit him!" he'd hear himself cry out, "Can't you hit him when he won't even fight you? Can't you do one thing right in your life?" But Cloud would only drop his sword, searching out the antagonizing voice, his own voice, and the green-eyed man needed to second chance. His one strike was true. Cloud watched impassionately as he was cut down, the Masamune sliding from his body sickeningly. A smile at the lips of his killer. Then a laugh. Then Sephiroth, damn that name, strode towards the dust, the ash and Cloud saw what scared him the most. It wasn't Sephiroth holding the Masamune. It wasn't the son of Lucrecia who'd cut him down. It was Cloud Strife, his blonde hair spiked and slicing the air, his bright blue eyes mocking him.

And then he would wake up.

"Stupid dream," he muttered. He could say that now. It was a stupid dream. He had killed Sephiroth. His subconscious just desired to keep the game going. But Cloud had declared checkmate long ago.

There was a sharp ping and the elevator doors slid silently open. Shaking off all thoughts of the past, Cloud stepped outside, expecting to see Howard, the security guard scheduled to watch the side employee exits that night, give him a wave and a respectful smile. But no. Instead of the bright, almost harsh light of the lobby, it was dark outside. Cloud turned around, suddenly fearful, but the elevator slid closed as though sensing evil, and retreated, leaving him alone. It smelled strange here. He backed up against the wall, where he knew the the lobby light switch was. He found it and flicked it on.

"Oh."

The room he was in certainly wasn't the lobby. In his absentmindedness, he must've pushed the wrong button. This place hadn't seen use in ages. He could tell by the crumpled stacks of boxes, the scattered papers, the inch thick layer of dust sprinkled over everything. No cobwebs of course, Reeve had a bit of arachnophobia, had the entire building sprayed and tarped every six months. Cloud scratched at his bandaged forehead and for a reason he didn't understand, instead of turning back around and heading home, he stepped away from the wall and into the sprawling complex, something unnamed pulling him onward.

It seemed familiar to him. This wasn't surprising. In his twelve years as head of security, he knew the Shinra building inside out. He had to have been up here at some point. Beneath the dust, he could see the room had once been very modern. Very mechanical, nearly like a laboratory. Anonymous machines lay silent against the walls. A large glass dome occupied one area of the room, though it's walls had been shattered and now lay gleaming dangerously against the tile floor. A catwalk encircled the place, leading back to a control booth set high, and more rows of machinery. The air buzzed slightly, making the dust motes vibrate and the hair on Cloud's arms stand on end.

"I'm such an asshole," he breathed to himself suddenly, "Such an ass. This is Hojo's lab. This is where we found Red." He approached the broken dome, nearly stepping inside to examine in curiosity, but some foreboding sense kept him from it. "Over there is where the blood trail led away. Hojo's assistant had lain there too, I think. And Jenova. . . the structure holding Jenova was in that room over there." The name of the monster quashed Cloud's excitement over the memories. He walked about the room with more solemnity now. It was all so old, so disused, and discontinued. Well, thank God it was discontinued. He didn't like to imagine the things that had gone on in that room during Hojo's reign. Though he knew too well of it. He'd been a part of it.

He pushed deeper inside. It really was large. Every time he thought he was about to hit a wall, he moved boxes aside and discovered more. He didn't know what it was, but he couldn't make himself go back. It was late, his long day pressed hard upon him, his head ached, he was tired, but he couldn't make his feet take him back to the elevator. He continued sloshing through the dust, papers, and debris but something inside told him he was getting closer to whatever it was he was looking for. Suddenly, the walls, which had begun to narrow down into something approaching a corridor, stretched away dramatically, the ceilings raised, the floor lowered about a foot, and a huge room opened up before him. That's when Cloud collapsed.

"I've been here before. . ." he whispered. His eyes opened wide, all weariness forgotten. He began to taste fear in the back of his throat. His pulse quickened and his hands turned cold. He shoved them in his pockets as he picked himself up, almost embarrassed at falling. Green eyes, fire, mako, blood. They'd done it to him here. Those five years he'd spent missing, that he'd forgotten, repressed for so long, he'd been here in this room. This wasn't a sudden realization. He knew he'd been under Hojo's imprisonment for that time, the madman had told him that himself before he, Vincent, and his friends had torn him apart. But none of his memories from that time had been very clear, they'd all been muddled by pain, and the green haze of mako-- this place-- it terrified him. Being here again, Cloud had to fight to keep from running.

Trembling slightly despite his best efforts not to, he made his way about the room. Here was the table they'd so often bolted him to. Needles on a rack were ones they might've used. And this chamber here, with the thick lead door, a mako radiation chamber. . . distinct memories came to him suddenly of being thrown inside and allowed to scream for hours. Frowning deeply, he found a dilapidated desk chair and threw himself into it. Its wheels, rusted solid, didn't move under his weight. He looked about the room in a mixture of horror and anger.

"They did it to me here. . ." he said, his voice raspy. He spoke out loud as though to hide from his mind, which threw constant images of the torture before his eyes. "For five years, oh God, how did I live through it? I can remember. . . everyday, the mako injections. Constantly poisoned. I'd be allowed to heal, then poisoned again, and again. A never-ending cycle. What were they trying to do? I know. Hojo wanted another Sephiroth. He wanted me to give him power he couldn't give himself. Did he ever talk to me? He must have." Cloud shut his eyes, trying to recall things more clearly. He wanted to understand the scientist's motives. The pain, the robbery of his life, it might be more bearable to him if he could only recall Hojo's intentions better. Then, he'd have someone he could blame without qualms.

"Tell me about your mother. . ." Hojo's voice was cold, scientific, just as all of him was. Cloud had lain on the table, his wrists bleeding, sores that had just began healing broken open again after the mako treatment. His mind was just beginning to resurface after sinking into unconsciousness from the pain. Hojo and his assistants had discovered though, that each time it resurfaced, less of it came up. The more mako they inundated his blood with, the fewer sane memories were left to him. It was a terrible switch-off.

"My mother. . ." he'd began, his tongue feeling thick, his mind tired and sore. He told of her physical features, of his love for her, her cooking, her smile, her laugh, her devotion to him. He forgot that he was talking to an enemy and he let his

soul spill away because it comforted him. Hojo only nodded coldly, not really listening.

"Tell me of the night Sephiroth went mad."

This was harder. This was painful. And full of gaps. Cloud would fumble through the events, his mind racing but coming up blank in many places. But he knew this was wrong! If he'd been there, why couldn't he remember? Feeling Hojo's intense gaze upon him as he hesitated, Cloud would race to fill in the story. Suddenly, things would come to mind, images of events that seemed clear enough, yet didn't entirely make sense. Perhaps he had been in SOLDIER when he'd returned home. Maybe he hadn't killed Sephiroth himself. Maybe he had. He just couldn't recall. . . a green haze smudged away anything definite and it hurt too much to try and remember.

"But I remember now." Cloud sat up in the rotted chair, looking the room over. How he wished that Hojo was there so he could bash his head in with a rock hard fist. Five years gone, and more taken away besides. But it didn't matter now, did it. Cloud smiled to himself weakly, passing a gloved hand over his face, rubbing hard at his eyes. Distractedly, he leaned over the examining table. Raising a hand, he swept away some of the dust, revealing it's finely polished surface, nearly like a mirror. He looked at himself there, almost for reassurance. He didn't seem a day over sixteen. For a thirty-four year old to be able to say that was something else, but it made Cloud nauseous. It was the mako. It had done things to his body. Years ago, Tifa had loved to tell him how young he looked, how healthy he was, how lucky it seemed for the years to be so kind. But she'd stopped that after a while. When she began to get older, not noticeably older, just as should naturally happen as years roll on, while he never aged, she began to worry. He remained young and his blue eyes never lost even a degree of their mako burn. It was unsettling. But Cloud was grateful she didn't mention it anymore. She knew somehow.

"I'm a monster," the man sighed, not really meaning it. He could relate with Vincent sometimes. Though as far as Cloud knew, he'd been thankfully spared from having Jenova cells pumped into him. Or had he. Sephiroth had always hinted at the possibility. To hell with hinting, he'd flat out told Cloud that he was a Jenova puppet. The way he'd controlled the young man's mind only backed up his claim. But Cloud wasn't sure. He didn't think it was true. It didn't matter now though. That freak was dead.

"To hell with this shit," he said suddenly standing. "I'm just dragging my feet through a lot of dead shit. Anyone that ever meant anything to this lab is dead and buried. Hojo, you idiot, I care about you so little, that I'm not even going to think about you. And Sephiroth. . . I figure I showed you all you needed to be shown. Goodbye." He stood violently from the chair, fury thick in his actions. This place didn't need to be here anymore. First thing in the morning, he'd go to Reeve and ask why it hadn't been torn down and replaced with something useful. And then he'd make sure that it was.

"Cloud."

His breath caught in his throat as the low voice carried his name to his ears. He turned around in a panic, clutching at his gun.

"Who's there?" he called softly, though his voice wavered more than he would have liked.

There wasn't an answer, but then, Cloud hadn't expected one. Mind's playing havoc with me tonight, he thought to himself nervously. He gave the horrible room another glance and then began walking back the way he'd come, perhaps, a little too quickly.

"Cloud."

The voice called again, a little stronger this time, neither male nor female in tone. He didn't answer. His only response was to walk faster, fear causing sweat to stand out and sting his eyes. I don't hear that, he told himself firmly. The halls narrowed again as he left the mako treatment room and re-entered the main part of Hojo's lab, the glass lying broken on the floor shining brightly. Cloud had to squint his eyes for a second. The shards had seemed to be covered in blood, fresh blood that ran in rivulets and collected on the floor. He blinked, and the gore was gone. He ran now, knocking over the packing boxes in his panic. They tumbled noisily, their contents breaking, but they couldn't drown out the voice.

"Cloud. . . Cloud!"

It was fairly screaming now, screaming in anger. He slammed himself against the elevator doors, desperately skidding to a halt and jabbing the down button again and again. The voice repeated his name, each time in more agitation. Cloud felt that if he didn't get out soon, its owner would appear and jab something into his heart.

"Cloud!"

Finally! The doors opened silently, unaware that anything was wrong. He threw himself through, and pushed the L button as though he were on fire. The voice called his name one final time, in a shriek so high and piercing, it cut through his head like a pike. The elevator closed at last and the dark lab slid from sight. Cloud sank to his knees, back against the wall, just as something slammed itself into the doors, making a reverberating thud that shook him to his bones. It sounded as though some huge, ungodly fist had pounded the elevator door in frustration at his escape. The echo of the noise, and

of the voice who'd cried his name, rang through the man's head the entire ride down.

~*~

To live in the town of Icicle Inn and enter a conversation with a remark about the weather was a little frowned upon by the natives. It was the northernmost city in the world. Residents sweated when the thermostat hit twenty above. But dammit, Arik Bivs didn't bloody care!

"It's friggin' cold outside!" he declared, entering the bar and throwing himself on the stool closest to the fire. The place's few patrons barely looked up at his statement. The town was small and they all knew each other, but there was absolutely no way to respond to such a comment without wasting words. He was right. It was cold.

"What'll it be, Arik?" the bald-headed barkeeper asked chummily. Arik grinned, rubbing his hands together gingerly.

"Lessee, I been coming in this bar for fifteen years and ordering the same thing: a shot of Jack Daniels and a shot of rum. Maybe I'll try something different today. How about. . . hmm. . . a shot of whiskey and a shot of Lucky Seven?"

"Surgeon general says excessive drinking can lead to liver disease," the barkeep remarked jokingly. Arik grinned, not really listening.

"Surgeon general is going to put you out of a job."

"Nah, as long as there are thirsty men, there'll be a place in the world for me."

"Hallelujah." Arik leaned his elbows forward onto the bar, settling down comfortably, wishing to enjoy the warmth of the fire against his face and hands. After his friend brought him his drinks, his insides began to warm up too, a pleasant fire burning cheerfully within him.

"So what have you been up to today?" the barkeep asked conversationally. Arik shrugged.

"Same old. Can't do too much more on m'roof until those new shingles come in. Holzoff tells me the weather should be letting up any day now, but the snow seems as thick as ever if you ask me. The trucks won't even try to come through until this blizzard lets up. I'm stranded, so to speak. And bored out of my mind."

The barkeep shrugged, handing a beer to a customer seated in one the booths.

"You could always move to Costa del Sol," he said laughingly, "Sorry to break it to you, Arik, but you live here by choice, so you have no right to complain."

The man smiled, watching the empty shot glass before him. He didn't know why anyone would want to live in Icicle Inn. It seemed more a place for hermits, than sociable men. A person could come there and lose himself in the blinding whiteness of the snow-scape. Why had Arik moved there? He didn't even remember anymore. But it didn't matter, it'd become his home. He shrugged to the barkeeper, then went back to his rum.

The tavern door blew open behind him suddenly and Arik shivered as icy air ran cold fingers over his back. He didn't turn though, he only watched the man who entered now with distracted interest as he walked rather stiffly up to the bar and ordered a drink. From the corner of his eyes, he saw he was a foreign fellow with deeply tanned skin and black hair. His coat looked brand new, as did his boots and gloves. Not from around her, not used to this cold, Arik thought to himself with a bit of an internal smile.

Drink in hand, the man took the stool next to Arik and drank gratefully.

"I needed that," he said, plopping the glass down and smacking his lips.

"Hullo, stranger," Arik said before he could stop himself, feeling quite friendly. The man looked to Arik in surprise, then smiled.

"Hullo. Quite a bit of snow out, eh?"

"It happens occasionally this side o' the equator. Where ya from?"

"Midgar. I'm visiting my aunt Opal. You probably know her."

"That I do. You must be Holzoff's nephew then. Have you been in to see him?"

The man shook his head rather shamefully. "The Great Glacier's been rather insurmountable since I arrived. I went to hire a guide to take me up there but he said it was impossible, all the roads are snowed in. And I'm not a very good snowboarder. Give me a skateboard, sure, but me and the cold don't mix."

"Well, maybe I can give you a lesson or two. I know Holzoff gets a mite lonely up there doing his research and all. We could try for it tomorrow."

"Can't." The man shrugged sadly, gesturing for the barkeep to pour him another round. "I have to be back in Midgar."

"That's a shame," Arik said tonelessly.

"You wouldn't happen to know where I could rent a chocobo, would you? I was going to wait for the transport trucks, but my son's birthday is Wednesday, and I'd rather not miss it. He's going to be twelve. Only happens once, y'know."

Arik grinned, beginning to button up his coat again. "So I've heard. C'mon. There's a place just a few buildings down that rents them out. I'll take you."

"That'll be eleven gil," the barkeep said. Holzoff's nephew tossed a couple coins into the man's hand and thanked him. Arik gestured carelessly, a signal for his total to be added onto his ever growing tab. The two men exited the tavern, arms wrapped close to their bodies to retain warmth.

"This chocobo fellow isn't exactly your average joe," said Arik as they were tramping through the snow, his breath like smoke billowing from his mouth. "A lot of people are a little thrown off when they first meet him, but they shouldn't be, he's a nice enough sort. Not too friendly, but not too mean either. He just likes to be left to himself. I've had a coupla drinks with him in the past, he will talk to ya, if he decides you're worth it."

"So you're friends?" the man asked, teeth chattering uncontrollably against the cold.

"Mmmm. . . more like acquaintances. He's from Midgar, like yourself. I think his friends all live there. Maybe you know him? Named Vincent?"

"Midgar isn't like here, sir," the man said, smiling, "Here, everyone knows everyone. Midgar has a population of about 400,000. There, even after you think you know someone, you'll find you really don't."

"Ah. Well, here's the place."

They stood before a rather beat up old shack, graying and a little dilapidated. A small painted sign hung on the door. Chocobos: for sale and lease. The snow piled high about it, almost up to the windows, but a small path had been dug about the door and after Arik gave a polite little knock, the two men stood in the space expectantly. After a moment, they heard someone moving about inside and then locks unclasp sharply. The door opened and Arik's young companion had trouble keeping from gibbering like an idiot.

"Good afternoon to you, Vincent," Arik remarked casually.

The man standing in the doorway nodded curtly. Holzoff's nephew stared. He had red eyes. They glowed brightly from beneath his mess of black hair. His face, young and handsome was marred by long scars that ran the length of his jaw cruelly. But his red eyes. . . the young man couldn't believe it. He looked the fellow over from head to toe. He was dressed entirely in black, from his boots to the sweeping coat he wore. He was holding a strange metallic tube in one hand. . . no, that was his arm. His left arm was a wicked looking claw that extended from his elbow, five hooked fingers pronging out at one end. It glinted with his every movement.

Arik saw his companion staring and rolled his eyes.

"This young fellow wants to rent a chocobo from you," he said, trying to get the ball rolling. Vincent nodded again.

"Come inside," he said, holding the door wide for them. Arik pushed the younger man through, then followed.

The shack was pleasantly warm. A bright fire glowed in the hearth. The place was sparsely furnished, but what was there was clean and serviceable. The house contained only one large room. That in turn was divided into corners. A bed stuck far back against the left wall, a table and chairs against the right with the fireplace separating them. Nearest the front door was an easel, the painting there hastily covered with a paint-splattered piece of canvas. Other paintings were stacked against the walls, their fronts hidden from view. A desk and typewriter, along with a radio, lay beside them. A lone door to the left led back into the stable and bathroom.

Vincent led them to the table and motioned for them to sit down. He took off his coat and hung it from a hook on the wall, then he too sat, his claw resting on the table. Holzoff's nephew stuck a hand out and Vincent made as though he'd shake it with the claw, smiling ever so slightly as the young man paled. But he of course relented at the last moment and stuck out his good hand.

"Where are you headed?" he asked, staring him in the eye.

"Midgar," the man answered truthfully, "I've been here visiting relations, but I have to get back to the city by Wednesday."

"Why not wait for the trucks? What's so important? Even by chocobo it's dangerous out there. It's been very bleak, and the wolves are hungry."

"It's my son's birthday. I promised him I'd be back in time. He'd be heartbroken if I didn't make it. And my wife would give me hell." Holzoff's nephew laughed nervously, and Arik smiled. Vincent only nodded.

"Midgar. You'll need a Gold Chocobo then, at 300 gil a day, to cross the sea. It's a two day journey, so it'll cost you 600."

The young man's smile faded at hearing the price. It was a fair deal, probably more than fair, but his funds were limited. "I can give you 400," he said hopefully. Vincent nodded, and the man was nearly blown back. "Really? Thank you!"

"Something else though," the red-eyed man said suddenly, "I need you to deliver a note to a friend of mine in Sector One."

"Not a problem. I live in Sector Two, I can drop it in his box on my way to work."

Vincent rose and gestured for the man to follow him. They exited through the door and into the stable, leaving Arik sitting alone at the table. He tried to sit there patiently and wait for their return, but patience wasn't one of his strongest virtues.

That Vincent Valentine is a strange sort, the older man said to himself. What does he do in here all day? I know I'd die of boredom if I were stuck in here alone. The man oughta get himself a wife, some company. Arik rose from his chair and waltzed over to the fire, spreading his hands before its warmth. This place was so sparse. It needed the touch of a woman. Curiosity getting the best of him, he sauntered casually over to a mess of cabinets stuck up on the wall. The first he opened revealed a few loaves of brown bread, cans of soup, and bags of rice. This all he eats? wondered Arik silently. The next cabinet was full of oil paints, turpentine, and rolls of canvas. The last cabinet made the older man cringe. It was stuffed with a wide array of weapons, pistols mainly, but he spied a lethal looking sniping rifle and some huge, hulking piece of metal inscribed with the words "Death Penalty". A few stray bullets rolled out and he stuffed them back in, closing the cabinet doors hurriedly. The sound of cooing chocobos drifted to his ears and he turned, but the stable door was still shut.

"Bloody freak. . ." murmured Arik, eyeing the last cabinet fearfully. "What's he got all them guns for? It's like he's preparing for a war or something. Hmph." The man waited for a moment, trying in all honesty to keep from snooping around further. He'd never been in Vincent's house before. He had shared drinks with the man, that was true but having never had the need for a chocobo, he'd never been invited inside. That covered painting on the easel cried out to him suddenly, and he itched to see what it was of. He inched closer to the work, his eyes on the door, for some reason fearful of being caught, as though he were breaking a law. He stood before the canvas a moment, then lifted the cover and peeped under.

At first he couldn't make out anything. It seemed only a balance of red, black, and blue color thrown about the panel. But as he squinted, stepped forward and then back again, he was able to discern a woman's face hidden in the marks. Shrugging, he dropped the cover, a little disappointed. He didn't know what he'd expected to see. Someone cleared their throat, and Arik looked up sharply. Vincent stood in the doorway, staring at him icily.

"Your friend is in the stable, Mr. Bivs," said the red-eyed man emotionlessly, "He wants to thank you for your kindness before he leaves." Vincent held something clutched in his hand, Arik assumed it was a pouch of gil, but he was very careful as he passed him and entered the stable. Vincent closed the door behind him.

Chocobos of every color lined the place, each tucked neatly away in its own little stall, a blanket covering each to protect them from the biting cold. Many were asleep, but a few were awake and warked softly as Arik entered their domain. Holzoff's nephew straddled a beautiful golden bird, reins clutched tight in his hands. The creature could sense how inexperienced its rider was, but had been well trained and didn't take advantage of it.

"I'm loving this thing," the young man exclaimed, stroking the chocobo's downy neck. "I'd love to ride this guy to work every morning."

Arik smiled, but it was forced. Vincent's cold gaze had startled him and the man felt he'd remain startled for the rest of his life. "You take care out there, young fellow. The wind's picking up. Ride safely."

"Thank you for your help, sir. I'll be sure to visit you next time I'm in town."

"You do that. And happy birthday to your son."

"Thanks." The young man touched his heels to the chocobo's golden sides and in a flash it was off out the stable doors which Vincent had left open, and heading towards the sea. Bracing himself, Arik turned and opened the door to the shack. He bid the man inside a polite goodbye, then saw himself out, squirming under his red gaze. Vincent sat at the table for a few minutes after he was gone, fingertips pressed together and flexing in and out, his eyes distant with thought. Then he rose, and continued to paint.

~*~

It was nearing three in the morning before he stopped, pulling himself away from his work with a paint-smeared face

and oil streaked hand. He was hungry, so he made himself a bowl of rice and a sandwich, stoked the fire and sat himself down on his bed, back to the wall. The cold was intense, but he ignored it, thinking of other things. The painting he'd finished was turned so that he could look at it while he ate. He was rather proud of this one. He thought absently that she would have liked it. Well, he would know for sure tomorrow. Tomorrow he would make the trip to the falls to give it to her, just as he did every year at that time. At first, it had been snatches of writing that he'd leave in that fair cave beyond the water, writing and flowers. But he noticed after a while that the words he wrote eventually became hollow, and that the flowers always died. One Christmas, Tifa had given him a set of oils and brushes. So he decided to paint a tribute. And to his surprise and joy, his soul came out onto the canvas, a thing that time could never rot.

He'd been growing fond of the painting he'd been working on that afternoon and had been mildly upset when he'd had to burn it after Arik Bivs' eyes had stained its surface, but it didn't matter. He could afford more canvas, and his inspiration was inexhaustible.

Popping the last crust of his sandwich into his mouth and then following it with a gulp of water, Vincent stood and stretched, beginning to tire a bit. He put on his coat and boots and wandered out to the stable to tuck his chocobos in for the night. He petted each as he passed them, checking their greens and straw to make sure they were all supplied. He checked the lock on the stable door, and then poured each bird a fresh trough of water. They warked contentedly in their sleep, and Vincent sighed, satisfied. It put him at peace to care for the animals, to fill their basic needs and protect them. Really, it was the ideal job for him. He felt the less he was forced to interact with the people of Icicle Inn, the better off everyone was. Humanity often filled him with a terrible anger. And anger was dangerous. But peace was welcome, it kept the beast within him caged away. He hadn't transformed into the Chaos demon in years. A small part of him hoped that it wasn't even there anymore. But that small part was naive, Vincent often felt the beast prowling about in his mind while he dreamt, pacing back and forth like an imprisoned animal.

It doesn't matter, he thought, I'll keep it caged.

Giving the chocobos one last glance, he re-entered his home, shutting the door behind him silently. He pulled back the thick bedclothes, flicked off the lights, then stripped to his waist, sliding quickly between the sheets. Head centered on his pillow, he lay there, staring at the light of the fire flickering against the ceiling. Pleasant thoughts must have come to him, because after a few minutes he fell softly asleep, the hint of a smile on his lips, perhaps anticipating the next day. Within him, the demon paced.

It was nearly twelve-thirty when Cloud found himself putting the key to the door of his home in the upper class neighborhood of Sector One. It came unlocked with a reassuring click. The events of the day, but especially of the night plagued him still, keeping his pulse from slowing. Each noise sent it roaring again in his ears. The peacefulness of the night as he'd walked home from the train station had done a little towards getting him to think the voice he'd heard had been a mere figment of his imagination, but it couldn't stifle his unease completely. Even under the clear, star-studded night sky, the closeness of the lab clung to him, making him nearly claustrophobic despite the limitless space surrounding him. He still heard the voice, the genderless voice, calling his name like a death sentence.

Careful to keep his footfalls muted, he entered his home, his family sleeping. He'd called Tifa earlier and told her not to wait up and apparently she hadn't. He'd been keeping a lot of late hours the last couple of weeks, Reeve insisting that Dragon Weapon be hurriedly completed and sent out so that Yuffie would get off his back about it. "And of course, the techs and Turks just can't function correctly unless Reno or I are there to watch over them," thought the man in heavy sarcasm.

Cloud was the fifth highest paid employee at the Shinra Company. His home showed the fact. It wasn't sickeningly extravagant or anything, but Cloud made sure his family lived in comfort, despite the fact that the name on their mailbox read "Strife". Silently, he climbed the stairs up to the second floor, ignoring the darkness since he knew his home so well he didn't need lights to navigate it. The door to his son CJ's room had been left opened just a crack. He knew that Tifa had done it, so he could peek in on him when he came home. He entered the darkened bedroom soundlessly, made sure that CJ was sleeping, half-hoping he'd wake up so that he could talk to him, then tiptoed out again. Ifalna, his five year old daughter, was sleeping softly in the room next door, her peaceful breathing occasionally interrupted by little hiccups. The sound of his two children brushed every ounce of unease from his mind. His two most prized possessions were safe.

He and Tifa's bedroom was just down the hall. He peeled his shoes off as he walked, the soft carpet warm and rich beneath his feet. The light was off behind his bedroom door. Tifa was rolled over on her side, breathing softly. Cloud set his keys and things down gently on the dresser, then undressed, careful not to disturb her. He draped his gun belt over the

back of a chair, removing the pistol and laying it conveniently on the nightstand. Since he'd began to work for Shinra, Reeve had insisted he learn how to use a gun. His sword was too conspicuous and too clumsy for company work, he'd said. Cloud had balked at the command at first but had found that he had a knack for marksmanship. He was nearly as good a aim as Reno now, however he knew he could never match Vincent or Barret. If he'd had a choice though, he would have picked the firm, solid grip of a hilt to the cold metallic feel of a gun. Giving the room a last glance around, he rolled into bed with a long, shaky sigh and settled back against the pillow.

"How was work?" Tifa asked suddenly. Cloud grinned. It never failed, no matter how quietly he thought he'd moved, she always woke up. He swore she had ears like a cat. She rolled over to face him, laying a hand on his chest, and he squinted to make out her silhouette, a darker dark against the black of the room. Cloud stretched lazily.

"Productive," he said firmly, "That damned weapon of Yuffie's is finally done and on its way."

"Thank Shiva," Tifa breathed, laying her head against Cloud's chest, "She won't be calling here anymore then, nagging about it?"

"No. I swear, I regret the day I ever gave her her own PHS. Seems to me I remember telling her it was only for emergencies."

"Well, the dragons are causing her a lot of trouble."

"I suppose," the man relented, rubbing his wife's soft hair through his calloused fingers pleasantly, "It'll be alright though. Even Yuffie can't screw up this weapon. You should have seen the thing, Tifa, it blew a life-size replica of a Da-Chao Dragon made out of mythril, entirely of mythril, to total oblivion. There were fragments everywhere. Even Reno was thrown off." Cloud chuckled, remembering Reno's pale face as he'd risen from the floor. A pale Turk.

Tifa raised a hand and drew attention to the bandage still wrapped around his forehead. "Is that how you got this, luv? Bit o' shrapnel?" Just to be frivolous, she was talking in a very bad English accent. Cloud guessed she must have taken the kids to see a puppet show that day.

He laughed and answered in his best cockney impression, which was rather terrible, "That I did, sweets. mythril to the noggin, ya know. Sharp stuff that, take your 'ead off at fifty paces."

Tifa laughed, sat up and kissed his forehead gently, prying the bandage up for a moment to see the damage done to her husband. Just a deep cut was all, only an inch or so wide. She laid back, satisfied.

"Will I live, doc?" Cloud asked, turning over onto his side and pressing his head into the soft pillow.

Tifa kissed him lightly on the lips, smiling.

"I think your chances are pretty good," she whispered. Cloud let his eyes slip shut as she flipped onto her side, her slender back firm against his chest so that they could share each other's warmth. He laid a weary hand comfortably on her hip. As he drifted to sleep, the wonderful scent of her hair in his nostrils, his mind viciously shoved the voice into his head again, calling his name repeatedly in lethal tones. But he didn't pay any attention to it. Tifa's presence shoved it all away, leaving only peace and bliss.

"Dad! Dad, please! Pleeze!" CJ Strife, his ten year old hands clasped in supplication, prostrated himself comically before his father. He looked a lot like Cloud. His hair was starkly blonde and to avoid the family heirloom, he kept it cropped close to his head, spiky hair not considered to be very "cool" in his fifth grade class. His complexion was dark, something he got from his mother, and his eyes were starkly violet, perhaps a strange, genetics-defying mixture of his blue and her maroon. For a ten year old, he was rather short but he made up for it in volume. "Dad!" he cried again, the walls nearly reverberating, "I promised I would!"

Cloud was seated at the kitchen table, a newspaper spread before him. He drank his tea soberly, unperturbed by his son. "That's your own fault, CJ. Don't make promises you can't keep."

"But dad, I had to. Ash said he was gonna bust my head open! And Sliver Takada said he meant it! There's no other way!" CJ's eyebrows arched imploringly above his bright eyes, his small mouth frowning deep. Cloud looked down at him and had to fight to keep from laughing. CJ was trying his hardest to be earnest, the man knew this, but he always came off so damned funny. Tifa entered the kitchen suddenly, running a brush through her hair and looking down at her kneeling son curiously.

"Are you still bugging your dad, CJ? Cloud, just tell him no."

Cloud shrugged his shoulders smiling. "Maybe I should consider it. He really seems to wanna."

A breath of hope caught in CJ's throat and Tifa sighed in exasperation. Donning her meanest mom glare, she bent down and wagged a finger in her son's face forcefully.

"You're not taking the Ultima Weapon to school!" she said firmly, and by her tone, CJ knew the argument was finished. She straightened, putting the brush on the table and pulling an over-sized sweater on over her blouse. The November winds were whistling outside, making the air colder than it really was. CJ glared at her, then crossed his arms and stomped from the room. Cloud watched him go with a bit of concern.

"Well, at least we know he can't go against our orders and sneak it in his book bag," he said lightly, but Tifa didn't laugh.

"He really has an obsession with your swords, Cloud," she said softly, sitting in the seat across from him and grabbing the comic section from the newspaper.

"Hell, I have an obsession with my swords. He doesn't, I mean, come on. He's just having a little spat at school with that Ash kid. CJ can wallop him, don't worry. I've taught him how to fight. Kids have to learn to take care of themselves."

"At the age of ten?" Tifa asked, eyebrow raised. Cloud shrugged.

"The sooner, the better. You wait, he'll come home today victorious. And in a couple of years, when he's stronger, I'll start giving him fencing lessons."

Tifa didn't answer. She didn't want CJ to turn into a fighter and Cloud knew it. She never wanted to see him bloodied in battle or killing to survive. She'd thought that's what she and Cloud had fought for all those years ago: a world where people wouldn't have to make war anymore. They'd argued about it before, but her husband was rather adamant on the subject. He remembered what it had been like when he was young. He'd had no father to teach him how to defend himself. He'd had no one to show him how to take a punch and then give one back. So he'd failed miserably when the children of Nibelheim had beaten on him. He didn't want to see that happen to CJ.

Not wanting to argue again, Tifa changed the subject.

"Are you going to be late again tonight?" she asked, her eyes skimming through the comics.

Cloud gulped the last of his tea and nodded. "Probably. I'm going to be starting a new project today." The man said the sentence sort of queerly and it made Tifa look up at him in curiosity.

"And what would that be?" she questioned.

Taking a deep breath, Cloud answered, "I found out yesterday that Hojo's old laboratory still exists." He watched as Tifa's eyes widened slightly, her gaze fixed upon him. "For some reason, Meteor spared it years ago, spared the very heart-artery of the entire ordeal which I don't understand, and the employees have never put in a request to appropriate the space for anything else. The place is a wreck. I don't think anyone could salvage anything from it if they wanted to but I don't care. I'm meeting with Reeve today and I'll get him to let me tear it all down."

"Are there files in there still?" she asked quietly.

"I suppose. . . " Cloud looked up in surprise at her question. "Why?"

The woman turned away and he thought he saw tears in her rusty-colored eyes. On instinct, he reached for her hand.

"You could find out what happened all those years ago. After Nibelheim burned. Those five years you disappeared."

"I know what happened," Cloud said darkly, looking back carefully into his memories, "They pumped me full of mako and tried to turn me into another Sephiroth."

"But you don't know why. . . "

Cloud shrugged, seeing her point.

"Alright then," he said rather easily, "I'll haul out the old files and look through--"

"No!"

Cloud flinched as Tifa jumped from the chair, her eyes wide in fear. Tears were pouring down her cheeks. She walked towards him quickly and put her two strong hands on his broad shoulders, staring him in the eyes.

"No," she repeated, "Promise me you won't do that."

"But I thought--"

"No, Cloud. Don't you remember what happened when Sephiroth began asking too many questions? When he holed himself up in the mansion and read for days of the orchestration and manipulation of his life? No, you know enough, and the things you don't know are in the past. I. . . I don't want to see what happened to Sephiroth happen to you. Please, stay out of there. That place is dead."

Tifa wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her sweater and turned away from him, quiet for a long moment. Cloud sat

blinking, staring at her back. How could she think his sanity was so fragile? It nearly angered him that she doubted him so. He wanted to argue with her, but then he recalled the voice he'd heard in the lab the night before, the voice that now, in the light of day, seemed so ridiculous. How many men with perfectly sound minds allowed themselves to be chased out of rooms by hallucinations? he asked himself mockingly.

"I promise, Tifa," he said gently to the back of her head. She turned, smiling through her tears. The breath caught in Cloud's throat. Even after twelve years of marriage, her beauty sometimes startled him. She stood there now, arms hugging herself, her hands lost in the billowing folds of her white sweater, beautiful chestnut hair falling gently over her shoulders. Tears made her eyes shine like two perfect rubies. And her smile filled his soul with wonder. Unable to help himself, the man stood and took her in his arms, kissing away her fears. She embraced him, kissing him back a little crookedly, looking up through her soft bangs into his shimmering blue eyes. For a moment, she searched them, checking for things that shouldn't be there; sadness, anger, fear. But they only burned brightly with mako. She wondered why his eyes glowed so intensely. She'd seen many men with mako-altered bodies, SOLDIER members, test subjects, Sephiroth, but none of their eyes had burned as brightly as Cloud's always had. She peered into them deeper, nearly entranced. The energy flowed in tight white tendrils, obscuring his pupils and pouring light from behind the blue pigment in his irises so that in the dim illumination of the kitchen, the skin around them held a blueish tint, catching his own internal light a little eerily. She reached a hand up and rubbed his face, smiling gently. They were so beautiful, his eyes, but what a price they'd cost him. She didn't want him to have to pay any more.

"Mama. . ." Tifa turned and saw Ifalna walking towards her. The little girl wore a baby blue jumper embroidered with waltzing chocobos. Her blonde hair was pulled back into two pigtales. "Why are ya crying?"

"No reason, sweets," Tifa said, kneeling down and fixing the strap that had come loose on her jumper. "Ready to go?"

"Can I stay home today?"

"Nope."

"Oh." The girl rubbed her eyes and yawned. She was a very quiet child, nearly pensive. She left the screaming to CJ. Her sober violet eyes turned to Cloud.

"Morning, dad," she said, smiling.

"Morning, sunshine. Get your coat on so you can go, it's chilly out." The little girl turned and left the kitchen just as silently as she'd entered, snatching a donut on the way out. Tifa watched her leave, love in her expression.

"CJ is a hurricane, Ifalna is the eye," she remarked tenderly. Cloud laughed then gave her a quick peck and was out the door. He was dressed in the same sort of clothes he'd worn yesterday, his own personal uniform. He refused to wear what Reeve assigned. He didn't like monkey suits. As she watched him make his way down the path and out into the street towards the station, Tifa thought he was the handsomest man she'd ever seen.

She straightened her outfit suddenly, blowing breath into her eyes to dry the tears and refusing to give Hojo's lab another thought. She trusted Cloud to do as he'd said. Finally, she turned and exited the kitchen to make sure her kids got off to school alright before she herself headed for work.

"Cait Sith!" she hollered, stepping into the living room, her hands on her hips. "Are you up?" She knew that the robotic cat never actually slept, just turned itself off and plugged in to recharge, but she couldn't help saying things her way. At her words, a large gray and white splotched feline approached her on four legs. A crimson cape was tied about its neck rather dashingly, and a plastic party crown sat pushed backwards on his head.

"Good morning, Tifa," the cat said cheerfully, rising up to two feet and grinning. "CJ and Ifalna ready to go?"

As if on cue, Ifalna shuffled her way down the stairs, tugging at her coat. She held a piece of yellow construction paper in one hand, a curl of tape stuck to the back. Upon approaching Cait Sith, she attached it to his chest.

"What's this?" the cat asked examining it closely.

"A medal," said Ifalna matter-of-factly, "For winning at cards last night."

Cait's artificial intelligence whirred and clicked to come up with a response.

"Cute," he said finally. He patted Ifalna on the head and then turned to Tifa. "What about the other one?"

The woman frowned.

"CJ!"

Mom's voice came to his ears harshly, startling him. He was standing in the middle of his parents' armoury, ogling the weapons there as was his habit. The room sat on the second floor, all the way to the left and usually remained locked, but Cloud had been going through his things the week before, searching for a few gold armlets to sell off, and had forgotten to lock up. CJ had been taking advantage of the slip. He was imagining his father as he must've looked thirteen years before,

in his SOLDIER uniform, wearing the enchanted mystile armband and wielding the gently humming sword before him. Ultima Weapon. The boy gazed on it as though his eyes could never get their fill. The massive blade hung mounted on the wall at the very rear of the room, besides his mother's Premium Heart. But he thought boxing rather brutish. It was always the swords that held his attention. His dad had saved the planet with that sword, he thought proudly, longing to hold it in his hand.

"CJ!"

"Coming, mom!"

Standing on tiptoes, he tried to reach the hilt, but his father'd hung it too high. "By Odin's beard," he muttered, using an expression he'd heard Cait say sometimes. He sighed. Ash would've really quaked if he'd gone to face him clutching that sword, he thought, smiling wickedly. He would've spun it around his head and plunged it into the ground for effect. Then Ash would've ran. CJ almost laughed at the mental image. But then he frowned, reality popping him upside the head. He wouldn't be taking the beautiful sword to school today. He would be facing Ash alone, with his own two fists. He sighed again, the force of it wracking his chest and making him shiver.

He didn't even understand why Ash hated him so much. But then, something in his ten year old mind did have a slightly vague idea. Maybe it was because his father was Cloud Strife, a legend, a hero. Maybe it was because Ash's father was a seldom seen pothead who made his existence known only through the burns, blisters, and welts he left on his son. CJ shrugged. The why's weren't really important. The fact of the matter was, Ash was going to kick his butt at recess, and CJ was going to disappoint his father by letting him.

The weight of the world on his narrow shoulders, the little boy left the fantastic weapons behind, blinking as harsh reality shone in his eyes, blaring away the dreams he'd had of victory. He plodded down the stairs, miserable. Tifa saw him and her heart went out. Why did he have to be so much like his father?

Bundled in their coats, she shuffled them out the door. Cait would lead them to the Sector One Elementary School as he did every morning, mog-less at CJ's request. The boy thought a robotic talking cat as a babysitter was bad enough without him having to ride atop a giant mog to boot. He watched the cat shuffle along contentedly, happy in his position. Reeve had been ready to scrap him after Meteor had hit and his usefulness expired. Cloud, however, had developed a soft spot for the bundle of fur, wires, and stuffing, and had asked the Shinra president if he could have him. A little reprogramming from Cid Highwind, and Cait Sith went from toysaurus to nanny overnight. He was perfectly satisfied with the change.

Closing and locking the door behind them, Tifa gave Ifalna and CJ quick kisses before they parted ways for the day. Before pulling away from her son though, she punched him chummily in the shoulder, grinning as though she were about to commit a crime.

"I'm going to give you something," she said to him lowly. The boy's face lit up in surprise. "And I want you to be careful with it. Here." His right hand went out and she placed a small, worn glove onto it, strapping it tightly about his wrist. "My old teacher Zangan gave me this, CJ. My first glove. It's not particularly powerful, but it is enchanted. It makes the wearer's strength equal to that of his opponent's. It creates a fair fight. I've seen that Ash kid. He's the size of a frigging vlakorados. But now you don't need to be scared of him." She smiled warmly at her son, and he hugged her, grateful. "Now, I don't want you to fight. I want you to avoid it at all costs. But if you have absolutely no choice, then I've got only one thing to say."

CJ looked at her, blinking in disbelief.

"What?"

Tifa beamed. "Kick his ass." CJ grinned and hugged her again, holding his gloved right hand lovingly. He ran to catch up with Cait and Ifalna, already half-way down the block. His mother sighed contentedly and began the walk to work, confident that her babies were safe for another day.

A continent away, Barret Wallace watched his own baby with quite the opposite emotion. Frowning, he stood in the doorway of his daughter's bedroom, taking in her drooping form soberly. She was sitting up in bed, her back supported by pillows, an open book in her lap. Her eyelids were shut and she was breathing softly. He stood there a while longer, staring at her lovingly but with concern etched in the lines of his face. He hesitated before calling her name, hating to wake her from sleep. She was such a beautiful creature, the light in his life. And she looked so much like her mother it frightened him sometimes. The same large brown eyes, doe eyes he'd heard them called, beautiful auburn hair braided into a thick rope

that wreathed her face like a glorious crown. She had many of Eleanor's features too, the same round face, and delicate cheekbones, but she had Dyne's nose, a perky thing that sat confrontationally between her eyes. She was seventeen and causing Barret more problems now than she had when Shinra'd kidnapped her at four years old.

"Marlene, baby," he said finally, trying to keep the gruff from his voice. "It's seven-thirty. Rise and shine."

She was still for a moment, as though she hadn't heard. Then her face scrunched up, eyes still shut, and she murmured, "Alright, daddy. Five minutes."

"You said five minutes, ten minutes ago."

She smiled, opening her eyes slowly. Her back was stiff from sleeping sitting up. Bones popping staccato down her spine, she rose to her feet and stretched. She was wearing the same clothes she'd worn the day before: jeans and a Golden Saucer t-shirt. Her hair somehow remained perfectly braided and pinned atop her head. She stretched again to get the kinks out and grinned as her shoulder popped.

"Guess I'm getting old," she said laughingly.

"That you are." Barret couldn't help but smile as Marlene skipped towards him, arms open wide in anticipation of a hug. He didn't disappoint.

"I guess I won't bother askin' if you're excited," he said after they parted. The girl didn't answer him. Her flushed cheeks burned brightly and her grin stretched from ear to ear. Barret couldn't remember the last time she'd looked so happy.

"After two years, dad!" she exclaimed, twirling, her stiffness forgotten, "Two years! Two years and seven months actually. Heck, that's almost three years. . ."

"Not quite--"

". . . Is Nanaki awake yet? Is he going to see us off? Oh, my god, I can't wait. . ." Marlene hugged herself, then hugged Barret again, then ran from her bedroom in excitement. Her father watched her go wearily. He couldn't share in her joy. She was leaving him. She'd go on to a new life, maybe a better life, certainly a more interesting one. He turned back to look at her bedroom. It was quite stark and empty in the morning light. All of her things had been packed up already. The sheets on her bed were from a guest room and the book she'd been reading was his. It was already as though she didn't live there anymore. He picked the book up distractedly and glanced at the cover. Theories of the LifeStream by Elder Bugenhagen. Hmph. Volume Five. Barret had never know a more long-winded man in his life. He could nearly curse himself for ever moving to Cosmo Canyon, for ever introducing his daughter to a subject she'd fall passionately in love with: the Planet. "Why does she hafta leave?" he asked himself quietly, leaning dejectedly back against the wall.

He tossed the book back onto her bed and stalked from the bedroom, through the hall and out onto the main balcony. He grabbed the handle of the wooden ladder there and began climbing down to the canyon floor, covering the vertigo-inspiring height with practiced ease, though he only had one hand. His left arm ended in a polished silver cap. A gun had sat there once, but the time for fighting had past.

The citizens of Cosmo Canyon were rather eccentric. Most had spent their lives there, studying life, a subject that one could never exactly claim to know everything about. There was always more to learn, more to see and experience. The futility of their studies often revealed itself in their actions. They worried of little, consumed by a desire for knowledge. They could have been the scholars occupying Laputa, their heads stuck so far up in the clouds. If such was the case, that meant Barret was Gulliver.

He landed on the canyon floor with a thud, glancing about for his daughter. The few people walking by looked to him and called good morning but he only grunted and shook his hand dismissively. Everyone knew what his problem was. Cosmo Canyon's citizens had been preparing for it for weeks: Marlene Wallace was moving to Midgar that day. And Barret wasn't happy about it.

"Good morning, Barret!" elder Bugah called in over emphasized sunniness. The balding man approached him waving and smiling as though his life depended on it. "I was wondering if you'd finished your work on my bicycle yet. I was hoping you'd get to it before Marlene and you set off this morning."

Barret nodded, not looking at the elder. "It's finished, Bugah. I had Will lock it up for you in your garden. Have you seen Marlene?"

"Why no, I haven't. How much do I owe you?"

"Fifty-five gil for parts." The elder dug about in the pockets of his robe and dropped a few coins into Barret's massive palm. The man stood there tapping his feet, deep in thought. He pocketed the money carelessly.

"The transport comes in a few minutes, Barret, don't you think you and Marlene should be waiting? If you miss the buggy, you'll have to wait till next week before you can go again." Bugah looked up to his friend anxiously. Barret frightened

him a bit, but he was a good man. He'd come to Cosmo Canyon years ago with a random assortment of beings destined to save the world, including his dead friend Bugenhagen's grandson, Nanaki, thought by all to be lost to them forever. He'd expressed an interest then in learning what the Canyon had to offer and had returned nearly a year later, to stay. He studied less now than he did work. He'd become the town's unofficial handyman. He loved the planet with a fire that not even he could truly explain, but he'd discovered in his time there that he would love it the way an artist loves a flower; admiring the colors, the handy work, the beauty of the thing, fighting to preserve it if need be, but not particularly wondering why it grew, or bloomed, or died.

The man looked down at Bugah finally, squinting in the morning sun. "I know the time we got is limited," he said, "That's why the hell I'm lookin' for her. Marlene!" he bellowed, patience gone. "Get your ass out here, girl!" There was a sprinkling of laughter from far above their heads. It floated to the two men like angel feathers on the breeze. A deep, playful growl followed it that would have alarmed anyone, but Barret only sighed in exasperation, cupped a hand to his mouth and hollered, "Marlene! I hear the damned transport coming! If you wanna continue with this fool notion of yours of going to Midgar, than you'd better start acting your age and--" Barret blinked in surprise as Marlene landed before him, cutting his rant short. She could move so fast up and down the ladders of Cosmo Canyon it surprised even him sometimes. Nanaki sprang off a low cliff, coming to rest at her side, his paws hitting the dusty ground silently. His one good eye blinked fiercely and his dark mane slapped at his neck in the wind. He gave Barret a feline grin before sitting on his haunches and staring up at him expectantly.

"Sorry, dad," Marlene said a little breathlessly, "You let me sleep so late that I gotta be quick saying my goodbyes before we go."

"It's not my fault you wouldn't get up--"

"Elder Bugah," she said, turning to the old man and clutching at his hands, "Thank you for putting up with all these years. I know it hasn't been the easiest. . ."

"Nonsense," the elder said quickly, his eyes misting over ever so slightly, "You're one of the best students I've ever had. Who would have guessed that your father'd come here to study the planet and you'd be the one to wind up with the degree? Bugenhagen would have been hysterical." The old man looked at the girl fondly, silent suddenly, and thinking of something. He pulled one of his hands from her grasp and reached in his pocket, withdrawing a small sphere of red materia. "For you," he said, placing it in her grasp, the orb sparkling promisingly. Marlene held it up and examined it, laughing a little.

"Summon Materia," she said, "Why?"

"A memento. The day you came here, a mako fountain sealed away deep in the Gi caves spewed this onto its shores. It worked on making it for thousands of years, maybe a million, and it finished it the day you arrived, in your little pink dress riding on Barret's shoulders. I think it's yours." Marlene embraced the elder in a loving hug that left the old man a little dizzy, whispering thank you and crying a little. Bugah broke free, gave a wave and retired to his room, wishing her the best of luck. "Be careful in the city, Marlene. Midgar is dangerous. Of all the places on the planet, that city is most removed from here."

"Yes, Elder."

"You listen to him about Midgar, but not to me?" Barret spat, feigning hurt, as soon as Bugah had left. "'Guess I'm just an idiot who don't know the ins 'n' outs a the planet so my advice is worthless, huh? I tell you what, girl, I may not have a lotta book smarts, but I've had plenty a experiences wit' that city. You're makin' a mistake."

Nanaki frowned, his dangerous teeth protruding from his lips suggestively. "Stop living in the past, Barret," he growled, looking to Marlene for backup, "Cloud and Reeve have cleaned the city up. All the young people are moving there, it's a place of opportunity now."

"Listen to Nanaki, dad," Marlene pleaded but Barret turned away. They'd already been through all of this. The entire week had been spent in vicious arguments. There were few things left to say that hadn't been said already. Barret refused to change his opinion and Marlene refused to change her plans. After all, she'd had them for nearly three years.

Bugah hadn't lied when he'd called her one of his best pupils. From a very young age, he could tell that she possessed a lust for learning that would require a lot to ever be satisfied. Where Barret had eventually tired of studying the planet, the lifestream, and materia, seeing in it the futility and ignorance of humanity, Marlene saw just the opposite, convinced that humanity could redeem itself in the planet's eyes if only they sacrificed enough and learned enough about why the planet did the things it did. By the time she was fifteen she'd read every book in Bugenhagen's study, she'd memorized everything that could be seen from the observatory. She'd written a treatise on the symbolism of materia hues. Bugah called her a genius. Barret called her a fanatic. But never to her face. And then, two years and seven months ago, Marlene had begun reading about Shinra. All of her life, she'd known of the company only from her father's very one-sided stories but for the

longest time had been content enough to leave the corporation at that. No one in Cosmo Canyon would dispute Barret's tales of Shinra's wickedness. They all recalled the near end of their lives as the blood-streaked face of Meteor had hovered over them promising terrible things. It had been summoned there by Sephiroth. And Sephiroth had been summoned into existence by Shinra. But Marlene had begun to read about Shinra's reforms, about the efforts of the new president Reeve. They no longer used mako energy, but instead were pioneering the use of electricity, which could be gotten from sources as simple as sunlight and the movement of water. It had fascinated the girl and she'd written to her uncle Cloud, unbeknownst to her father, asking him to share all he knew about it. He was merely in charge of security and weapon development though, and the info he'd given had been scarce. He had sent her a packet of information though on how to qualify for an internship in the Weapons Development Department. It required a huge exam and two letters of recommendation that had to be written by recognized experts in the fields of science and planet life, and also a recommendation from a current Shinra Department head.

Marlene could still remember the day she'd gotten that thick envelope in the mail. She'd pored over what Cloud had sent her, convinced that she wanted nothing more in life than to work for Shinra. But she hadn't been naive. Barret hadn't talked to uncle Cloud in over ten years simply because he worked for the company. Marlene had had no doubt in her mind that he'd alienate his daughter just as easily if she followed in Cloud's footsteps. So she'd studied for the exam in secret, convinced that she'd never make it in anyways, but letting the thing become a hobby she worked on in her spare time. Last June, things had taken a turn for the serious. Cloud had sent her the exam without warning, attaching a brief note saying that if she'd send a few of her papers and essays to him, he'd pass them to a fellow named Neto, weapons development head who might very well write her a recommendation if he liked what he read. And President Reeve was an old friend of both his and her fathers. He'd write a recommendation in the blink of an eye. That had gotten her excited. With a recommendation by the Shinra president himself, she would have to be selected to intern! So one night, trembling with the possibility of it all, she'd gone to elder Bugah, explained, and he'd proctored while she'd taken the exam, writing her a letter of recommendation afterwards. She'd packaged it all up then and sent it to Cloud. The reply had come barely a week later.

She was in. Hell, she was more than in. They'd been so impressed with her exam that they'd wanted to hire her on the spot. She'd made a perfect score, something unheard of in the company. But that had all been easy. It was getting her father's permission that had proven nearly impossible.

Barret had taken a seat near the Cosmo Candle. His feet dangled off the edge of the upraised mound of earth, the glow of the fire throwing a ring of light around his head and shoulders. Marlene looked at him in aggravation. If only he understood, she sighed. But he didn't and he probably never would. She wondered if he knew just how much it upset her that he insisted on accompanying her into Midgar, chaperoning her like a little girl. She was a woman now, a woman going places. She'd just landed herself a 40,000 gil a year job in the world's biggest corporation. Why couldn't he be proud? Why couldn't he accept that Shinra wasn't the evil conglomerate it had once been? Marlene wondered if this was how uncle Cloud had felt years ago when he and her father had had this argument.

Nanaki flicked his tail, looking from father to daughter and back again. Humans perplexed him so.

"He did the same thing to Cloud," the animal said lowly, recalling how cruel and cutting that argument had been. Marlene nodded her head.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"Cloud had been working for Reeve for a few years. He'd taken the job only temporarily at first, meaning to quit after he and Tifa's house was paid for, but then they found out she was pregnant. Then CJ came into the world, needing things that a new life needs and Cloud found less and less reasons to quit. He discovered Shinra was different. Different because of him," said Nanaki quietly, looking to his friend. "But your father can't forget the people that the company stole from him. You have to understand his reasoning just a bit, Marlene."

The young woman crossed her arms, looking out into the distance at the approaching transport unit rolling in from Costa Del Sol. It threw up a dreadful plume of dust and dirt behind it, clouding the sky as though it were burning. It was nearly half a mile away still, yet they could already hear the thunder of its massive engines. Marlene watched it thoughtfully.

"The first thing I'm going to do at Shinra," she said resolutely, "is design a new buggy. See that, Nanaki? It's eroding the dust away faster than the wind can. There's got to be a better way."

The fiery animal grinned at her words. It had been humans like Marlene that his grandfather Bugenhagen had been telling him of as a cub. Humans like her would save the Planet. He nuzzled her hand fondly and she scratched him lovingly behind the ear, leaving part of his mane sticking straight up. She fixed it for him, then looked him over before heading towards the city gates. He'd been her best friend in this desolate canyon. Well, not desolate, she reprimanded herself

sharply. A lot of people cared for her in this town, but Nanaki had beaten them all. And he'd done his best to change her father's mind.

"Bye, Red," she said, using the nickname affectionately, already at the gate of Cosmo Canyon and shouldering one of her bags.

"Visit?" Nanaki asked, the flame at the end of his tail flickering hopefully. She nodded.

"In the springtime, if I can. I have to make a good impression there, ya know. I can't go taking months off. I'm going to be head of that place one day." Marlene smiled cockily, reveling in the hopefulness of youth. Barret eyed her uncertainly and stood from his dejected seat, walking slowly towards her as the transport suddenly screeched to a halt right outside the gates. The driver opened the door, tossing out the mail in a large, canvas-wrapped bundle, then gestured for any passengers to climb inside. Marlene waved to Nanaki and a few of the other canyon residents who'd gathered around to see them off, then hopped aboard. Barret tossed the rest of the bags into the cargo hold of the transport, grabbed his own satchel and waved the town farewell. He'd return, but it'd be without his daughter, so the homecoming would be a false one.

"Hold the fort down, Red," he called as he mounted the transport steps lightly. "We'll be back."

The door shut and in the blink of an eye, the hulking vehicle began moving away, retracing its steps back the way it'd come. Nanaki watched it go in confusion. "We'll be back?" he repeated beneath his breath, "Either you committed a simple slip of the tongue, Barret, or you're gonna attempt to keep your daughter from doing what she wants to with her life. If you've chosen the latter, my friend, you may lose her entirely. Marlene will never come back to Cosmo Canyon. Not to stay." He watched the transport away in the distance now, a blotch of pink and rusting silver against the red sands of the canyon. He sincerely wished them both luck, knowing that Marlene would need it most.

~*~

Yunata had to be his favorite chocobo. He'd raised her from birth, the first bird he'd bred alone, taking the tips he'd learned from Cloud, Billy, and the Chocobo Sage to create one of the greatest Golden Chocobos to ever grace the planet. She was so intelligent she could nearly guide herself, so fast that she'd easily knock the wind out of him if he let her go and could keep up that speed for miles, never even breaking a sweat. If he'd ever cared to race her at the Golden Saucer, he'd no doubt she'd blast the competition into a disorderly mash of beaks and feathers.

Vincent sat easily on Yunata's broad back, riding saddle-less, one hand loosely clutching the reins. Another golden bird was tethered to Yunata and straggled behind as she moved, a little weighed down by the packs Vincent had strapped to it. It seemed a lot of supplies for a simple trip to the falls.

They'd left the northern continent behind a few hours ago, and Yunata moved easier now, unhampered by the snow. The mountains loomed ahead, a ring of peaks surrounding Lucrecia's lake menacingly. But Vincent loved them. They protected what he thought of as his. His cave. Their cave. He urged Yunata on, letting her stretch her neck and wings and really take off, covering the short distance to the base of the peaks in no time. The poor pack chocobo struggled to keep up, warking in distress. For Yunata, once there, scaling the mountains was just as easy. The Golden creature's claws which could so effortlessly skim over the waters of the ocean, found it simple to locate the footholds of the mountains and zip up their sides, like a cat climbing a tree. They were moving like the wind but jerking around a lot and Vincent turned his head to check on the painting and other packages. He had to turn quickly back though as Yunata, cocky now, reached the summit and without checking her speed, plummeted down the opposite slope. They were approaching the thin strip of land between the mountain's base and the glittering lake rather fast for his liking. Not thinking of the consequence, he jerked on the reins, worried that she'd lose her footing. Yunata panicked, a rarity for her, and began to back-peddle in mid stride.

"Dammit. . ." Vincent muttered, right before she slipped, fell, and her, her rider, and the pack chocobo all tumbled down into the waters.

It was mid-November and the lake was cold. His black coat soaked its waters up quickly, threatening to pull him down to the murky bottom. He unbuttoned it with numb fingers and it fluttered away as he paddled upwards, a dark splotch against the blue crystal of the lake. His head broke the surface suddenly, and he gulped in a long breath of air his teeth began to chatter. Moving quickly, he made for the shore, swimming past Yunata and throwing her a dirty look. She perched on the surface of the waters carelessly, her webbed feet and mysterious abilities keeping her perfectly afloat. The other chocobo stood behind her, panting a bit but perfectly dry, Vincent's supplies still strapped to its golden back. They glanced to their master in curiosity and he almost thought he saw a smug look in their beady black eyes. Damned birds.

Once on land, Vincent called to them and tethered the mounts to an outcrop of rock, grabbing a change of clothes from his supplies. Changed and comfortable now, he pulled out a long, somewhat-tattered blood-red cloak. He donned it against the chill in the air, strapping it securely onto his tunic, the collar falling just below his lower lip. He hadn't really been thinking that he might actually wear it when he'd packed it away that morning. It was a cloak that held a lot of memories, a lot of bloodstains that'd been washed away from its material, but never from its soul. "Perhaps it is apropos," he thought to himself, running his good hand through his damp hair. It fell over his eyes messily. He grabbed the large canvas-wrapped painting off of the ground then pulled out a handful of flowers, white lilies tied with ribbon. Leaving the chocobos behind, he approached the falls, his steps slow and measured.

Walking through, the mists almost seemed to part for him. They cascaded in beautiful colors; violets and blues, deep greens in the shadows. The afternoon sun filtered through, turning the sprays into liquid gold that frothed from off the rocks and showered Vincent's face with small, chilly kisses. But his gaze never turned to the natural beauty. He had eyes only for what lay beyond, concealed in the dark, less glamorous shadows. The cave was small, almost perfectly round. Directly across from the entrance, a fissure in the rock ceiling above allowed light from the outside to shine down upon a shaped stone altar. The altar was filled with the fruits of Vincent's love for his lost Lucrecia, paintings for the most part. Those he left for her were never the dark, tortuous scenes that he so often committed to canvas. He gave her only pictures of her own beauty as he remembered it, of flowers, of the light off the snow on the Great Glacier. Things he thought she might like to see. Writings were there too, stacks of papers in Vincent's small, cramped hand. But those he had written solely for himself. They consisted mainly of confessions.

He approached the softly illuminated space and knelt down before it, the only thing in the world that could make him kneel. He laid his flowers atop the altar, removing the now dead blossoms he'd brought last year. They also had been white lilies bound with a ribbon. He always offered her these same kind, they'd been her favourite. He put them away in his pocket, then, laying his claw on the altar and closing his brightly blazing red eyes, he prayed. He prayed to his angel.

But what he muttered in words so soft they couldn't be heard weren't really prayers, not the kind of pleading, half-frightened, dubious prayers that most men prayed. He simply talked. He told Lucrecia of the past year. He told her what he'd been doing, thinking, feeling. He told her of Cloud, Tifa, Cid, and the others, and how they were faring, of his chocobo business and of the new birds that'd been born that year. He told her of Arik Bivs and the young man from Midgar of the day before. He told her how Yunata had gotten over confident and how he'd gotten worried, stopping her short and plunging them all down the mountain. And he could swear he heard a light joyous laugh at the words and he laughed with her, glad to do so, even at his own expense.

He talked for a long time, his spirit lightening with every word. Finally, his heart, soul, and conscious cleared, he unwrapped the painting he'd brought for her and leaned it up against the altar. It was rather simple. A canvas of blinding white, the paint laid on thickly. Different colors blended away into it but they all were muted and neutral, there only to enhance the perfectness of the white. In the upper right corner, sprays of baby's breath had been rendered wonderfully. They spread down and through the space, reaching each side, the tiny blooms opened, the tiny leaves curling. And that was all. Some would have called it trite and Vincent might have thought maybe they were right. But all art was relative. To him, the painting was representative of the current state of his soul. He'd found his niche in the world. He was at peace with his past and although he remained quite apathetic about his future, he no longer minded sticking around to see what'd happen.

Leaving the painting alongside the others, he rose, his features calm. His hair had dried and he was considerably warmer. Glancing at the light through the fissure above, he saw that it was dying a bit. He'd spent longer talking to his lost love than he normally did, hours, it seemed by the position of the sun. His red cloak falling over his shoulders, he turned and headed for the exit, leaving a last smile and a last desiring kiss on her lips, though the actions were unseen and impossible. She returned the gesture by granting him an overwhelming sense of peace, and reassuring him of her forgiveness. Vincent Valentine sighed contentedly as he did every year. But then he frowned.

The beast never-endingly crouching at the back of his mind suddenly bucked, roaring dangerously in his head. Without warning, the man's face became taut with unease and apprehension. Those two feelings didn't belong here. This cave was his sanctuary from all of that. Fighting back the rising anger in his chest, wary lest the Chaos demon claw through to the outside, Vincent turned slowly, taking everything in. Something wrong and evil suddenly possessed the air, crowding out the former sense of divine peace. There was a scratching sound from directly above his head but when he looked, there was nothing there.

"What do you want?" he said lowly, wishing he'd entered the cave armed.

"To talk to you." A gloved hand grasped his shoulder, nearly making him jump. He whipped around and suddenly found himself face to face with an impossibility. Face to face with Sephiroth. The two men stood there for a few moments, silently regarding each other. Vincent's cool countenance showed no hint of surprise. His mind of course was racing.

"You're dead," he said, as though commenting on the weather. The green-eyed man grinned, nodded and released Vincent's shoulder. He looked the same as he had when he'd terrorized the Planet years ago. Long silver hair, black garb, flapping black cloak and his muscled chest peeping through between his shoulder armour. He paced around Vincent carelessly.

"You're a sharp one," he said, not sounding a lot like Sephiroth, "I'm dead, quite dead. Been dead for a while. I'm still dead. Perhaps you should be wondering why you're talking to a dead man."

"You're doing most of the talking." Vincent straightened, feeling decidedly eerie.

Sephiroth laughed low, watching the red-eyed fellow in mirth. "That was funny. But, please let me apologize, did you have something you wanted to say to me?"

"Why are you here?"

Sephiroth shrugged. "I'm here to visit my mother." Nonchalantly, he turned away and approached the altar looking around at the paintings and flowers.

"I thought you thought Jenova was your mother."

"I know better now." He knelt down and examined the newest painting carefully then peered at the signature. He laughed suddenly. "That signature!" he said between gasps, "Ha! That's damned funny!" Vincent bristled but said nothing. "Don't you see? Vincent? Ya know, like Van Gogh! Hee hee hee. You've already lost an arm, I guess your ear will be the next to go. You'd look quite funny with a claw for an ear." Sephiroth laughed again, as though it were the funniest thing in the world and Vincent calmly figured this was what it was like to go insane. He didn't say a word as the black-mantled man harassed him. He only stood stoic, puzzled at the dead intruder but hiding his confusion behind a cold mask. Finally, seeing his insults were falling on deaf ears, Sephiroth stiffened. He'd insult the woman he loved then, if the man hadn't any self-respect left.

"She was a whore, you know," he began, his voice a sibilant hiss, approaching Vincent slowly, "A two-gil whore who couldn't make up her mind between a lunatic and a deformed Turk. The lunatic hurt her, ignored her, treated her like an animal but she picked him anyways. Over you. What's it feel like to be second best? To have done all you could for her and still be stuck with the guilt, when her murderer never even gave any of it a second thought? Must feel pretty shitty, eh? Or maybe you like it. Maybe you cling to that guilt so you'll have an excuse for not rejoining society when in all actuality you just can't handle--"

Vincent snapped, releasing a feral snarl and lunging for his antagonist, claw raised. He delivered a blow that should have taken the already dead man's head from his neck, but instead the five metal prongs on his left hand passed through Sephiroth as though he wasn't there.

"What the hell--?" he muttered, unconsciously stepping back, eyes wide. Sephiroth grinned broadly.

"What did you expect to happen when you try to kill a dead man?" he asked. His wicked smile spread wider and he began to chuckle. Then, his shoulders shaking violently, he emitted an insane howling laugh that chilled Vincent to the core. And just as suddenly as he began, he stopped. Eyes snapping fire, he launched a lightning-fast kick into the man's kidneys, knocking him instantly to the ground. Then another savage kick to this chest, then another and another. Vincent curled into a ball, knees shoved in his face. How could a dead man cause him pain? How could the toes of his boots be so solid? The beast within him roared as his defenses weakened. The edges of his vision began to go black, as he felt Chaos creeping closer to the surface. He gritted his teeth, struggling to keep it at bay.

"You're not Sephiroth," he snapped in realization. "Sephiroth was a bastard, but he wasn't a liar. And he wasn't a coward who fought unfairly. Not to mention the fact that I saw him die thirteen years ago."

Vincent heard another laugh, but this was in a different voice. He looked up and saw that his attacker had vanished.

Good call, an invisible voice chuckled. Breathing heavily, Vincent rose to his feet, clutching at his bruised ribs. Bent almost double, he leaned against the cave wall, waiting for another assault.

"What the hell's going on?" he called, "Who are you?"

"You know me, Vincent Valentine. You know me quite well. As I do you." Sudden pain shot through his head and he collapsed, unable to bear it. Squeezing his eyes shut, images flooded him; images of pain, death, and despair. Some were memories; Lucrecia's death, his imprisonment in the Shinra mansion, the battles fought during the Meteor affair, but others were things he'd never even thought of, things so terrible, so real that tears ran down his face. He saw Cloud and Tifa dead in each other's arms, he saw Barret's little girl Marlene lying in a pool of her own blood, he saw Icicle Inn burnt to the ground, lonely strips of smoke polluting the sky. Terrible nightmare images that could never happen. He saw himself suddenly, a picture of himself as a monster that could never revert back to humanity.

"Get out of my mind, you unconscionable bastard!" he cried, clutching at his forehead. Laughter filled his ears, his

torturer reveling in his pain. He clenched his hands into fists, suddenly summoning all of his strength and lashing out, not with a kick or a punch, but with a burst of his own will. It expelled the being from his thoughts and he was able to think clearly, the horrible visions ceasing. Before it could attack again, he jumped to his feet, roughly wiping the tears from his red eyes and assuming an attack stance. "You try that again and I'll tear you apart," he threatened, his claw raised.

A few moments passed and he was able to catch his breath. He could practically hear the other presence waiting, trying to think of what it would do to him next. Without warning, the air directly in front of him shimmered slightly and it seemed that the very molecules that composed it reformed in front of his eyes to create an image of a man. The features came into focus, the figure's body becoming solid, or at least creating a convincing image of solidity. Vincent blinked hard as suddenly a mirror copy of himself stood facing him, red eyes blazing brightly.

"Nice to meet you," the real Vincent grumbled bitterly, head aching along with his ribs. The copy didn't smile. It didn't speak to him either. It only stood there, watching him.

"Well? What are you waiting for?"

His copy shrugged, then turned and walked away from him towards the altar. It sat down upon the stone slab casually. Some sixth sense told Vincent to glance behind him and make sure his escape route was clear if need be. To his dismay, he saw that where the back of the waterfall should be, there was only a cold stone wall. He was trapped. Chaos clawed at his will. His attention refocused suddenly as the clone finally spoke.

It was holding up its claw, as though examining it. He admired the way it glinted in the waning sunlight. "What a marvelous gift, Vincent," it murmured thoughtfully, "Hojo must've really liked us to bless us with such a thing. We're never defenseless. How many men can claim to that? Sure, we don't have our gun right now, but we have this claw. And that beast within is ready to fight at the slightest whim. We're always ready to kill, always armed. It's a shame we've wasted our life hiding in our little chocobo shack in Icicle Inn, too afraid to use what was given to us."

"Shut up." Vincent eyed the being darkly. It was trying to anger him. It wanted Chaos to come out. It could take Vincent's mind over again if he turned into the beast. He'd have no power to stop it. "Shut up, you figment of a diseased brain. You're not even real. You're not even worth talking to."

The copy laughed, ignoring him. "You were a man years ago. What are you now? A coward, hiding, scaring the locals with your darkness. Hmph. The town oddity. What wasted potential. You're not worth the gifts we've been given. Hojo should have let you bleed to death. Do you hear me, you fool? You weak fool, mourning over lost love, over a woman who never really cared about you. She preferred her scientist and her evil child to you. And who the hell wouldn't. . .?"

Vincent shut his eyes, the words boring into his skull. It had turned slowly from a physical voice into one that rang only in his head. He'd have ran from the cave to escape it, but he had no where to go. Things he preferred not to think upon were thrown suddenly into his thoughts. He wasn't surprised to open his eyes and see himself standing directly before his face. The copy, or was it even a copy? drilled into him with its gaze. It raised the claw towards Vincent's head. The man prepared to die, nearly welcoming it. But no, the claw stopped, two of the fingers resting lightly against his brow.

"It's all in here, isn't it, my poor friend. You don't need to be told. Hmph." Without warning, the thing turned quickly away and vanished. I'll see ya later, it said in its disembodied voice, as though bidding farewell to a brother. Vincent fell to his knees once it was gone. The waterfall reappeared and the atmosphere resumed its peacefulness. All was still and sane again, everything on the outside anyways. The peace could no longer reach his unsettled heart.

~*~

"I'm gonna grind you into hamburger, ya freak. . ." Ash's tone bespoke how sincerely he meant the words. CJ gulped, fists raised defensively. The two boys stood facing each other in the schoolyard, nearly fifty feet from the back of their school, their actions hidden from the recess monitor by a line of trees. Twenty fifth-graders ringed them, breaths held.

"I don't wanna fight ya, Ash. I never done anything to ya."

"Sissy," the boy sneered. Ash's friends in the crowd laughed derisively and CJ reddened. His own friends though, came through.

"You're a jerk, ya know that?" his pal Sliver called.

"Yeah, CJ's gonna kick your ass, Ash-hole." This little quip came from Brittany, CJ's best friend. He heard her stick her tongue out at the bully, making little spurting noises.

"You shut your mouth, gagighandi face. I'll take care of you after this!" With that last word, Ash sprang forward, landing a blow to CJ's jaw. The boy blinked in surprise, and fell back hard onto his bottom. Rusty blood flowed from his mouth.

There went that loose tooth. He moved it under his tongue for safe keeping. No use losing a perfectly good two gil from the tooth fairy just because of stupid Ash.

Giving his mother's leather glove a reassuring pat with his left hand, he stood quickly, glaring at his opponent.

"What's that little mitten gonna do, eh? You're such a weakling, you could just take that thing off and throw it at me. 'Hurt me more than you trying to punch me with it.'" Ash and his friends laughed insanely. CJ growled. The bully wouldn't sucker punch him again, he swore. He tried and CJ easily sidestepped it, racing to remember the moves his dad had taught him. Seeing an opening, he jabbed at Ash's nose, landing his first blow and causing his opponent to look up in surprise. That'd hurt.

"You little shit. . ." he breathed, stepping forward intimidatingly. Smiling, CJ ducked and rolled between the much taller boy's legs, springing to a standing position behind him and punching him in the nose again as the bully turned to face him. Nose gushing blood now, he asked, "Getting fancy, eh, Strife? Hope you have a will made out."

"Talk, talk, talk, that's all you ever do, Ash, "CJ spat, cocky now. "Shut the hell up and fight." The bully came at him quickly but CJ blocked and swept his legs sending him crashing to the ground. The boy felt a sudden surge of power enter the muscles of his right arm. He felt like he could rip a brick in half. Trembling slightly, he released the energy into his opponent's jaw, ending the brawl. Ash's head lolled over and his eyes shut, unconscious. The victor grinned wide in surprise. He'd never known he could hit so hard. He turned to face the rest of the fifth grade and they cheered him.

"CJ! Oh, my gawd, boy!" Brittany came forward and threw her arms around his neck, thrilled for him, "I didn't know you could fight like that! You were all like, "hah!" and "wah!" and doing that fancy twirling stuff! Awesome!"

Sliver shook his head coolly, eyeing Ash's friends as they walked slowly over to examine the fallen bully. "He's going to be feeling that for a while."

The children all gathered around CJ, admiring the leather glove, seeing past its age and torn material, and making of it an idol. They knew the boy hadn't won that battle alone. But CJ Strife felt as though he had, basking in their adulation, hands on his hips as he answered their questions and responded to their compliments. Then, a thick, wrinkled hand grabbed him roughly from behind and he was lifted bodily into the air by the collar of his t-shirt. The fame couldn't last forever, and he'd been expecting his capture. As he was carted off by Syd, the three-hundred pound, sixty year old, thickly muscled recess monitor, his friends waved to him, applauding him. He couldn't help but feel blissfully happy.

~*~

They'd called the ambulance. This had caused CJ to worry. The staff in the Sector One Elementary School front office buzzed about him busily where he sat awaiting punishment in a hard wooden chair near the assistant principal's conference room. First they'd been bustling to make sure the ambulance hurried, then they'd answered the EMS workers' questions frantically once they'd arrived, now they hovered about Ash as he sat up in the gurney, a bag of ice pressed to his broken nose. CJ sighed. They'd yet to care that he was bleeding. He could have a busted head or something. He removed the tooth from under his tongue and spat it out into his hand. Tucking it safely away in his shirt pocket, he jumped suddenly as Cait Sith entered the office in a panic.

"CJ!" the mechanical cat cried, jumping off his mog, cape flapping behind him. He landed in the boy's lap and threw two paws about his neck in relief. He hugged the cat back to reassure him.

"Hi, Cait, "he said, then threw a wave to the mog. Mog crossed his thick, stuffed arms huffily.

"Are you alright?" Cait asked in concern.

"Yeah, I guess. I lost a tooth, but it was loose anyways."

"So you're okay?"

"Yeah."

"Good, now take this!" The little cat hissed in anger and bashed his charge over the head with a white-gloved paw. CJ tried to cover himself from the robot's wrath, but to no avail.

"OW! Cait, I'm sorry! Really! I had no choice!"

"Sure you didn't!"

"Mr. Sith?" The cat halted his attack and looked over his shoulder, eyes narrowed at the woman who'd addressed him.

"What?"

"Are you CJ's legal guardian?"

"I'm his babysitter. Why?"

"My name's Mrs. Hachimitsu, I'm the assistant principal. We're sorry to say that young Mr. Strife here has earned himself a two week suspension with this little fiasco. Would you please tell one of his parents to call us so we can set up a conference to work out further punishment?"

As though suspension isn't bad enough, CJ groaned to himself.

"Will do, ma'am. Is that kid alright?"

The woman looked the cat up and down, suddenly realizing what a strange little thing he was, then nodded absentmindedly. "Broken nose is all. Ambulance was called in as a precaution, he could have a concussion. CJ, you've behaved very shamefully."

The boy just nodded. No use trying to defend himself from the slander. And even if he had done a rather violent thing, he didn't care. He hadn't a speck of guilt on his conscience.

"Well, you take this time to think about what you've done. You, your parents and I will all meet soon and we'll discuss what we should do to make sure you're sorry. Alright, Mr. Sith, you can take him home now." The woman frowned and turned away, walking towards Ash to tell him the same news. Cait hopped onto his mog, grabbing his megaphone. CJ stood slowly, staring at the ground in dejection. The little cat had a sudden change of heart. He'd known the boy all his life. He wouldn't have fought without good cause.

"Wanna ride?" He offered. CJ looked up, half-grinned and shrugged.

"Sure." Sure, why not? He'd ride out of school in style. Ash would ride out in an ambulance. That thought left him with a dark feeling of pleasure.

Mog was rather humongous and CJ had yet to have a growth spurt, so there was plenty of room on the stuffed toy's right shoulder for the boy to perch upon. Cait gave the thing a pat on the head and it moved quickly from the office. Students and staff watched the kid and his babysitter ride off in amazement. Those Strifes, they thought, shaking their heads.

~*~

That Strife, Reno thought and he shook his head slowly. The former Turk stood with crossed arms in the doorway of Hojo's decrepit old lab. He watched his friend giving orders to the orange-clad Shinra labor bustling around and moving crates, machinery, and broken projects out of the room. They were depositing it all in a rusty old garbage bin that maintenance had moved upstairs that morning.

"And you're sure we shouldn't be salvaging anything?" he called to Cloud for the third time that day. They'd thrown so much out without even examining it, crates containing experiments that could lead to any number of amazing scientific finds, countless journals scribbled with priceless notes and research. It boggled Reno's mind that one scientist's life, Hojo's life, could be so easily discarded with one day's hard labor.

"I already told you, man, it's all going. Every last test tube."

"But we could be missing so much."

Cloud turned, his face a cold mask. "Hojo specialized in world domination, Reno. He performed experiments with mako, Jenova cells, and genetics. By witnessing and dealing with the mistakes he made, I think we learned more than all of these gizmos and books here combined could teach us." The blonde haired man looked at his friend heatedly for a moment, but then caught himself and weakly smiled. "I'm sorry," he said, "I've just been really thinking about this a lot."

Reno shrugged but returned the smile, his red hair masking his eyes. "S'okay. I know that all this stuff is hard on you. I worked for Shinra thirteen years ago, but I didn't really know what was going on up here. I was only concerned with doing what the big cheeses wanted. That's all a Turk is ever concerned with."

Cloud nodded. A Turk did the job, that's all there was to it. At least, that'd been the creed of the old Department of Administrative Research. The men and women that he and Reno trained now were taught to think for themselves when the occasion rose. One mind could turn the tide.

"Really strange that you never knew this was still up here," Reno said suddenly. "I mean we've been in charge of security for twelve years. I'm trying to think how you could have missed it."

"You knew then?"

"Course I knew. This lab's been on the list of vacant rooms for years. I just never really thought about it a lot. It's just

been forgotten. There's a certain stigma about this place, I suppose. Evil here, and bad memories. The techs just weren't interested in renovating it for their own needs. Too many old ghosts to deal with I guess."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. When I stumbled in here last night, I started walking around, taking a look at everything, ended up scaring the hell outta myself. I kept thinking I heard something yelling at me. Just the mind playing tricks though." Cloud laughed as though it were a joke. Reno didn't answer, he only turned to eye his friend strangely, a curious look on his face.

"These too, sir?" a voice called from far away. Cloud turned, looking past the crowd of workers laboring in the large room and towards the back. He approached the voice, Reno walking easily at his heels. He had nothing better to do. He didn't know why Cloud was personally supervising the clean-up of the lab. It was a rather lowly task for the co-head of security of the most successful corporation in the world.

"What is it, Hanson?" Cloud asked once they'd reached the man who'd called him. The Shinra worker saluted quickly, and pointed to his discovery. Sealed away in a ten foot square, flat lead drawer, was an amazing stash of materia. Each softly glowing orb was nestled firmly in its own gray foam slot. They looked like pearls on display at a jewelers.

Reno whistled softly. He leaned towards Cloud and eagerly whispered, "Can I?" Cloud grinned and nodded. Both men ignored Hanson and leaned forward towards the cache. There was an equal assortment there; summons, magics, commands, supports, and independents. Reno lifted up a particularly intense red sphere. He took off one of his gloves and held the materia against his bare skin.

"Summon Ifrit, "he said, "Level three."

Cloud hefted a few orbs in his own hands, sensing their spells and levels. "Mastered Fire, "he called off, "Mastered Ice, two level two Contains. A raw Poison and a raw Earth. Pretty standard stuff."

Cloud seemed rather unimpressed with the discovery and Reno was puzzled until he remembered that back in the days of Meteor, he and his team had owned a veritable hoard of materia. He wondered where it had all gone to since then.

"Do you know how much this stuff is worth?" Reno breathed, hefting a few Mastered Alls in his hands.

"On the black market?"

"Where else? It's illegal to buy or sell it anymore. For medical purposes and military use only. I uh, don't suppose you'd turn your head while I stuffed a few of these away in my jacket, eh?" Reno made as though he'd stash them in his pockets, but then laughed and tossed the orbs back in their slots. He didn't need the money. He made just as much as Cloud, only he hadn't a family to support. Sometimes Reno would toss hundred gil marks in his fireplace, just to watch them melt. "Well, "he said casually, "Shall I call up the Mako Board and have them cart this stuff off?"

Cloud shook his head. "I'd ask you to, yeah, but they don't meet till Thursday." The Mako Board was an organization started by Reeve immediately after the Meteor Disaster. In those early years it had met everyday and occupied an entire floor of the Shinra building. It had a say in every action of the company, ensuring that every product, every project was planet-friendly and mako free. It had handled each new piece of materia discovered, placing the orbs in special vaults that drained the mako slowly from them, re-releasing it into the lifestream safely. But as the amount of materia discovered grew less and less, and the mako-hungry scientists remaining at Shinra either died, retired, or moved onto better projects, the Board met less frequently now, only once a month, on the third Thursday. There hadn't been a piece of materia discovered in years. For some reason, the planet had stopped producing it. Either that, or humans just weren't able to find it anymore.

"Well, "asked Reno, "What do we do with it till then? It's not like we can just toss it away in the bin with the rest of the stuff."

Cloud dropped the orbs back into the drawer and shut it soundly. He flexed his fingers, the hand that'd been holding the materia tingling and glowing slightly green. Reno stared.

"Damn! What's wrong?" the man asked, stepping away from his friend cautiously. Cloud looked up at him, surprised at his shock.

"It's the mako, "he said simply, "I'm so full of the stuff that it comes up to the surface occasionally, when I'm exposed to other mako. It'll die down again in a few minutes. It's only because I haven't used or held a piece of materia in so long, my blood's all psyched, like I'm gonna cast a spell. You've never seen that? In battle, all those years ago, it'd happen whenever I'd use magic. Sometimes the mako in my eyes would burn so brightly I wouldn't be able to see for a few moments. Rather inconvenient stuff."

"That always freaked me out." Reno laughed nervously, his hands stuck uneasily in the pockets of his slacks. "Never happened to the SOLDIERS."

Cloud shrugged. "They didn't spend five years being poisoned by mako, did they? One exposure was all they got. Enough to enhance their strength a bit, make them quicker, tougher. They weren't made into frigging walking mako

fountains." He spat the last words rather bitterly, watching his hand as he talked. Reno shuffled, anxious to change the subject.

"So. . ."

"Well, we'll leave it here. It's safe enough. No one has any use for materia anymore. I'll tell the Board to pick it up Thursday and they can cart the stuff to the vaults. Easy. Hanson, what time is it?"

The orange-clad laborer looked up surprised. His mind had been wandering during the two men's conversation. "Uhh. . ." he stuttered, refocusing, "The time! Sorry, sir, it's a quarter to one."

"Military time, please!" snapped Reno automatically.

Hansen jerked to attention, feet together, arms at his side, head straight and chest puffed out. "Fifteen minutes until thirteen-hundred hours, sir!" he barked. Reno grinned, pulling a few of his stray red hairs behind his ear.

"As you were, soldier," he replied, smiling for some smug, unseen reason.

"Lunchtime," Cloud said simply. "Hansen, call lunch. Back at fourteen-hundred." He shut the materia drawer with a clang, then walked back towards where the majority of the lab's mess still lay piled up messily, covered in dust. Reno scratched at his nose and marked a course for the elevator, thinking he might snatch Rude from the confines of the Turk's training facility so they could head over to the commissary and grab a bite. It was obvious that Cloud wasn't in a very sociable mood.

In a few minutes the lab was deserted, the laborers off to take advantage of the lunch hour. Cloud continued the work they'd been doing, carting the ungainly grimy packages to the bin and hurling them inside with a vengeance. He felt satisfied upon hearing the faint tinkles they emitted as their contents shattered, broke apart, and were obliterated, feeling a sense that with every physical piece of Hojo's work that he destroyed, he was in turn wiping out the power-hungry scientist's mad ideals. Soon, with everything he'd ever worked on gone, there'd be nothing left of the man but a lot of bad memories. And then, he thought, carrying the train of thought to an extreme, when I die, even that'll be gone, till there's no one left to remember him anymore. The idea of this brought a grim smile to Cloud's face. He recalled the look in Hojo's eyes when Vincent had delivered the final blow, launching a bullet into the deformed scientist's head that'd nearly torn it clean off. How much more suiting could that've been, that Vincent, the only man more devastated than Sephiroth by Hojo's work, should be the one to finish him off? If the black-mantled man had been Cloud's own fated nemesis, than surely Hojo had been Vincent's. Cloud tossed another box into the overflowing bin, punching the button that switched on the compactor triumphantly. The screech of metal met his ears like music as it all was destroyed. All that evil, all that misguidedness gone, dead, years after its creator had met his end. Glass shattered, metal twisted and bent, wires snapped and came apart at the solder-seams. A symphony of righteousness conquering the wrong of life, he thought contentedly. Done by his hand.

He took a last look around. The large room was half cleared. He figured the Shinra work crew could finish the rest. He grabbed a clipboard from nearby and scrawled a hasty note, addressing it to Hanson, simply because he didn't know any of the other men's names, and asking him to take over the task, ordering that it be finished by that evening. Everything cleared out, cleaned, and disinfected. All except the mako room in the rear. Neto, weapons development head, had requested that the room be left as is so that he and his techs could test materia there in the lead lined chambers. The weapons that Shinra designed went mainly to the continent's army, so their use of materia was legal under the law. The Mako Board couldn't say anything about it, as long as all unused materia was disposed of correctly. Cloud signed the note and tacked it to the elevator doors. He looked at it soberly. Hojo's death certificate. He almost expected that terrible voice he'd heard the night before to come and protest the thing. But there was nothing. He'd thought as much.

Grabbing his jacket and keys from a stool, stooping to pick up his wallet which had fallen to the floor a good ways off from the rest, he ducked over to the stairwell, opening the door there with a bang and stomping down the stairs to his office to do some paperwork. After his steps had echoed away, the lab became utterly silent. Even the compactor quieted, the last rumblings of its machinery reverberating softly into nothingness. The atmosphere was disturbingly still. Except for one thing. Deep, deep, hidden profoundly away in the recesses of the laboratory, something lived.

A room full of loud workers had obscured the faint, nearly imperceptible sound of its breathing. The quiet observer would have noticed it now. It quickened suddenly in excitement, growing carelessly louder, while the beast it belonged to moved about anxiously, its claws scratching away at the walls that kept it hidden. In harsh tones it scolded itself, the feral voice only one of many that screamed control. A long tongue escaped its burnt black lips sickeningly, running over pointed teeth as though gingerly, pleasurably recalling the taste of something it'd gone without for a very long time. Calmer now, it rested again, great white terrible eyes blinking slowly. The beast gazed down at something held in its claws. Photographs. Patiently it flipped through the stack, discarding each one with a careless flick. Until he came to the last few.

"Aahhh. . ." it breathed, holding an age-yellowed photo up to the scant light, "I was right."

The photo after this one caused the same reaction, as did the next, and the one after that. The beast let a capacious grin stretch across its countenance, yellow teeth glaring, snorting breath acrid and hot as it exhaled. "This is the way, "it muttered decisively, "It's finally time. Time at last. . .time at last. . ."

~*~

Onward to Part Two: Sowing The Seeds

So, what do you think? Do you like the thought of Cloud as a dad, Vincent as a reclusive painter/poet/chocobo breeder, and Barret as a maintenance man? And what's up with the thingie flipping through Cloud's photos? Please email me, GlassShard, with your comments and flaming balls of critical ire, I'd love to hear 'em.

Oh, and if you're wondering, the title of the fic, Too Much In The Sun, is a line from Hamlet. I won't tell you why I used it for this fic just yet, cause it'll spoil what's to come. Keep reading ^_^

Oh, and ya know that FFVII characters are copyrighted by Square, right? Okay, thought so.