



Part Three:
BRANDED

Neto looked to the new, young, female tech rather sternly. His mouse-like face puckered, all of his features bunching together with his stubby nose as a center-point. She smiled shyly up towards him, trying her damndest not to look away.

"Excuse me?" the young scientist asked, a condescending sneer in his voice. "Your name's Marlene Wallace, isn't it? Well, Miss Wallace, perhaps you weren't told on your first day, but you're new, and as a new tech here in the Shinra labs, your job is not to question the presiding scientist, but rather to back up his every word as though it were gospel." The group of young techs flanking Neto sniggered as Marlene reddened. The young woman couldn't help but avert her eyes now, her hands clasped behind her white lab coat.

"I didn't mean any disrespect, sir, it's just that I've seen this sort of thing before. This particular problem, I mean. I don't want you to have to run so many tests to discover it for yourself if one of us already knows the solution."

Neto arched an eyebrow in slight disdain as she so impudently included herself in the collective "us" of the Shinra techs. That was a carefully guarded pronoun. But he decided he'd humor her for now. She was a little too brash for someone so young, for a newbie nonetheless, a bottom of the barrel peon employed only to make coffee and struggle through computations that the rest of them were too lazy to perform, until the next new tech was hired and she could pass her lowliness onto that poor soul. He decided she needed to be taken down a peg. He'd let her embarrass herself in front of the entire Weapons Development Department, maybe that would get her to respect him.

The group of technicians was standing in that same hangar in which Dragon Weapon had been tested. The crater where the Da-Chao mythril model had exploded was finally being filled by a few orange-clad Shinra workmen, the noise of the cement truck loud against the sensitive ears of the scientists. They stood bunched together, examining a new laser prototype which had been set up for display on a long, wooden workbench. The laser was rather huge for something meant to be handheld. It stretched nearly four feet long and took up most of the bench.

"Alright, Miss Wallace," Neto snapped coldly, "Let's see what you can do. I know your father Barret is quite a studious sort, I'm sure you've learned a lot under him. Show us."

The group of techs laughed uproariously, Neto's sarcasm hitting home. Marlene turned fifty shades of red and her fists clenched at her sides. Her father's life was a personal joke around the Shinra building, she'd learned the past few days. The Turks used him as an insult, calling each other "Barrets" when they might misfire, or misjudge a target. These snooty technicians were even worse. Barret had been a figure of international acclaim after the fall of Meteor, as had all the warriors who'd saved the Planet. His retreat into Cosmo Canyon was rather closely followed by the news media. They'd watched him with hawk-eyes, waiting for a story. That story'd come when it'd been discovered he'd given up on his studies of the Planet and turned into the town's maintenance man. The hilarity of it had only increased when they'd found out his daughter was a planetary genius and Bugah's brightest student.

Standing there meekly, cowed by the laughter of her coworkers, it broke Marlene's heart to realize just how overlooked her father was. He'd saved the life of everyone in that room, and here they were, mocking him like fools. Nanaki had been right in telling her she needed to see Shinra from her father's point of view. If she'd have been him standing there, she'd probably still hate the corporation too. Eyes snapping in ire, she whipped about to face the laser, laying two expert hands upon it. They'd tested it only moments before and it still was warm. A smile spread across her lips. I'll show 'em, she thought darkly, for me and for dad.

The goal of the weapon beneath her hands, ideally, was to focus the energy of a single orb of fire materia into a fine stream, a laser, and then use that beam to slice through obstacles. Simply casting a fire spell was too messy, and all it could do was burn, its energy expiring in the open air. Taking that same energy and focusing it cleanly though opened up many possibilities. The only problem was that they were expecting too much out of a simple piece of fire materia. They were trying to get it to focus into the metal rod at the rear of the weapon by itself, treating the mako energy of the materia like electricity. Sure, electricity would jump right onto the metal, but the mako fire was no where near as predictable. It would simply lash out at the nearest living thing other than the caster. That's what the young technician now in the infirmary had just found out.

"Where is the materia supply?" Marlene asked, assuming her best professional tone. Neto nodded towards a cabinet in the wall and she reached a hand out towards it, opening it slowly. Materia winked at her in the dim hangar light, always easy, always friendly to her eyes. She delved her hand into a drawer containing blue orbs, support materia, moved about inside it for awhile, and then withdrew an Elemental. She grabbed some wires, plopped the materia besides the fire, made some quick adjustments to the laser and held it up, crossing her fingers. Neto watched her in curiosity.

"It won't work," he said, "The Elemental will only focus the materia into the weapon's current attack. That thing has no attack power of its own."

"It does now." Without warning, her anger getting the better of her, she hefted the laser onto her shoulder, took aim at a bullseye set up on the opposite wall, and pulled the trigger, at the same time, casting Fire 2. The weapon didn't make a sound as she fired. It seemed as though nothing had happened. Neto smirked, expecting the young woman to fall down on her knees in apology. But no. She lowered the weapon, gingerly leaning it back on the bench, then dashed over to the bullseye. Neto and his techs followed, smug grins marring their already unattractive countenances.

"What do you expect when Shinra starts recruiting outside of Midgar?" one of Neto's assistants whispered in his ear.

"Yes, what do you expect of some anonymous wench recommended by President Reeve of all people? She's a wet behind the ear country bird." Neto looked to the young man who'd made his statement and smiled, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. The bunched group of white-clad scientists approached the bullseye, not understanding why the new tech was so excited when the damned laser hadn't even fired. They halted before her, watching in mystification. She was gesturing frantically to the bullseye and suddenly they all saw what she meant. An inch wide hole was burnt through the center of the target, drilling a perfect tunnel through the two feet of cement that constructed the wall behind it. Bright sunlight filtered through, projecting through the hole like a flashlight and shining mockingly in Neto's eyes.

Marlene grinned wickedly.

"Is that focused enough for ya?"

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She was supposed to get off at six, but that night Neto kept her there till eight, calling a special meeting of every staff member in the WDD, or Weapons Development Department so that Marlene could give a quick lecture on how she'd done what she'd done in the hangar. To her amazement, she'd been met with many uncomprehending stares from her peers as she'd explained the properties of materia to them. They didn't seem to understand at all how it worked or how its power could be used for so much good. The meeting had stretched for three hours. Every time she thought she'd answered the last question, someone else would raise their hand with a fresh one. Afterward, as the WDD staff filed from the lecture hall, Neto stopped her and pulled her aside.

"I was wrong," he said, his voice uncharacteristically humble, "It doesn't happen often, but today I was wrong. You're really quite knowledgeable with mako and materia. Such knowledge is beginning to be lost around here. I'm sure you noticed by the blank stares you got when you had to explain the difference between AP and MP. We're all young scientists, all of us new school. The desire to experiment with mako died along with Hojo and his group. The mako board has such restrictions now. It makes even the limited materia experiments we do do difficult to get approved. But today, I think, you showed us there is still a lot of validity to mako research."

She blushed with the comments, her eyes shining prettily. Neto marked them, smiling at her beauty, but trying to keep his mind on the topic. "Well, Miss Wallace, I think that today you've proven even though you've only been with us a scant few days, that you should be a member of the new materia research group we've established. The Security heads just finished overhauling Hojo's old labs, cleaning them out and tossing his old experiments, but I put in a request that they leave the mako room alone and let us use it. It's sitting there now, waiting for our research. I just feel that there's so much we can learn about the planet through studying mako."

"Oh, Dr. Neto, I feel the same way. In fact, sir, I wanted to work for Shinra so badly for that very reason. There are so many properties of materia that we don't know anything about, that even the great Bugenhagen couldn't figure out and he lived for centuries. The secrets of the planet reside in those little orbs, I just know it. The balance of life, I think sometimes. You remember the white and black materias, don't you, sir?"

Neto chuckled. "I do but I know you don't, you're too young."

"And you were only a teenager," she replied rather snappishly, "But, sir, those two materia represented the power of good and the power of evil. They kept each other in check. It was when Sephiroth summoned Meteor and threw the balance of power out of whack, that chaos ensued. But then, when white materia was called into play, it canceled out the

dark power, restoring the planet to balance. Such balances hold true for everything in our world. For every power, no matter how great, there's something that keeps it in check. Fire has ice, aero has quake, bio has esuna, it's little things like that that make me think materia are so vital to our understanding of anything. Humanity even, in all our power, are kept in check by the Planet. No one force can truly dominate." Neto didn't understand half the things she was saying, but he nodded anyways, marveling at the way her face lit up as she argued. She saw him watching her so intently and finally clued in that he wasn't exactly pondering the mysteries of materia behind those smoky black eyes. "Alright," she said suddenly, getting off her pedestal, "I'd love to be a member of that research group."

"I'm glad." He shook his head, grinning at her, not believing himself. He'd never acted like such a love-struck fool before. "Listen, what are you doing now? Are you-- are you going home?"

"Why?"

"I was just thinking that maybe we could go down to the commissary and get some coffee."

"It's after seven, sir, the commissary's closed. Besides, I don't drink coffee."

"Oh."

Marlene smiled at how crestfallen the man looked.

"What about ice cream?" he shot suddenly, "There's a nice little ice cream parlor on Giman street. I think it's open late. My treat?" She'd stood there for a moment, looking him over. He was rather bookish for her taste. She loved intelligent men, but she also loved men who knew enough to get outside once in a while. Still though, he was mildly handsome, in a mouse-ish sort of way. Maybe a little old. She was about to nod her head and say what the hell, when she recalled his words back in the hangar that afternoon. That terrible biting sarcasm he'd used about her father. Any playfulness in her eyes vanished suddenly and ice took its place as she scowled at him.

"Actually, Dr. Neto," she snapped, "Thank you for the invite, but I have to be getting home to my father. If I don't get there soon and stop him, he'll stay up all night reading comic books and blowing up reactors." She said the last words in deadly sarcasm, then turned and walked away from the man, not looking back once.

"I deserved that!" he called after her, "Another time then!" He watched her walking, watched how her beautifully braided hair glinted in the fluorescent light, encircling her head like a tiara. His heart skipped a beat and sang a little song it'd never sang before. He'd ask her again tomorrow, and the next day, and that day after that. Perhaps he'd put science on the back-burner and make Marlene Wallace his next project. He grinned like a schoolboy, turned and stepped lightly back to the labs.

Instead of going straight home as she'd told Neto, Marlene took the elevator down to the fifty-ninth floor. The silver doors opened before her now silently, revealing a dark deserted hallway. She wasn't nervous for even a second though, it was the Shinra Security floor and there wasn't a safer place in the world. Stepping from the elevator, she took a sharp right and made her way to the end of the seemingly endless hallway, her heels clacking loudly upon the cold tiles. What a day, she thought to herself wearily, a hard day, an exhausting day, but without a doubt, her best day yet. She'd earned the respect of her co-workers. That knowledge warmed her to her toes. The gazes on their bookish faces upon seeing that lovely hole in the wall. . . she chuckled in her throat. Plans spun through her head now, plans of what she'd do as part of the materia research team. Projects came to mind, ideas began to form, things she'd wanted to try for years but been unable to because of Cosmo Canyon's limited resources. She smiled to herself. Elder Bugah and Nanaki would be so proud of her. Even Barret would be proud, though he wouldn't understand the grandness of her accomplishments exactly, it didn't matter, he'd see in her eyes her excitement and would be able to share in it easily. That was what Marlene loved best about her father.

"Miss Marlene."

She spun around at the words and suddenly saw Reno approaching from behind her, his red hair hanging messy over his eyes. She hadn't seen him in years. She noticed with a small frown that there were a couple gray hairs amidst the red, and a few stray lines about his eyes. But he was as handsome as ever, the picture of a bad ass Turk. His suit now was black, but still frumpled and tie-less, his collar loose and hanging open. She couldn't really remember the things that Barret had told her he'd done years before, and was rather glad for it. He, like so much of the rest of Shinra, had his sins to atone for, but his past was of no concern to the young woman. She greeted him with a smile, knowing him only as her Uncle Cloud's shiftless but harmless friend.

"Good evening, Miss Marlene. I'd heard you were working here now," he said, unable to think of a better way to engage conversation.

"Hullo, Reno, yeah, I've gotten a job over in the WDD."

"That's hard stuff to get started in," he breathed, looking at her over the top of his dark sunglasses, "But I heard you've

really been doing a number up there. As in, impressing the hell out of Neto."

"How'd you know?" she asked, eyebrows arched. He shrugged, smiling faintly.

"I just came from talking with Rude. . . "

"He's the. . . "

". . . bald one, right. He was in the hangar today when you burned a hole through that two foot wall of cement. I don't know if you were aware or not, but afterwards the laser then preceded to cut down a small stop sign two miles away. All I can say is I'm glad no one was in the line of fire."

Marlene's mouth dropped open, imagining what the consequences of that might've been. But then, something struck her as odd and she gave Reno a puzzled look. "How could that be?" she asked, "According to my calculations, the laser only had a range of five hundred feet. It shouldn't've--"

"Geez, lay off, girl!" he said suddenly grinning, "It was a joke. Damn." Reno laughed, throwing up his hands, pulling one of them through his hair. "Science nut. Anyways, how ya doing?"

"Fine, I was on my way to see Cloud."

"Yeah, I thought you might be, that's why I stopped you."

"Don't tell me. . . "

"Yeah, I don't think you should bother Cloud right now."

"That's what you guys's secretary told me yesterday. And I went to his house the day before that and he wasn't there. I been in town a week and I've yet to lay eyes on him." Marlene tapped her foot impatiently, sticking a hand in the pocket of her lab coat, waiting for an answer. Reno didn't have one to give her.

"You do know what happened, don't you?" the man asked gently. Marlene nodded.

"Why do you think I want to see him so badly?"

Reno shrugged. "Kid, Cloud would appreciate your thoughtfulness, I'm sure, but he's not really himself right now. He's. . . he's just not himself. You wouldn't be doing him a favor if you went to him right now." Reno crossed his arms, shifting from one foot to the other. He hoped he wouldn't have to go into too much more detail with her, hoping she'd understand that Cloud was best left alone. He'd never seen his friend so broken up. He was blaming himself for the disappearance of his children. He was punishing himself for what he considered his crime. He wouldn't eat, he wouldn't sleep. When he talked, it was hollow, as though he wasn't really there at all. He averted her eyes. He also didn't want to tell her he'd just left Cloud in his office drunk outta his head. He'd had the brilliant idea to try and loosen his friend up with a bit of something from Reeve's personal booze stash. He figured they'd get toasted, talk about better things, he'd forget his kids were gone for a while, and everything would be great. He hadn't known Cloud would only get quieter and more depressed with every drink. Reno had had to leave him, unnerved by the things the man had started to say.

"He shouldn't be at work, "Marlene snapped suddenly, "He should be home with Tifa. Why is Reeve being so bastardly? Can't he give the man the week off?"

"Watch your tongue, missie. Of course Reeve's given him the week off. He's all but ordered him to go home, but Cloud won't. He says he can't stand to be in his house. He won't leave that bloody office. He only sits in there like a fool, his huge damn sword cradled in his lap, staring out the window. I've given up on him. He's too frigging stubborn." Reno scowled behind his glasses, then looked to his watch suddenly and swore. He gave Marlene a quick wave, then turned brusquely about and began walking back down the hallway.

"Where are you going?" Marlene called after him. Reno shook his head dismissively, running his fingers through his hair and attempting to straighten his wrinkled jacket. He tucked his shirt in with a frantic hand.

"Got a date. You stay out of there, girl. Go home before it gets too dark out. Hey, ya got a mint?" Marlene tossed him one from her purse and he waved in thanks, then was gone, turning the corner, the clacking of his heels growing fainter and then disappearing, leaving the young woman alone on the nearly deserted floor. She sighed, then leaned wearily back against the wall. The quiet around her was perfect. It was rather nice after her hectic day. She sighed again, shutting her eyes.

She'd been devastated when Barret had told her about CJ and Ifalna's disappearance. He'd heard of it from Cid Highwind, having met the old pilot for drinks in a bar in Sector Seven on their second day in Midgar.

"The world's going to hell, "the pilot had said, a stubby cigarette hanging from his lower lip. "What kind of a rat bastard kidnaps little children outta their beds? In the dead of night? Little CJ and Ifalna. . . they're really the sweetest things. Who'd a thought that that wonky Cloud would have such great kids? But he did. And now they're gone. His past has caught up to him. And I'll betcha two gil those kids are paying for it in spades. Cloud just can't escape his last name."

Marlene blinked sadly. It hadn't sounded like it, but Barret had assured her Cid had been really broken up over the kids' disappearances. He'd donated the Highwind to the search for a couple of days, but the old airship hadn't really been able to lend much help. Now, no one was really even looking anymore. The boy and girl were gone. And Cloud was helpless.

"Screw Reno," Marlene said suddenly, pushing herself off the wall violently. "If nothing else, I can go look in on him, make sure he's alright." Mind set, she began trekking down the hall towards his office, the hem of her lab coat slapping at her calves as she walked. Soon, the large glass double doors leading into the Shinra Security office loomed before her. Cloud and Reno's names were stenciled on the glass in white, along with the Shinra seal. She pushed on one and the door opened silently inward. She walked past a huge room lined with monitors. Each showed a picture of some different part of the building in either infrared or flickering color. Leaving this room, she entered a spotless hallway, turned the corner and was suddenly confronted with a door marked "Cloud Strife, Co-Head of Security and Weapons. Class One." It wasn't shut all the way, she was glad to see. Grateful the floor was carpeted, she stepped forward softly as a cat and pushed it open. It parted from the frame without a sound.

The office was huge, easily as big as Reeve's. One wall was nothing but a large picture window looking out on Sectors One and Two. There was a full moon that night and the milky orb seemed to hang suspended from invisible wires just outside the glass. Its light hit the mass of the clouds and set them to shining. A few lonely stars twinkled distantly, their light nothing in comparison to the moon's, but they tried with honest efforts to match it and Marlene smiled at them encouragingly.

Cloud didn't have the lights on. He sat staring out the window, perfectly still, his spiky head rising up over the back of the desk chair he sat in and silhouetting darkly against the moon's white. She entered the room a few steps, trying to work up the courage to say something, to address a man who'd never said a single harsh word to her in all her life. But the words stuck in her throat, making her choke. She could see the massive Ultima Weapon was lain across his knees. He drummed his gloved fingers against the blade, the sound hollow and loud. Everything about him showed dejection, from his unkempt hair, to his wrinkled clothes, to his sprawled position in the chair. She wanted to go to him and make him feel better, to set his mind at ease about his children, but what was there to say? They were both gone, gone without a clue, leaving nothing behind but broken hearts.

Cloud let forth a shaky sigh suddenly, and lightly swung his sword from his lap, embedding it in the carpet and pushing himself to a standing position with it. Marlene had absolutely no idea in the world why, but she dove behind a table to escape being seen. Perhaps she was scared he'd be mad at her for sneaking up on him, perhaps she was just startled at his sudden movement. She didn't know why, but she continued to crouch there in the dark, watching as the man turned around and began to pace. She peered at his face, nearly gasping at the sight.

His eyes. . . she couldn't believe it. He had mako eyes, she'd always known that, been fascinated by them since she was a little girl, but his eyes now were nearly inhuman. They burned with unnatural light, glowing, emitting so much illumination of their own that they lit his cheeks and brow a startling blue. Any trace of pupils he'd had left was gone now. His eyes were glowing blue pools of energy, nothing more. The scientist in her marveled, awed at how much mako the man must possess inside of him, and at how much he must have absorbed from the monster she'd heard had attacked CJ and Ifalna. Such massive amounts would kill a normal man, she knew that without question. Cloud, mako-adjusted as he was, still must be horribly sick with what he'd been exposed to. She watched his face, seeing it easily through the dark because of his eyes. His skin was a pale, deathly white, and she thought she could see sores on his face and hands. She confirmed the mako poisoning grimly. She wondered how it was he was still standing. Hmph. The power of human will never failed to amaze her.

Eyes half shut, he walked the room, swinging Ultima Weapon at his side. Marlene watched his lips moving silently, as he recited unknown words to himself. He did this for a while, all the time his mouth moving, his mind preoccupied with dark thoughts. He's making himself sick, she thought, sicker than the mako is. Reno said he hadn't eaten, or slept. Did he mean all week? At this rate, her scientific mind informed her he'd be dead soon, dead of neglect and deprivation. She shook her head sadly, her throat burning and tears forming in her brown eyes. It just wasn't fair.

She heard Cloud give up his pacing after a bit and collapse into his chair, coughing so hard he doubled over. When the fit passed, he sat shaking, sweat running down into his eyes, breathing with a rattling sound. She tried to stop herself, but she couldn't hold out any longer.

"Uncle Cloud?" she said softly, standing from behind the table. She approached him hesitantly. He didn't even look up.

"Uncle Cloud, it's Marlene. Are you okay?"

Head sunk down between his knees, arms clasping around his sides, he greeted her weakly. "Hullo, Marlene. I'd heard you got the job. Congratulations."

She stepped up to him and laid a trembling hand on his shoulder. It was then that she noticed the bottles. Several

bottles of whiskey and rum laying empty at the man's feet. She smelled it suddenly on him, thick and dangerous.

"Yeah," she said hesitantly, "I'm working for Neto now. Thanks to you."

"Barret must love me. . ."

Marlene laughed faintly. "He's over it. He really is. He's in town ya know."

"Is he here now?"

"No, back at my place." She stood there silently for a moment, listening to his heavy breathing. "Listen, Uncle Cloud, I heard about CJ and--"

Without warning, one of his hands shot up and grabbed her forearm harshly, squeezing until she stopped talking. Without ever turning to look at her, he spat, "Shut up. I don't want to hear it. If I have to have one more bloody person spout to me how sorry they are, I'll go crazy. Just don't." He released her arm and she stepped back involuntarily towards the door. There was something in the man's voice that frightened her. She thought it might just be the booze, but it seemed deeper than that, like his breath wheezing over the fissure of a tear in his soul. He looked up suddenly, his fiery blue eyes scaring the hell out of her. "Leave," he growled, "That's right, go. Out the way you came. Go ask Barret if he's satisfied yet. He's got you, but I've finally lost mine. Ask him. . . ask him if we're even now." He broke down into coughs, his eyes shutting and turning away from her. Marlene stood in the doorway, leaning heavily against the frame. She watched the man, confused and worried.

"You should go see a doctor about that," she murmured. He coughed again, but then, wait. No, Marlene realized it was a laugh.

"A doctor?" he asked, a tear squeezing from his eye as he clutched his sides, "Doctor's did this to me to begin with, Marlene. You don't know though. No one does. No one understands what's happened to me." She was about to approach him again, touched by his soft, self-pitying words, but his gaze snapped back to her and he snarled, "Get away! Go! Leave! Get out!" That evil voice again, ringing in her ears. Blinded by tears, she ran from the office and down the hall, not stopping till she reached the elevators.

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Barret folded the clothes as neatly as he was able. He wasn't used to doing this sort of thing. It was hard, with only one hand to work with. Marlene had always done the household chores, the laundry, the dishes, the cleaning, and he'd go out into the Canyon to scrounge up business. It'd been a peaceful existence, if a monotonous one. But he'd enjoyed the monotony, it was something you could get lost in after long enough and he truly had. He'd been caught up in the rapid, hazy passage of time and when he'd finally woken up from it, his little girl had gone and turned into a woman. Groaning, he stuffed the last of his shirts away in his suitcase, sat on it, and clasped it shut tightly. It was time for him to leave her to her new life. It was time for him to return to his own. These simple facts hurt him deep inside.

"Dad!" he heard her call suddenly, entering the tiny apartment like a whirlwind. He heard her fling her purse and coat into the corner, then kick off her shoes. They hit the wall with a bang he couldn't help but grin at.

"In here!" he called, centering the suitcase on the small guest bed. Marlene's new apartment was nice. It resided in a Shinra-owned building in Sector Two, very close to the train station, clean even pretty in its design. They both were happy with it.

"Dad!" Marlene called, stepping into the room breathless, "Dad, you wouldn't believe the day I've had." The young woman gave her dad a peck on the cheek, then flopped down on the guest bed wearily. Her eyes skimmed over the packed suitcase suddenly and Barret saw they were red and puffy, as though she'd been crying.

"What's wrong?" he asked. He scooted her over and sat down next to her comfortably. She looked at him in surprise, remembered her eyes and wiped a hand roughly across them like a little kid. She smiled.

"Oh, that's something else. Something that can wait. But let me tell you what happened today. . ." Barret listened quietly as she related the tale of the laser to him. She left out the bit about Neto's insults, wanting to spare her father's feelings. When she was done, she laughed lightly. "And after the meeting adjourned, Neto stopped me in the hallway and tried to ask me out! It made me feel like a queen to be able to turn him down. Imagine, daddy, the head of the WDD asked little old Marlene Wallace out on a date. I almost died."

Barret looked down at her uncertainly. "I don't want you gettin' involved wit' any o' those Shinra men. Especially the scientists. You don't remember Hojo. Or even Gast. They're creepy freaks."

"Aw, don't worry about it. Neto is a jerk. I'll respect him as his employee, but it ends there."

"That's good. You sure showed that little punk a thing or three with the laser, eh? I woulda loved ta see the look on his face, at one of the Wallace's showin' him up." He laughed lowly, the noise erupting from his massive chest with deep reverberations. She gave him a little hug, sharing his feelings exactly. He turned to her though, concern suddenly replacing the mirth in his brown eyes. "But that certainly doesn't explain why ya came in here cryin'. What happened after that? Neto didn't torture you wit' a lotta sappy pick-up lines, did he?" Barret laughed, trying to cheer her up. She looked to him gratefully, but couldn't smile again. She was remembering the man she'd just left, and the desolation in his voice as he'd hollered at her. Tears welled up again, but she stifled them in annoyance. She hated to cry. Crying was so weak and unscientific.

"Well, dad. . . "she began, wanting to approach the topic as gently as she could think of, "I saw Cloud tonight."

"Oh." Barret shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I figured you'd run into him eventually, you two workin' in the same building and all. Um. How. . . how is he?"

"Really bad," she sighed, "He's taking the whole thing so hard. He's blaming himself."

"He's always done that. He's always thought it was always his place to protect everyone and everything. And if anything ever happened, he'd blame himself. Like an asshole."

"His kids are gone, dad. What would you feel like if I disappeared?"

Barret frowned and shook his head. "I already know what that's like. I sure remember it way too clearly, sweetheart."

"You didn't blame yourself though. You had Shinra to blame."

"That's right. They're the ones that took ya, and put ya in danger so much."

"Cloud doesn't have anything like that though. He only has himself and his guilty conscience. You shoulda seen him, dad. He was sitting up there in his office, all in the dark, drunk, mad, depressed. He had that big glowing sword with him and I kept getting scared he'd use it on himself."

"Don't talk nonsense. Cloud wouldn't do that, he has to save his kids."

"Yeah. I hope he knows that."

The two were silent for awhile. Marlene sat back against the headboard and stared at the ceiling. Barret was quiet, remembering Cloud as he'd been in the old days; solemn, confused, a little crazy, a little cocky. Always thinking of the good of the group, always thinking of ways to take their enemies down. Despite how young he'd been, Barret had respected the hell outta him. And then he'd gone to Shinra. What a traitor, Barret thought, but the words had lost the venom they'd contained years ago. Marlene had shown him all the improvements the company had made in Midgar over the past years. He'd been impressed. The city had really cleaned its act up, and the reactors were gone, watchtowers in their places. People in the streets spoke proudly of Shinra now, he'd noticed. The company was a friend to them. What a strange thought. He'd have a hard time learning to not hate those two syllables, to associate Shinra with friend and not with enemy. But he was really making the effort. Marlene worked there now, as well as his old friend. He came out of his thoughts suddenly and turned to his daughter, eyebrows raised.

"Was he glad to see you?" he asked. Marlene's head snapped around in surprise, she'd been immersed in her own ponderings.

"What? Oh, yeah. Well, at first I think he was. He was drunk, ya gotta understand, and sad outta his head. He didn't know what he was saying."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, nothing really."

Barret's brow lowered angrily. His voice got a little louder. "What did he say?" Marlene flinched.

"He wouldn't let me talk about CJ or Ifalna. And then he wanted me to ask you. . . " she hesitated, fiddling with her fingers, "To ask you. . . if you and him were even now. He said you had me, but he'd lost his. I don't know what he meant. Like I said, he was drunk."

"I know what he meant." Barret rose to his feet, the bed popping up suddenly with the release of weight and nearly throwing Marlene off. "He meant we fought years ago to get you back, to keep the world safe for ya. And then afterwards, it all worked out great, and me and you could ride off into the sunsets wit' our happy li'l lives." Barret shook his head, knowing how Cloud's mind worked. "And fer a while, he had his li'l piece o' paradise too. And now it's gone, and he doesn't think it's fair that we could all fight years ago ta bring you back, and now, here he is, wit' nothing to fight, no where to go, nothin' t'do but sit and wait for something to happen. There ain't no big army no more to go and hunt his kids out wit' him. He's lost and he thinks it's unfair. And it is unfair. And he's going to continue to be bitter towards anyone who has anything he can't have."

"Like you having me?"

"Exactly." Barret sighed, shaking his head and watching the ground, "You said he asked if we were even now? Hmph. Maybe we are, maybe we are." He bent over and grabbed the suitcase that'd fallen on the floor, along with his satchel, and headed out of the bedroom.

"Where ya going?" Marlene called after him.

"Just putting these by the door. Cid's coming by tomorrow morning with the airship. He's goin to take me back to Cosmo Canyon."

In the blink of an eye, Marlene was off the bed and out of the room, standing by her father's side suddenly. He looked around and saw her, nearly laughing. "Daddy!" she whispered, "You're leaving so soon? I mean, it's only been a week!"

"There ain't nothin' fer me t'do here, girl. You're settled in wit' the apartment and wit' the new job. Hell, you'll be running the WDD in a few weeks from what you've told me. I need t'be gettin' back."

Marlene stood silently, knowing it was true. There was no reason for her father to be in Midgar anymore. It was her home now, not his. She just hated the thought of him leaving. Her brown eyes soft and sad, she stood on tiptoe and threw her arms around his neck.

"I know," she said. "I just didn't know it'd be so soon. Well, it won't be forever, right? You'll fly back for Christmas, right?"

They parted and he gave a salute. "You bet. I was talking t'Cid and he says he'll be happy to have his men fly me anywhere I want if I give 'im notice. Cid and I go back, ya know. No more desert transports for me." Barret chuckled, tossing his luggage near the front door, then turned and headed into the kitchen for a midnight snack. Marlene watched him, a thought suddenly coming into her. She tugged on her braids, adjusting them behind her ears.

"What time's Cid coming?"

"Eleven."

She grinned a bit, leaning with crossed arms against the wall. "Good. That means you'll have time." Barret stuck his head out of the kitchen, a donut in his mouth.

"Time fer what?"

"You should go see Uncle Cloud tomorrow morning, before he goes to work. You'd make him feel a lot better. He needs to talk to a friend."

"He's got plenty of friends at Shinra."

"No. Reno, he doesn't understand, he doesn't have kids. Neither does Reeve, or Rude, or any of those Turk people. He needs to talk to you, dad. Tell him you're 'even'."

"I don't even know where he lives. . ."

"I do. I can write the directions down. You can go before Cid comes, you'll have plenty of time. And you'll be able to see Tifa. You haven't seen her in ages and you guys were best friends at one point, weren't you?"

She heard him grumbling beneath his breath. He'd said he'd forgiven Cloud earlier, that he was willing to him a second chance. Here was his opportunity to prove it.

"Fine," he said, as though losing an argument, "Write the directions down and I'll go in the morning. I swear ya must hate me, Marlene. I don't know what ta say ta them people."

"Just be a friend."

Barret growled, exiting the kitchen with a sandwich in either hand. He looked to his daughter and sighed. "Being a friend of Cloud Strife is a lot harder than you'd think."

~*~

The room was small and cramped, like the inside of the trunk of a car. Its walls were plain steel, streaks of oxidation running down them in places. Small as it was, the dim lighting barely managed to penetrate its corners. It only served to show the occasional scuttering cockroach, and the exposed, dripping pipes. The black ceiling disappeared high above its head.

It sighed deeply, the green vapors that composed its body shuddering with the exhalation. This was a sight he'd stared upon for nearly five years. These four cold metal walls. Everyday it became harder and harder to be content just staring at

them. More and more, he wanted to break free, to discover the reason he even existed. Though he could easily squeeze his molecules through the spaces between the steel's particles, the four walls caged him in anyway. It was principle, perhaps.

The mako beast had been formed in Hojo's lab for no particular reason. The tanks of mako had been sitting there unused, forgotten for nearly a decade. Then one day, the mako managed to eat through the lead containers and hiss into the air thickly. That was when the monster's memories of life began. He could remember the mako's anxiety to keep together and to free the rest of the energy holed up there in the tanks. Somehow, it chewed through the lead until every container was opened and then it all formed together into a cloud, each tendril weaving together tightly. Like God then, the Planet had blessed the mass of vapors with a consciousness and some sort of soul, because the monster could remember waking up, taking a deep, shaking breath, and beginning its life.

There hadn't been much to see. Just a dusty, unlit room, filled with equipment and machines. He'd seemed the only life there. Until Chieko had appeared. They'd been wary of each other at first, circling like enemies, neither one knowing just what the other was. The mako beast hadn't even known what exactly it was itself. Through experimentation it found it could shape into a solid form, albeit it a quite horrifying one. A horned beast with shaggy, knotted fur and huge clacking claws. A monster quite simply, nothing identifiable as a species. Chieko had panicked at seeing the mass of green vapors suddenly solidify into such a creature and had lunged at it, teeth aimed to rip its throat out. Of course she'd sailed right through it and smacked into the wall rather unceremoniously.

The mako monster could almost smile now at the memory. It had so few things in its mind that it could truly call its own, but his memories of Chieko were solely his. Slowly at first, they'd become friends. There was so little to do in that deserted lab but share in each other's company. There'd been the daily rituals of finding her something to eat, rats mainly, and bugs. He'd sometimes travel the streets of the city and bring her dead dogs and chocobos to feed on for a change. That had earned her trust. Somehow earning this was important, it had sensed. It wanted a friend, a confidante.

The mako beast didn't know why it existed. For the longest time that fact hadn't bothered it though. It'd been young and reckless and hadn't really cared, content to spend the days chatting with Chieko or exploring the Shinra building at night after the people all had left. Not long ago though, it had began to grow restless. Sometimes, it would hear voices calling, but the voices came from itself. Sometimes there were screams, the sounds of thousands, millions of lives crying out. It was the Planet screaming. He could hear it.

"Great beast." Chieko called him this often, he had no real name. "Great beast, my father says you belong to the Planet, that the Planet is your mother. That's why you can hear her."

It hadn't known whether to believe her or not, but it seemed to make sense. It was formed of mako, thusly formed of the Planet, the Planet owned it. Sometimes it wasn't sure if it liked the thought. Did he really want to be owned by something else? And if a child of the Planet then, why? Why was he there?

Sometimes Chieko would disappear for hours at a time. The beast would drift near the floors of the lab, searching for her, as though it were a game of hide and seek. But he never won. She would appear on her own eventually, suddenly, out of nowhere. But it knew where she'd been. Off to see her "father". The mako monster thought this much spoken of ghost was a figment of its friend's imagination. There were no other creatures in the lab but them. If there had been, the mako beast would have sought them out, eager for company. No, there were only the two of them, the two of them alone for five long years, and Chieko by herself for who knew how long before that.

One night, one quiet night, a night starless because of clouds and rain, without a moon to grace the sky to comfort the world with even its cold, blue light, one night, the monster's mother had spoken to it. It thought back on that nightmare now with a small shiver. It'd lost its will that night. But it'd gained its purpose. It was the Planet's champion. The voices had come before, it expected them now. Chieko's "father" had claimed that the mako was life and life was powerful. Past lives spoke to it through its own body, whispering of petty problems or tragedies or joys that the once living energy had experienced. Shadows of memories occasionally flickered through its mind, memories that didn't even belong to it. But that one lightless night, a different kind of voice had spoken, cutting away all the others harshly. But it hadn't really been a voice, there hadn't really been words. It'd been the tongue of the Planet, a language you didn't need ears to hear.

The Planet had called it her champion. She'd given it life so that it could take other's. She'd constructed it of mako out of spite for Hojo and the rest of humanity's arrogance, it somehow making a sort of dark, twisted sense in the Planet's mind for a creature made of life to be an executioner. She'd given the beast a mission that night and told it what had to be done, and just who had to die. It'd listened emotionlessly. It belonged to the Planet. What she said, it did. There was no choice in the matter, but it didn't particularly ever feel the need to have a choice. The Planet knew, and it did not. The Planet was omnipotent, ageless, and divine. The beast wasn't. It was glad just to be a tool, a weapon. It was glad just to know why the hell it'd been born.

After that night, the mako monster had changed, its will no longer its own. It lived only to fulfill the Planet's mission,

waiting eagerly until the time came.

That time was upon them now.

Staring at the room again, taking in the cold walls, the dripping pipes, the mako beast snarled quietly, the little bit of mind that it could call its own, troubled. The list of those who had to die to save the Planet wasn't very long. A small group with the power to destroy everything. Those children weren't on it. Tifa Lockhart wasn't on it. The beast shut its dagger-like white eyes, mako lids covering them with a small hiss. Chieko was on it though. It would have to be born in a place with one inhabitant. It would have to befriend that inhabitant, trusting her completely. And then the Planet would have to come and tell it she had to die. The beast would have to kill her.

It didn't want to think about that now, about when one day it would have to sneak upon Chieko unaware and steal her life away. It was the Planet's tool and it shouldn't feel guilty about having to carry out her divine commandments. The Planet was the ultimate deity. The mako beast was only her weapon. A strange wash of forgetfulness passed over its mind suddenly, cleansing it of any ill feelings. Suddenly, it couldn't remember why it'd been so sad. The little free mind it had was quite suddenly, blissfully blank. But the creature was no fool. It knew why. The Planet had purged it of its will again. This fact flitted through its mind and the creature shrugged at it. No use worrying when it couldn't even remember.

"Beast," Chieko's harsh voice called from outside. The monster stirred suddenly in its small living chamber, then melted down into pure mako, sliding beneath the door to reappear and solidify on the other side. Chieko stood there, her tremendous paws tapping in impatience.

"You must watch the humans. My father's calling me. I have to go see him."

The beast listened to the words in slight annoyance, bothered by Chieko's hallucinations. It didn't know how she'd come to dwell in the lab, but it knew there were no other living things there, let alone her father. Yet it nodded its now solidified hoary head towards her and she bounded off into the darkness. Watching its friend go, its glowing green tendrils of mako wrapping sickeningly around its skin, the creature felt suddenly sad, yet had no idea why.

~*~

The morning was crisp and cold. Barret hugged his leather jacket closer around his bulk, his breath billowing out before him aggravatingly. He clutched a tiny scrap of paper in his hand, comparing the number written there with the number on the house before him. He groaned, wadding it up suddenly and dropping it onto the ground. This was the place.

"Morning there, big fellow!" Barret turned and saw a skinny little guy walking up towards him from a neighboring house. He was dressed all in tweed, with an ugly green trench coat pulled close about his frame. Barret thought that if the guy could afford to live in Sector One, he could afford some better clothes.

"Hullo," he returned, his voice unenthusiastic. The little guy stuck his hand out to shake Barret's then grinned when the man's massive hand engulfed his own.

"Quite a grip ya got there, buddy," he exclaimed, "My name's Nat, I'm Cloud and Tifa's neighbor next door there. I was just wondering if you were going inside?"

"I was considerin' it."

"Ah, well, I'm glad I caught ya then. I've been trying to get a hold of one of them all week, but either no one's home, or they're not answering the bell, or something, cause I just haven't seen them."

Barret looked the part of a man over with one eyebrow raised in disgust. "They're probably not answerin' the bell," he said. Nat grinned nervously.

"Yeah, well, I was wondering if you could give them this note on behalf of me and the rest of the neighborhood. If you're a friend and you're going in and all. . ." Nat held out a bit of yellow paper and Barret snatched it up, his face softening for a just a moment.

"A sympathy card? I'm sure he'd appreciate this," he said genuinely, unfolding the paper before Nat could stop him. "I know he's been feeling really poor about all this mess. I think he just needs a little help and friendship to get him thr. . ." Barret's voice faded away as he skimmed the contents of the letter, the rudeness of his actions never even entering his mind. He began to read the note aloud. Nat paled and stepped back a bit. "We, the undersigned hereby politely request that you Strifes sell your home and move on. Your presence seems to be a threat to the neighborhood and we're sure that you'll see this and act in everyone's best interest. It's obvious that your past has left you with things that can be of a harmful nature to those around you. . . detrimental to the peace of the community. . . a menace. . . we'll call the law into the matter if you don't comply. . . ?!" Barret looked away from the paper, disgusted. He cast a murderous glance to Nat.

"You back-stabbing asshole!" he hollered, taking a step forward. "Why don't you just shoot him in the face next time he walks out his front door, eh?" Barret crumbled the paper up violently and tossed it away. He was glad he no longer wore his gun-arm, or this pansy punk would be bleeding outta several different bullet holes by now.

"I didn't know you were going to read it!" was all Nat could stutter, his face drained and knees knocking. "I, I mean. . . we all thought--"

"Y'all thought? Y'all thought nothin'! Y'all thought only about preservin' yo' own measly li'l existences Forget the fact that one o' yo' own is down on the flo' over all this. God, yer pissing me off, pal. I recommend you get outta my sight now." Barret shoved the cowering man hard in the chest with his capped-off left arm and he flew back ten feet, green trench coat flying behind his head. As soon as he hit the ground, he rocketed up and took off running.

"Yer clothes is ugly too!" Barret called after him, "Never let yo' mama dress you!" Scowling deeply, he turned back to the task at hand, stomping Nat's letter violently beneath one of his massive boots. He couldn't believe that. In the wink of an eye, the bastards of this neighborhood had turned against Cloud. Back when he and Tifa'd lived in the Sector Seven slums, as hard as things were, as low as some of the element there had been, they never would have pulled such a stunt if he or she had ever had trouble. He figured it took more than money for a person to have class.

He yanked the fence surrounding the house open, trying to cool his temper. He'd been stressed enough about all this without that little confrontation to set him off. He wasn't looking forward to seeing Cloud again, Tifa neither, not with them both like this. He didn't know what to say. He knew he'd have to do some apologizing. He hated apologizing. He just hoped no one started crying all over him.

Straightening his jacket and taking a deep breath, he knocked at the front door. After a moment or two, he heard the locks unclasping and suddenly Tifa stood there gazing up at him. They stared at each other for a minute, shock in Tifa's eyes. Barret examined her, his hard heart breaking. She looked like hell. In a rare act of emotion, he hugged her before she could him, holding her close.

"It's okay, girl," he whispered as she cried into his chest, shoulders shaking as he patted her back like a child. "You don't have to say anything at all, you jus' cry."

Still holding her, he pulled them both inside and shut the door with his foot. He didn't want the bastard neighbors to see them. As she sobbed, wordless, he looked around at the interior of their house, stroking her hair comfortingly. It was too dark in here. The shutters were all closed, none of the lights were on. It was like a tomb.

He led them to a couch and sat down upon it, pulling her beside him. She lifted her face finally, and smiled at him lopsidedly, eyes shining with tears. He wiped them away and returned her smile.

"So," he began, "Whatcha been up to?" She laughed at his levity and shook her head, throwing her arms up into the air.

"Same old," she said in that strange voice that comes when it's choked with sobs but you try to force cheer into it, "Same old stuff for us. Why you here? Paying your respects to the dead?"

Barret frowned disapprovingly. "You guys won't go out without a fight. None of us will."

"Some of us are tired of fighting." Barret saw by the way she was looking off down the hallway that she was talking about Cloud. He nodded.

"Marlene told me he's taking all this hard. But how's he really doing? You're the only one who ever knew just what was really going on in that spiky melon of his." Tifa shrugged.

"He wants to kill something. He really does. That's how he's always handled shit like this. He's found out what was to blame and then gone out and taken care of it. You and him are a lotta 'like. But he can't do that now. He's lost what means more to him than anything else in the world. And all he can do is sit and think about it and find new ways to blame himself."

"And how are you handling it?"

"Me?" Tifa asked, looking up at him in surprise, "I just want them back. There's nothing I can do though, so I sit and wait and wonder when CJ'll come crashing through the door, Ifalna tugging at his jacket and laughing."

"You've looked everywhere?" Tifa nodded her head, eyes serious.

"Everywhere and then other places," she replied, "We scoured Midgar, and learned a lot, but it all wound up leading to a dead end. We found out something that I think is why Cloud is as bad off as he is. We-- we found out Vincent's missing too."

"Vincent?" Barret asked in surprise. He hadn't seen Vincent in thirteen years, not since the fall of Meteor. He'd assumed the man had finally died off alone somewhere and rejoined his lost love. He'd been rather content to think that anyways. "How do you know he's missing? He's always been missing."

"No, he comes here a lot. I think he likes to see the kids and the city. I got a note from him last week saying he'd be here the next day. He never showed up. We came across Yunata in a store in Wall Market. Some sleaze had found her and was trying to sell her off."

"Who's Yunata?"

"One of Vincent's chocobos. He raises chocobos now, did you know that?" Barret shook his head in amazement. "Yup. He lives in Icicle Inn and sells and leases and raises his own birds. I think it's charming. It's perfect for him."

"I guess," Barret said, scratching his head and trying to imagine Vincent Valentine in a chocobo stable. He got a mental image of the man in his black clothes and red cloak but with beat up overalls and a straw hat over it all. Very strange. "So do you have any idea where he is?"

"No, the creep said he'd found Yunata wandering around Sector Six, riderless, about three hours after the monster attacked us. And people in Wall Market said they saw a red-cloaked man riding after some strange green glowing cloud. Vincent must've seen the thing with the kids and gone after it. We don't know where he is now."

"He's probably with the kids," Barret said reassuringly, "And that's a good thing. He'll keep em safe."

"I hope so."

"I know so. I never particularly cared for that Turk myself, but he was rather fond of you and Cloud. He'll do everything he can."

"Yeah. . ." Tifa patted his hand, grateful for his words. She'd had no one to talk to the past week about everything. Cait Sith's artificial intelligence wasn't programmed to handle sympathy, and Cloud was off in a world of his own. Her only solace had been getting away to Seventh Heaven to think and work on renovations. Now, like a gift from the angels, here was her best friend. At least, her former best friend. After he and Cloud's terrible argument years ago, she'd been sure she'd never see him again. But he'd cared enough for her to put their differences aside and come back. She hugged him again, another tear escaping her eye.

"How did you hear about all this from Cosmo Canyon?" she asked, pulling away from him and sitting back, her hands between her knees.

"I've been in Midgar this week with Marlene. She. . . well, she got a job at Shinra. I've been helping her settle into city life."

"Oh, really?" Tifa asked, throwing him a sly look. He squirmed.

"Yeah. . ."

"You don't say. Hmm. . ." she smiled, seeing how uncomfortable the topic made him. "When Marlene wrote us last, she said you'd never change your mind. What happened?"

"That girl nags!" Barret growled, "I didn't have a choice, I had t'give in. It was what she really wanted. And I'm sure ya heard that she got that exam a hundred percent right, right? They gave her a job right off, let her skip the internship."

"One smart cookie."

"Yeah, that's what I figured She's got the skills, I should let her use 'em. Let her do what makes her happy. She can't very well become ruler of the world from Cosmo Canyon now, can she?" Barret grinned, glad that Tifa wasn't rubbing it in too much. They sat in silence for a moment, and he suddenly realized how quiet the house was. How still. A big house not to be filled with kids, he thought sadly.

He stood suddenly, giving her a last pat on the shoulder. She looked up to him in surprise, not wanting him to go. "You leaving?" she asked, hoping he'd say no.

"Not yet. I'm. . . I'm uh, going to go see how Cloud's doing." Barret looked up the stairs and down the hallway towards a shut door. Somehow he knew the man was in there. Tifa looked upon him with wide eyes.

"Are you sure you should?"

"What do you think? Do you think he'd like to see his old AVALANCE pal again?"

The woman looked frightened suddenly and Barret saw the change with surprise. "You're not scared of him, are you?" he asked a little angrily, "I sure as hell ain't." As though to prove his point, he took a few steps towards the staircase. She rose and laid a hand on his arm.

"I'm not scared of him, Barret, not really. How could I be, he's the man I love? But you haven't been here this past week. You haven't seen him. He's. . . he's dangerous like this."

"Let me just handle it, eh, Tifa? You thought he was dangerous thirteen years ago as a mercenary, and I straightened his spiky ass out now, didn't I?" He gently pried her hand from him, and gave her half a grin. Then, scratching his nose

nervously, he stomped up the staircase and towards the closed door. Tifa watched him, hoping there wouldn't be another argument.

Barret stood before the shut door for a moment before knocking. The last time he'd seen Cloud, the man had stormed outta his home in Cosmo Canyon with murder in his eyes. Barret had just finished calling him every insult he could think of, and then some new ones he'd invented just for the occasion Tifa had followed him out, torn between her best friend and her husband. She'd picked Cloud and Barret hadn't ever blamed her for it, he figured love was stronger than friendship. That was just the way the world worked. Taking a deep breath, he gave the door a rap with his knuckles, lightly.

"Come in, Barret."

He must've heard me downstairs, the man thought to himself, laying a hand on the doorknob and turning it soundlessly. Good, I'd rather not have to deal with any kinda big shock.

The door to the armoury swung open on oiled hinges and Barret stepped inside, eyes boggling. Every weapon Cloud and Tifa owned was on display here. Swords lined the walls and enchanted gloves lay on shelves. A rack against the far wall contained rows of materia, another rack was full of armlets. Rings and vests, Swift Bolts and M-Tentacles, potions of all kinds. It was unreal.

"You guys are better armed than most small countries," Barret said casually.

Cloud was seated in a short stool pulled up to the room's lone window. One hand supported his chin, the other grasped the handle of Ultima Weapon lightly. He didn't look at Barret when he spoke.

"Yeah," he said lazily, "Tifa and I don't like to get rid of stuff."

"No kidding. Well, I still have all my old stuff too. I just don't keep my gun-arms on display. Kinda creeps Marlene out." Barret guffawed, hoping the laughs would catch on, but they only died away foolishly into the air. He approached his friend and stood next to him, looking out the window. Nothing much interesting out there, just their neighbor's roof.

"Here to make nice with me, figuring it'll make me feel better about CJ and Ifalna?" Cloud asked suddenly, his voice belligerent

"Well, you cut right to the point, dontcha?" Barret asked, keeping his cool and only raising an eyebrow. He crossed his arms. "Yeah, actually though, you hit the nail on the head there. I uh, I just wanted to tell you that I'm glad Marlene got that job. Even if it is with Shinra. I think. . ." Barret cleared his throat and spoke quickly, "I think that I don't hate Shinra now as much as I used ta." There. He'd said it. It'd nearly killed him, but he'd said it.

"So I have your approval now? I'm thrilled, from here on I can live my life in fulfillment."

Barret held back a growl. Hadn't the man seen how hard that'd been for him to say?

"Well, anyways, thanks for getting Marlene that job."

"She got it herself. I just gave her the info."

"Yeah, well, thanks for that then," he snapped. "Thank you for everything."

"Yeah. . ."

He didn't even seem to be listening to him! His voice rang hollow with his responses, mind somewhere else. Barret thought he might have to pop him upside the head. "Listen, Cloud, I came here to apologize," he said, deciding to lay all his cards out on the table, "To apologize for all the crap we went through with that fight we had. I shouldn'ta called you a traitor just because you wanted to work for Shinra. That was wrong of me. I admit it. Barret Wallace was wrong."

"Should I be impressed?"

"Damn you, you bastard!" he cried in exasperation, "No! You should be decent and you should forgive me. I say I'm sorry, you say apology accepted. Part 1, part 2. Cause, effect. It ain't a difficult procedure."

"I don't forgive you."

"What?!" Barret grabbed Cloud's shoulder. That was the last thing he'd expected to hear. Cloud was a cold cocky bastard in Barret's opinion, but he was also damned nice. Too nice sometimes. How could he not forgive him? The thing that'd kept him content all these years was the knowledge that he had only to apologize to his friend and he'd be forgiven. Cloud didn't know how to hold a grudge. At least, he hadn't thought so. "What do you mean you don't forgive me? Why not? Damn you, turn around and look at me when I'm talking to you." He spun the man about and confronted his face. "Son of bitch. . ."

"Yeah," said Cloud, gesturing a hand to his face heatedly, "Go ahead and say it, Barret. What the hell's wrong with your eyes? They always were bright, but now they're frigg'ing on fire. Yadda yadda yadda. I don't care. You've always thought I was a freak. And I've never cared what you thought."

"What the hell is wrong wit' yer eyes, man?"

"Mako," said Cloud wearily, shutting them and turning back to the window. "It all comes down to mako. Screw mako. Maybe we should open the reactors back up and burn it all away."

"You don't mean that. . ."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I'm just a little tired of all this crap. Of people staring and of never getting any older. I look more like CJ's brother than his dad."

"You can't help it, and mako can't help it. It was Hojo."

"He can't help anything. He's dead." Cloud laughed darkly, "Dead. And here I am. Looks like he got the better deal."

It bothered Barret to hear his friend talk like that. That just didn't sound like Cloud Strife talking. Cloud was always vengeful, preferring to take out his frustrations on others, his enemies, but never himself. And he'd never heard him talking to a friend the way he was talking to Barret now. He imagined Tifa having to live with this and felt angry, the fury filling him slowly.

"You're just pitying yourself," he said, "You should be out lookin' for your kids. Or downstairs with Tifa. Instead yer up here, staring out the bloody window like a self-centered asshole." Barret turned and walked away from him in impatience. "You're kids've been taken from you. Fine, that really sucks. It's unfair. Vincent's gone too, probably gone trying to save em. Yeah, that also sucks. The world lately has just been really crappin' down your neck. But Cloud, it's been thirteen years since anything like this has happened to you. You've had thirteen beautiful years. Focus on those, be grateful for those. And deal wit' this nonsense accordingly. Stop blaming yourself too. Blame that creature that snuck in here and snatched the kids. Not yourself."

Cloud listened to the man's words impassionately. They didn't touch him. A dark presence engulfed his mind, letting in only the insults, letting out only the hatred. His hand tightened around the Ultima Weapon's grip.

"You should see Tifa down there, Cloud. She's upset too, ya know. They were her kids too and Vincent's her friend. She ain't sitting around like a fool, she's got hope. She's carrying on with her life. A real trooper. She's more concerned with you than for herself, cares more for her kids than for her own self." Barret wait for a response, but the man only continued staring out the window, his head and shoulders shaking slightly. A dark voice was whispering things in his head. It nearly seemed like that voice he'd heard that night in Hojo's lab. The things it told him were horrible. "No answer, eh, spike?" Barret continued, "That's because you know I'm right. There ain't nothing you can say to me, is there? Hmph. Working for Shinra's turned you into a coward, hasn't it. The old Cloud would be walking around with hope and a grin on his face, doing everything he could. He certainly wouldn't snap to Marlene when she tried to make him feel better. He wouldn't try to scare his friends. You're turning into a bully, a Shinra bully, like-- like, hell I'll say it, like Sephi--"

Moving like lightening, Cloud lunged towards Barret, his stool overturning noisily, the Ultima Weapon swinging and whistling above his head. A voice in his mind urged him on. Take his head off, it screamed, shut him up. The point of the blade came down swiftly and Barret had barely a moment to be surprised. He looked up into Cloud's eyes, looking for some trace of his friend. What he saw wasn't the man he knew though. For a brief second, a single still moment in time, he saw a foreign presence behind the luminescent blue eyes. It glinted at him, winked at him, saying cruelly, You are going to die. And then just as quickly as it came, it vanished, and it was Cloud looking at him again. He froze his movements in mid-action, his sword an inch away from Barret's exposed brown neck. He stopped so fast he fell back onto the floor and sat there, staring up at his friend. As though it were a viper, he dropped Ultima Weapon and it clattered beside him.

"Oh my god. . ." he whispered, horror in his face at what he'd nearly done. The dark voice chuckled in his head, then disappeared back into silence, leaving him alone in his thoughts.

Barret was breathing heavily, rubbing at his neck. He looked down at Cloud, automatically knowing what had happened hadn't been a conscious action. He couldn't immediately begin to comfort his friend, but he didn't immediately rebuke him either. They stared at each other for a long time, silence hanging in the air. Finally, Barret offered Cloud a hand up, but the man shook his head, his face pale. He'd seen a horrible image in his mind of his sword slicing into Barret's throat; of the blood splashing out and hitting the walls, his chest, his hands, his face. Red everywhere. It was so real, it was as though he'd actually gone through with the act. There was something wrong with him, he realized. Something terribly, terribly wrong.

"No. . ." he breathed crawling backwards away from him. Barret couldn't tell who he was addressing. "No, I-- I'm so sorry. . ." Eyes wide in terror, but unfocused, he lurched to his feet, reclaiming his sword, and ran from the room wildly. Before Barret could recover and run after him, he heard the front door slam.

Bugenhagen's observatory was quiet in the early mornings. Cosmo Canyon's residents had a habit of sleeping late, most not rising till well after eleven. They preferred to stay up all night and watch the heavens, charting the course of the moons and planets, theorizing as to why they moved at all. Nanaki sighed contentedly, his furry chin resting on his fore paws lazily. Blissful quiet all around him, and the November air was delightfully cool. He was on the verge of falling back asleep when Bugah bustled in, a stack of books held in the crook of one arm.

"Good Morning, Nanaki!" the elder cried, slamming the books on a table loudly. "The people in this town may like to sleep their lives away, but we're scholars! Scholars don't sleep. Scholars learn and delight in it."

Nanaki groaned a little, brushing his mane from his eyes with a paw. He sat up on his haunches and scratched at his ear, his earrings rattling. "I don't want to be a scholar if it means I can never sleep again. Sleeping's one of my favorite hobbies."

"Now, Nanaki, be sensible. With Marlene gone, that means you have to really buckle down on your studies to impress me."

"It does?"

"Yes, it does. Now, take these books up to the observatory and turn the machine on. I'm going to go get us something for breakfast. I'll be right back. No napping in the meantime." The little man scurried from the room hurriedly, eager to return and begin the day's lesson. Nanaki wished he could share his teacher's enthusiasm. Ever since Marlene had left for Midgar, studying the Planet had lost some of its appeal to him. It'd been fun with her. They'd been like school chums, making jokes behind Bugah's back when it was turned, helping each other cheat on tests, eating lunch together outside on the deck of the observatory, all those little things that made learning so bearable. Nanaki sighed. He was going to be elder some day, he needed to learn as much from Bugah as he could so he'd be prepared for the job whenever it opened up. It just seemed so boring without his friend though. He bet she was having a blast in Midgar, making new friends, settling into her new life. Forgetting all about him and the Canyon. He sniffed, feeling sorry for himself.

He grabbed Bugah's books in his jaws, his head drooping with the weight. Squinting at the titles with his good eye, he groaned. All five volumes of the History of Planetary Science. Oh great. It was going to be a long day.

He approached the control console to Bugenhagen's machine with heavy steps, switching it on with his nose. The room suddenly darkened as the platform he was standing on began to raise into the upper part of the observatory, the gears of the machine creaking deafeningly with age. He stood still, quiet with awe as always, watching the wonders of his grandfather's contraption unfold around him. He dropped the books to the floor with a thud, his head swinging this way and that, taking in the universe. For that's what he now stood amidst: the entire universe. Stars twinkled about him merrily, an infinite amount in an infinite variety. The planets, including the one he stood on, all revolved in their proper courses, lumbering through the universe serenely, lazily, like elephants in a circus parade. He searched for their own small planet and spied it suddenly, spinning off by itself, its green land and blue waters twinkling in the sunlight. It was so beautiful that Nanaki wanted to put a paw out to touch it, but he held back, scolding himself. "Like a little cub," he thought.

As though browsing through a store, he sauntered about the platform, taking in the sights. The machine was amazing. It perfectly copied the universe on a miniature scale, the two sharing the same mako and molecules. Whatever happened to the universe, happened to this model. If he'd had a magnifying glass, he would have been able to see the telescope of Cosmo Canyon there on the surface of the western continent, or the towering, floating bulk of Gold Saucer, streaming fireworks. The varied planets glowed like jewels in different colors and Nanaki wondered just what was out there on each one's surface. There was another planet light years away from their own, but it also was blue and green, and its atmosphere contained the same chemicals nearby. It also had one small yellow sun, a single moon. Very much alike, except that this planet was larger, with seven continents as opposed to their three. He wondered what life was like there, if people there fought wars, if governments were corrupt and children hungry. He shook his head. He'd never know.

"Everything set up?" Bugah called, entering the observatory with a box of biscuits. He climbed the ladder up to the platform, nearly dropping them on the way. Nanaki grabbed at them before they could fall and held the box in his jaws. "Ah, thank you, son of Seto. Now, go open to page five-hundred and fifty-three and begin reading."

"Which volume?"

"Ah, yes, I'm sorry, the third, please."

"Okay," Nanaki sighed. He nabbed a biscuit and slumped down before the massive book, flipping its pages with a petulant claw. As he read, Bugah went about his duties as elder. It grew quiet in the blue-lit chamber, the older man flitting about from planet to planet, checking on the status of each. The gentle hum of the universe filled the room, and Nanaki had trouble keep his heavy eyelid open over his good eye. The words on the page kept going out of focus, his head slipping

down before he could catch it. The text of the book was just so damned dry, he couldn't get interested in it.

". . . and so we come to the radius of materia. What is symbolic about the mathematical proportions of a single summon materia? Beeks wrote in his now famous report on the subject, that these measurements do in fact correlate proportionately to the measurements of the actual planet, with adjustments being made for the many convex and concave surfaces of the sphere. One wonders if the measurements may in fact contribute to the power of a certain materia; are materia with larger radii more powerful than materia with average radii? Does the power of the applied mako between the two vary proportionately with the measurements? Does anyone really give two craps about this? No, as a matter of fact, this book was written merely as a sleep aid for poor lost souls living too close to the train stations of Midgar. Unless you want to be knocked out immediately, we strongly advise you to stop reading now and go have a strong dose of coffee. . . "

"I don't remember that part," Bugah said faintly from the other end of the room. Nanaki groaned, his humor lost on the man. "If you're that bored, Nanaki, come here a moment."

He slammed the book shut with a grateful paw and stepped lightly over towards the elder, blinking hard to try and wake himself up. Bugah was hunched over the small version of their own planet, peering into its surface with narrowed eyes, his wrinkled hands clasped behind his back.

"What is it?" Nanaki called, approaching the man from behind. Bugah shushed him with an upraised finger, listening intently. After a moment, he straightened back up, shaking his head in annoyance.

"By the stars, I just can't tell. Your ears are younger and keener than mine. Listen closely to the Planet and see what you can hear." The elder looked at him expectantly through his beady black eyes and his student grimaced a bit.

"I'm not good at that sort of thing," he said nervously, "I mean, that's elder stuff."

Bugah gazed at him, smiling just a bit. "What's the matter," he asked mockingly, "Are you frightened to try?"

"No! It's just I--"

The man shook his head. "You're scared, my little cub, aren't you? A shame."

Nanaki stiffened at being called "cub", a fang curling out over his lip. "I'm not scared," he declared, almost growled, "I'll listen. I'm not a cub!" Looking to Bugah defiantly, he cocked an ear up and leaned towards the twinkling blue-green sphere, remembering the times Bugenhagen would have him listen to the terrible cries of the planet during the days Shinra's reactors had been slowly sucking the life from it. Those cries had scared him witless, young as he'd been at the time. He'd had nightmares about the Planet blowing up one day and sending him and Cosmo Canyon flying into space. Silly dreams really, he thought now. A cub's dreams.

He couldn't get closer than a foot away from the surface of the miniature planet before he was forced to cringe backwards and cover his ears with his paws. Bugah looked on his actions with a touch of fear. "What is it?" he asked in a strange mix of eagerness and worry. Nanaki shook his head, his earrings clacking. Those images of his youth were all flooding back to him now.

"I think there's something wrong with my hearing," he said dismissively, "My ears are buzzing."

"Don't lie, Nanaki, it's unbecoming to the son of Seto and to the protector of Cosmo Canyon."

"Sorry." He flinched at the words and sat on his haunches sheepishly, averting his eyes. The elder saw his shame and softened his words.

"It's alright. Try again. Listen hard. If the Planet is telling us something, we should heed it."

Screwing his courage, he leaned forward again, clenching his teeth as the awful sound filled his ears, high-pitched, whining, nearly unbearable. It bore into his brain, sending splotches of white into his vision. He listened for a moment, until the sound nearly seemed to die down, not becoming softer, but drilling into him until it became part of him, as though his own noise. He moved closer, peering into the depths of the sound unconsciously, feeling his way around it. When at last he thought he understood, when at last he thought he'd discovered the cause, he tried to pull back, but found he couldn't move. And his vision was black. He couldn't see!

A hand grabbed him roughly by the scruff of his neck and yanked him backwards, ending the trance suddenly. He'd had his eyes shut, he realized now foolishly. He shook his head to clear it, his ears ringing.

"Are you alright?" Bugah's voice was thick with concern. Nanaki nodded. "That happens sometimes to the inexperienced," he explained, "The Planet is powerful, and its voice is hypnotic. After enough practice, you'll be able to fight off its debilitating effects."

"Thanks for the warning," Nanaki muttered. He scratched his ear and sneezed, shaking his head again. Bugah smiled nearly imperceptively, then frowned, turning away.

"Now, what did you hear? The fact that you heard anything at all makes me fret. The Planet has sat in perfect contentment, nearly bliss, for thirteen years. For it to be calling attention to itself now is very grave indeed. Was it screaming?"

Nanaki shook his head, recalling the noise. It'd been a mixture of things he'd heard. But none of it had been anything like the pain of thirteen years ago. No, not pain, more like. . .

"Anger," he said to the elder, "It's angry. And maybe, a little scared. . .?"

Bugah paled.

"An angry planet is like an angry god. Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I think so. It was screaming, but screaming furiously. It hurt my ears."

The man stood thinking for a moment, his knuckles pressed into his chin. He turned to look at Nanaki and said, "It was fine yesterday. At least I suppose it was. My ears are going. . . perhaps I'm not fit to be elder, if I can't even hear the Planet when it's asking for help." The man bowed his head sadly and his student swiped at him with a friendly paw.

"Don't say that. You're the best elder since Bugenhagen."

"I'm the only elder since Bugenhagen." They laughed and Nanaki offered a cat-like grin towards his friend. Bugah shook off his melancholy and stepped towards where a row of buttons lined the wall. "Well, Nanaki, let's see what's pissing the Planet off, shall we?" Nanaki's eyes opened wide in surprise. He hadn't heard Bugah swear since he'd become elder. The last oath he'd muttered had been an appropriate "Sonuvabitch" as they'd watched Meteor ravage Midgar. He must really be upset.

With a steady hand, he jabbed a green button on the wall and suddenly the room pulsated with red light, washing out the serene blue glow of the universe. Powerful beams of it flooded down from somewhere, washing over the small, spinning model of their planet intensely. After a minute or two, it subsided and the chamber resumed its normal glow. A single red dot was left on the surface of the model, in the northern part of the eastern continent. Bugah stepped over and examined it closely.

"What's that?" Nanaki asked, peering over his shoulder.

"That, my young friend, is the source of the disturbance. It's where the Planet's screaming is most intense, most jumbled. And, I'm afraid, it's in the same place it was last time this happened."

They spoke the word in unison.

"Midgar."

"Well, that doesn't make any sense," Nanaki said, stepping away from the model, his tail flicking the air violently. "The reactors there are gone and the old Shinra is dead along with most of its misguided staff. What threat does it hold to our Planet now?"

Bugah shrugged in a very unelderly way, and Nanaki grimaced. It wasn't a good sign when the elder of Cosmo Canyon shrugged in response to a question. In fact, that could most definitely be read as a bad sign.

"I suppose," the man began hesitantly, "The only thing we can really do is wait. I'll keep observing the Planet. Tonight also, I'll go through Bugenhagen's journals and look for similar occurrences. Although I must say I've never heard of an instance where the Planet was actually angry. In pain yes, saddened yes, but angry? It's quite worrisome. The Planet is alive, but it's a soulless sort of life, it isn't sentient, it can't think really. It can't actually inflict its vengeance on another creature."

"What about when the LifeStream burst open and destroyed Meteor?"

"Simple defense mechanism. Despite what all the philosophers have said, the Planet destroyed Meteor to save itself, not to save humanity. The Planet, gods love her, is quite selfish."

Nanaki shrugged, eyeing the elder skeptically. Bugah knew he didn't agree. Nanaki followed the same school of thought that his grandfather had. He believed that the LifeStream was actually sentient, that it did what it did out of a love for life, in a desire to continue life, while the Planet, with its many Weapons and defenses, cared little for what crawled about on its surface. Nanaki tended to make a distinction between LifeStream and the Planet, instead of grouping them into one Whole as Bugah did. But he didn't particularly feel like beginning a debate with the elder over this. He'd experienced Bugah's debates before. They went on for days and Nanaki was too excited about the things they'd just heard to bother with a lot of dry arguments.

"So you'll monitor the Planet," he said eagerly, "And what should I do?"

"You finish reading that assignment I gave you. No slacking off. And no sleeping."

Nanaki groaned and Bugah shooed him off. His tail flickered as he walked, the evil, massive volume laying on the floor of the chamber threateningly. A wicked grin passed over his face suddenly and he chuckled. One swift swipe over the book with the flame at the end of his tail and that'd be the end of that. The book was pretty old, it'd burn rather quickly. The temptation was almost too much to resist.

~*~

CJ's stomach grumbled annoyingly and the boy grimaced, silently instructing it to shut the hell up. Ifalna, laying across his lap in perfect boredom, heard it clearly and giggled.

"Why does it do that?" she asked, looking up at her brother with wide violet eyes. He shrugged.

"Because I'm hungry."

"I know that. But why does it make noises?"

"I guess it's bored."

"I think it's singing."

"I think you're psycho."

She stuck her tongue out at him and laid back down, playing with the ringlets of hair that fell over her shoulder. CJ scratched his nose and looked over towards Vincent. Sleeping. Again.

Chieko had moved them all into the same cell. Vincent wasn't recovering very well from her poison and she'd been a little worried he might die. So she'd instructed the children to take care of him, giving few directions beyond that. Not exactly having a PhD, CJ had done his best. After initially passing out, Vincent hadn't woken up again for three days. He'd lain wracked with fever, muttering things, sweating and thrashing in delirium. When he'd done this, the two children had huddled against the far wall of the cage, scared out of their minds. He murmured a lot of things they didn't understand, violent, crazy things that frightened them. But he calmed down eventually and, unable to think of anything else to do, CJ had given him some water. When he'd finally woken up, he was so weak he could barely move and he couldn't chew at all. For two days he'd done nothing but drink water, working up the strength finally to gulp down some of the bread Chieko had left them. He was much better now, his wounds healing, most of the poison out of his system, but he still had a hard time staying awake for very long, and pain still swept through his head and torso whenever he worked himself too hard. All in all though, CJ was rather optimistic about his patient.

"I'm bored. . ." Ifalna sighed, more to hear herself say something, than to inform her brother. They were both bored, bored out of their skulls. They had been for days. There was nothing to do but sit against the back wall of the cage and stare out into the darkness of the room they were trapped in. They didn't look forward to meals as it was only water, bread, and some sort of anonymous meat that they preferred not to question. Their mild mako poisoning had gone away and they were only two regular, slightly hungry kids stuck in a cage.

"Do you think mama and daddy are lookin' for us?" Ifalna asked suddenly.

"Of course."

"They're sure slow."

"Tell me about it." CJ whistled a tuneless melody, his lips dry.

"Do you know where we are?"

He thought for a moment, his song pausing.

"Nope." He resumed it again, lilting and pointless, meandering along through the air. He would've rather have been fighting Ash, glove-less, than stuck in this stupid cage. He tapped his feet in time with the melody, making his sister's head jiggle where she lay across his legs. The cell they were in probably measured ten feet square, yet she insisted upon laying practically on top of him. He guessed he didn't blame her. Sometimes Chieko would approach the cage soundlessly, putting her large terrible face up close to the bars, her wicked, fanged countenance seeming to melt out of the darkness. She'd peer across the small group of humans without a word, then disappear again, her brown mako eyes glowing eerily. It was frigging creepy.

"How will they find us if even we don't know where we are?" Ifalna asked, surprisingly astute for a five year old.

"I dunno. Maybe that green thingie left a trail." That shut the little girl up, and she pictured a glowing trail of vapors leading down the streets of Midgar, her parents following behind it like sleuths with big pipes and magnifying glasses, faces pressed close to the ground. She laughed to herself.

"It doesn't matter anyways, Eef," CJ said, shortening her name obnoxiously, "Something's gotta happen eventually. It's not like they can keep us sitting here forever." He crossed his arms over his narrow chest, noticing how dirty and uncomfortable his pajamas were now. He would have to be kidnapped at night.

"Bloody hell. . ." Both children suddenly looked over towards Vincent's prone form as he emitted a groan and moved his arm up slowly to grab his head. CJ grinned, glad at anything that broke the monotony.

"Hey, Vincent," the boy called experimentally. The man's sleep was very restless and he'd move around a lot without actually waking up. This wasn't one of those times though. Stifling another groan, he pushed himself to a sitting position, leaning heavily on his claw and gasping with the pain of the movement. He edged towards a wall and leaned gratefully against it, eyes shut, trying to slow his breathing. "Sorry we woke you up," CJ said quietly, knowing from Vincent's previous accounts over the past few days that he woke with the equivalent of a hangover. He kept his voice low so as not to hurt his friend's head. "Do you feel any better?"

"Yes, actually," he replied, eyes still shut, trying to grin reassuringly. "Thank you."

"No prob."

Vincent examined the bandages around the wounds in his chest. Beneath them, many of the gashes had nearly completely healed. The Jenova in him had done that. He felt rather bitter about the fact. Given a choice, he'd of gladly taken the longer healing time than the cells of a dead monster in his body. He peeled off most of the bandages slowly, and put them aside.

"Looks pretty good," CJ commented, peering at the scars. "You heal up fast."

"Yeah."

"My dad heals pretty fast too. He fell outta a tree once, getting me a frisbee stuck up there, and broke his arm in two places. It was better in a coupla days. Good thing too, he wouldn't let my mom take him to the doctor. It's not fair. I have to go to the doctor, but dad never has too. Hmph."

"I have to go to the doctor too," Ifalna piped up, not wanting to be left out.

"Children have to do a lot of things that adults don't. And vice versa."

"I guess. Still not fair though."

CJ sat back and picked up his whistling again. Vincent put his cloak back on. The kids had been using it as a blanket, but he donned it now against the spreading cold in the room. His eyelids felt heavy as hell. They wanted him to sleep some more, allow his body to heal fully, but he revolted against the urge. He was tired of sleeping, if that made any sense. He would have given anything to have a gun. Any kind of a gun. He'd have blasted their way out of that hellhole in the blink of an eye. He sighed inaudibly, melancholy setting in. He would have loved to see Cloud or someone burst through the door, light streaming out behind them, there to open their cages, set them free, and slap a gun in his hand, preferably his Death Penalty. Sleepily, his mind showed him images of him blasting his way through the monsters, dealing hot death with every round he got off. It was certainly a pretty picture.

A stifled gasp and a shrill scream made him jerk his head up suddenly, his eyes snapping open. The children sat pressed hard against the wall. Chieko's face hovered before them, grinning like a cheshire cat's.

"You're awake," she said mildly to Vincent, "You've been asleep every time I've come to check on you before."

"That would be your fault," the man replied coolly. She'd brought them food. It lay near the ledge of the cage, the same meal as before: water, bread, and meat. Prison food.

"I do apologize," the creature said somewhat sincerely, "I'd meant to merely disable you for a few days. I hadn't realized my temper'd made my poison glands secrete more than usual, hence the added dosage--"

"Gross," CJ remarked. Chieko turned on him and spat, making Vincent rise angrily to his feet. It was the first time he'd stood in over a week and he did so rather unsteadily, immediately falling back down to his knees.

"You stay away from them," he commanded, the hostility of his words and glare not lessened one bit by his humble stance. She turned back to him and smiled.

"You're lucky you didn't die," she said, ignoring him. He didn't feel so fortunate, "A normal human would have, coupled with the poison you received from my friend's mako. But your Jenova kept you alive. You're quite extraordinary."

"Cut the flattery. Why did you bring us here?"

"Ah, starting to ask questions now, eh?" Chieko mused, her tone decidedly obnoxious, "That can be dangerous, you know."

"I'll risk it."

"Hmph. I'm sure you would, but I won't. I won't spill the details of the plan only to have one of you crawling insects escape and reveal it. You just sit tight and revel in your ignorance. Be glad you still possess it, treasure it while you can. Soon you'll know all and I'm rather sure you won't find it to your liking." Laughing at her private joke, she stepped away from the cage and began walking away back to her personal rooms, hidden deep within the lab. As her entire form came into view, Vincent had a sudden flash of clarity. Chieko looked startlingly familiar. Same build, same reddish fur, same long tail though without a flicker of flame at the end.

"Chieko!" he called before she could leave the room. She turned, expecting to hear some sort of plea, some sort of begging from her prisoner. She would have liked that.

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't happen to be related to a thing called Red, er, rather Nanaki, would you?"

Like a red streak, she darted towards him, teeth bared and snarling. Ifalna shrieked and CJ pulled the both of them away. Vincent just sat, too weak to do too much of anything but glare. Chieko hit the cage with a rattle, attempting to tear the bars off in her animal rage. She couldn't get at the man though, her teeth gnashed at the bars, spattering the interior with warm foam and Vincent watched her struggle calmly. Her claws raked the cage in frustration, making it sway. Her growls grew louder as he began to talk.

"I only mention it because you're nearly the spitting image of him. If nothing else, you both must be the same species," he smiled faintly, seeing how his words infuriated her, "You do have those wings, but they look rather unnatural somehow, stuck on perhaps. Other than those though, you're the same build as he though nearly three times as large, your face is very similar to his, a little twisted, quite ugly, but nonetheless, uncannily similar. Same coloring, red as hell. Something tells me that if we looked hard enough, we'd find XIV tattooed somewhere on your-- "

He didn't get any further. Chieko found a sizable chink in the bars near the top of the cage and jabbed one of her hind legs through into Vincent's head. The man saw it coming, but he honestly didn't have the strength to move out of the way. It struck him dead on and sent him flying into the opposite wall so hard he rattled the bars. Ifalna whimpered and CJ stared as Chieko dashed over to the man's crumpled form and stuck her face close to his ear.

"I should like to tear you apart for saying that name to me," she roared, the blood lust in her eyes backing up the validity of the statement. "But I can't. I can't. Know this though. I can kill these children, one of them anyways, we only need one. If you ever say that name to me again, I'll feast on that little girl slowly, so slowly, and I'll let you watch."

Vincent opened his eyes painfully and watched her stalk off, tail snapping in anger. He tasted rusty blood in his mouth and spat it out, sitting up and rubbing his jaw. "That was certainly interesting," he thought with a weary shake of his head.

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His eyes half-shut, his steps awkward, his heart thrashing, Cloud ran through the alleys of Midgar. He held Ultima Weapon spasmodically in his right hand, as though the sword were the only thing keeping him anchored to sanity. He didn't know where he was going. He didn't know what he was going to do. All he knew was that with every step, he was putting distance between himself and what he'd nearly done. It was terrible to think of.

His breath was ragged in his throat, his lungs burning. The poisoning wouldn't leave him alone. He felt so suddenly dizzy he had to shut his eyes, and the world spun around him as though he were caught in a satanic carousel. But still he ran, forcing the world to right itself. Midgar's filth-encrusted alleys flicked past him, his feet splashing in anonymous puddles, kicking up dirty trash and papers.

Stop running.

The voice cut through his head clear and angry. It pressed on his will and he was forced to obey, skidding to a sudden halt, his lungs grateful. He looked around him, panting. Surrounded on either side by the unattractive brick walls of two buildings. A few words of graffiti were sprayed upon them in neon paint. Packing boxes, cardboard, and overflowing trash bins leaned against their sides in typical alley fashion. He sat down heavily on a wooden crate, his boots crunching the excelsior sprinkled about. Trembling slightly, he put his head in his hands and folded in on himself, nearly sobbing.

Every time he pulled his eyelids down over his vision, he would see Barret's face gazing on him in horror, Cloud's own figure mirrored in his brown eyes, sword raised, conscience gone, countenance a mask of cold murder. He would have killed him. He'd stood from the window with every intention of slicing his friend in half. Or had he really? Cloud's memory was fading.

He picked it apart carefully. Wallowing in his misery, he'd sat at the window, he remembered that. He remembered watching how the clouds were moving so freely across the sky, oblivious to him, to everyone. And then Barret had entered

and a part of him had been glad, but then he'd been pissed too, that it'd taken Marlene to finally get the man to see the errors of his way. It aggravated him that it'd taken him ten years to figure out what an asshole he was and finally apologize, then expect Cloud to just up and forgive him. So, rather spitefully, he'd refused the apology, inwardly smiling at Barret's shock. Cloud Strife doesn't always have to be the doormat, he'd thought. I can be mean when I want to be. I can give hurt, I don't always have to be the one to take it.

Cloud remembered all these feelings clearly. They weren't healthy thoughts, but they were his own. The things after that he wasn't so sure about. It began to get hard to recall, a voice had began, different than his own voice, reminiscent of what had called to him in Hojo's lab. It was reminiscent of something else too. Something old and terrifying.

He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he could just melt into the ground. These old memories were too hard to shift through, and he'd been doing it so much lately his mind was raw. Old hurts, old mistakes. Wickedness. One man's control over him. His betrayal. That voice in his head now was like the one that'd made him nearly kill Aeris thirteen years before. It had made him hand over the Black Materia, it had tortured him in the LifeStream, trying to tear him apart. The voice wasn't a friend of his, but it wasn't really an enemy. It simply shoved things to his attention that he'd rather not do, or deal with. But he thought it'd died with its master.

He sighed deeply, the cold morning air burning the inside of his nose, his breath appearing before him and then billowing up to heaven. He watched its smokey whiteness against the sharp blue of the sky, nearly crying at the simple beauty. Ifalna would have commented on it in her precocious way. CJ would be standing off to the side, stamping his feet against the cold and asking his father to get a move on. He missed them so much. Where were they? Who had them?

There was a rusted old fender leaned up against the opposite wall, but there was enough shine left on the chrome surface to reflect Cloud's face back at him when he glanced upon it. He saw his eyes. They frightened their owner more than they frightened anyone else. He couldn't escape their brilliance, their horrible, inhuman glow. They mocked him, claiming he wasn't a human any longer at all. They reminded him of his failure. They remained after the mako monster, a small piece of it locked inside Cloud clawing at the walls of his soul. Mako had his children. Life itself had his children. The Planet had stolen them away.

He could feel it in him sometimes; lying in wait behind those eyes, securely entwined like climbing vines about the crevices of his skull; intangible but so close to his being, his very core, that he oftentimes could feel it brushing his thoughts, tickling tortuously at his synapses as they functioned: Mako energy.

In the daylight it was just a word, an amazing phenomenon made mundane by the controlling touch of man. So many of nature's greatest wonders had suffered the same degradation, becoming tools, becoming examples of theories or formulas; rainbows, beautiful, divine as they were, became the simple phenomena of light off water, the flight of a bird, so basic, so pure, became aerodynamics, wind flow, the issue of varying pressure. What was mako but potential energy, a force signifying life, a form of electricity powering flesh? He wanted to laugh. By being so easily harnessed, mako lent itself to de-mystification, to the gleaming cold scalpel of science. What screams did it cry in protest when prodded? What miracles did it perform to spit in calculating science's face? Its power had been effortlessly held in one man's fist, Hojo's sick, twisted fist, and then transferred like a common object into another.

"So manageable," Cloud muttered, fist pressed hard to his lips. "That life should be so easily defined. When you think about it too much, it all becomes rather pointless, doesn't it? I'll die and lose everything I ever was; every action, every experience, every memory will evaporate outta me like dew off a blade of grass hit by the sun. It'll find the LifeStream and mix with the energy of thieves, of kings, of heroes and fools, all equal after death, and Cloud Strife'll surely cease to be Cloud Strife. The energy'll pour outta my limbs and forget it was ever there, concerned only with creating a new life that in turn'll drain away again. This planet is damned heartless in its design."

He turned his eyes up to the bit of sky visible between the two looming brick walls of the alley, seeking some comfort. Did anything matter? Was he only a collection of random energy? Would it really all dissipate one day, leaving nothing but a shell and some long forgotten actions?

There's freedom to it.

The breath caught in his throat at the sound of the words. It was that thing in his head. It whispered so softly, so gently, like a mother, that he couldn't help but listen.

Consider it, Cloud, every one of your actions is a futile lie. None of it will matter one day. Death will come and no one will remember you. You won't remember, you'll have no consciousness to dredge up old mistakes, no mind to torture you. You'll have nothing then because you are nothing now. Just mako and flesh. All emotions, all the things you feel are side effects from the meeting of the two. I know it's a difficult thing to accept, but that's the way the Planet decided to structure itself long ago, before the beginning of time. So nothing you do matters, unless. . .

Cloud waited for the voice to finish, his heart breaking with every word. From what he'd seen in his life, what it said was

true. But the human spirit couldn't easily accept oblivion. He needed some solace, some option. "What?" he thought, "What reason is there to do anything?"

Power. If you achieve power now, than all the world will remember you and though your heart may stop, you'll never die in the minds and memories of the world.

The man shook his head, the voice's spell over him broken. That was stupid, he sighed to himself. He didn't care about power or any of that other nonsense. He just wanted his kids back. Mako be damned. Mako and all the cruel nuances of life could go take a ride. He scolded himself for even listening to the dark voice. He'd allowed himself to do that thirteen years ago and it'd nearly ended the Planet's miserable existence once and for all. He couldn't give in to the temptations of his weary mind anymore.

Using Ultima Weapon like a cane, he wedged it into the ground and pushed himself to his feet. He wasn't feeling too great. But he didn't care. He didn't figure he deserved to. The guilt pressed a little less firmly on his conscience if he knew that he was suffering right along with his children. He'd starve himself, deprive himself of sleep, let the poison gnaw at him, simply because the same things might be happening to his kids, somewhere. He stood for a moment, leaning heavily on the sword, waiting for the world to stop spinning. He glanced down at his hands, startled slightly by how pale and cold they were, trembling violently upon the hilt of his sword. His heart beat wildly, making him breathless. He was sick, was all. Impassionately he thought that maybe he'd die. He was convinced he didn't care.

But I care. I love you.

"You don't know me." Cloud spoke out loud, not even realizing it. He ignored the voice and began walking forward out of the alley. He didn't know where he'd go. He couldn't go home and face Tifa's grief and questions. He couldn't go to Shinra and face the people there. There was nowhere.

"There are my arms, Cloud. You can step into my arms and never have to worry about what to do, where to go, or what may happen again."

The man halted in his tracks, cold sweat sticking out on his forehead. He listened for the sound of people, anyone nearby, frightened suddenly at being alone with the voice. But there was nothing. Distant crowds, but no one near enough to hear him if he were to cry out.

"What's the matter? Turn around and look at me."

The voice wasn't in his head anymore. It came to his ears freely, sprung from his mind. He didn't want to turn and see what it had manifested into. But he had to. Something snatched at his will and made him turn slowly, made him keep his eyes open, made him stare.

She was beautiful. Her features were perfect in every sense of the word, her nose, her lips, her eyes soft and curving in just the right ways, the flesh pure and unblemished. Her simple blue robe curled about her figure airily, not moving in the breeze. She stood patiently, maternally, her arms spread to the man as though longing to embrace him.

"I've missed you," she whispered, and a tear fell down her cheek.

~*~

Vincent's eyes snapped open and he nearly cried out. The darkness spread about him. CJ and Ifalna were snuggled up close against him, snoring softly, peacefully. The bars glinted, defying him. He breathed deep, trying to regain his composure. He'd been dreaming of Jenova. He'd seen her face again, her lying face, twisted with her magic, or with control of his mind, to appear beautiful and friendly. But Vincent knew better now. He knew that the creature was foul, evil beyond his comprehension. It wouldn't fool him again.

He looked down on Ifalna's cherubic face, her head laying warmly on his chest, the excess of his cloak spread over her and her brother. Sighing in contentment, he laid back and closed his eyes, looking for sleep.

Jenova spread her arms wide. They were shapely, gorgeous, perfect in the way that a mountain's lines are perfect against the sky. Her hands reached towards him longing to hold him tight, to protect him in their sweet safety. A tear, a crystal tear that bespoke love and compassion, trickling from one of her bright eyes, she whispered, "I've missed you."

Again, Vincent opened his eyes and the image faded. There was a slight burning in his chest and head, like a fire smoldering, but it disappeared as the dream did.

But it's not a dream, he thought, I'm awake. He was suddenly scared to close his eyes again, knowing that she'd still be there, her voice pleasing, easy, and tempting. Caged in body and in mind now. The corners of his mouth turned down in a frown. Alright then, no more of this nonsense. Let's be finished with this now.

His mind made up, he quietly unstrapped his cloak and laid it about the children, rising painfully to his feet. Soundlessly, he moved towards the opposite end of the cage and sat there, cross-legged, his hand on his knee, his claw loose at his side. "Bring it on. . . "he whispered and, steeling his courage, he shut his eyes.

~*~

Jenova stared at him, eyes all encompassing. Vincent looked down at himself. He was all there. He was outside, in an alley, stooping in a puddle, but he couldn't feel the wet that should've been soaking into the knees of his pants. He could only feel the bottom of the cage he was trapped in with CJ and Ifalna, though, as bizarre as it was, he couldn't see it unless he opened his eyes. He looked up at the creature standing before him defiantly, his features cold. He had a warm dull ache in his head and chest.

Jenova lowered her arms suddenly, almost in disappointment as no one stepped forward to embrace her. They fell to her sides softly, and a breeze appeared to dry the tear on her cheek. She stepped forward, her movements full of grace and ease. Vincent refused to move aside for her. He stood his ground contemptuously, but she hardly seemed to notice. Without a word, without a sign of disturbance, she walked right through him, as though he were a shadow. He stood in slight shock after she had passed, blinking a few times.

Well, he said to himself, attempting to think logically, Wherever I am right now, I'm not really here. I'm really in that cage. So I shouldn't fear for myself. Good.

He turned around to face Jenova's back and saw that Cloud was there too. His friend was clutching Ultima Weapon, standing pale and shaking in the cold of the morning. At least, Vincent assumed it was cold, he could only feel the warmth of the cage, the breathing of Cloud's children in his ears, as well as the noises of the alley. It was a strange sensation, like wearing headphones with the volume turned down low.

"Who are you?" Cloud asked suddenly, leaning heavily on his sword. The woman seemed familiar to him somehow, like some phantom figure from an old dream. She was smiling at him.

"I'm not here to hurt you, that's all you need to know, Cloud. I want to help. I want to be your friend." Vincent stood and moved so he could see both of their faces. He did a slight double-take as he noticed the intensity of Cloud's eyes, but he dismissed it quickly, knowing the man must have had a close brush with the mako beast.

"My friend," Cloud scoffed, "Nah, you're some stupid figure from my imagination. How pathetic is it that you want to be my friend? How pathetic is it that I'm making imaginary friends up for myself. I swear to god, I'm losing it." He almost laughed, turning away to face the exit of the alley. He began to make his way towards it, then a sudden thought occurred to him and he turned sharply. "You're the visual accompaniment to the voice in my skull. You were. . . doing things to my mind a while ago. You made my hand move, the sword fly." He looked troubled, trying to remember the sensation, "But I stopped you. I didn't hurt Barret. You failed." Cloud looked nearly cocky for a moment and the woman watched him as though he were her impudent young son. Vincent looked on, unable to decide if this was all some twisted dream of his or if perhaps, somehow, an actual event.

"It wasn't all me," Jenova said gently, "Not even mainly me. All I did was offer up the suggestion, you're the one who acted on it. That man was saying cruel things to you, demeaning your woes with his uncaring forked tongue. You had a natural urge to quiet him. I'm sorry you didn't go through with it. A strong man kills his enemies. You though, you cowered and ran."

"I did not!" Cloud cried, taking a step towards her in frustrated fury, "I mean, he's my friend, not my enemy. Why would I ever hurt him?"

"You didn't forgive Barret. He's still your foe. He thinks you're a traitor because you work for Shinra now. He thinks it, Cid thinks it, Tifa thinks it, Vincent thinks it, Red thinks it. . . you think it."

Each name that rolled off her tongue struck Cloud like a blow. Vincent watched him reel.

"No!" the man cried, stepping forward towards the pair, "I don't think that, Cloud. I think you're a reformer and a good man!" To his dismay, no sound came from his mouth as he tried to talk. Panicking, he tried to clasp his friend's shoulder, but his hand slid straight through, as though he were made of air. Cloud fell onto his knees, overcome by dizziness and fatigue. Jenova pounced.

"But it's alright, my poor son. They don't know anything. They're humans, they're surface-eager and cold. I've watched the species for countless years, never impressed really. They hurt, they kill, then they denounce each other for it, then go and repeat the actions. They call you a traitor, they rebuke you for your betrayal, for your sins, your failures, all the while, committing their own crimes, which they'll conveniently overlook. An utterly evil race of vile creatures. Don't worry about

what they think of you, my poor child. You're better than they are, you admit your faults freely."

"Don't listen to her, Cloud! She's only telling you these things to get your trust, to grab hold of your will." Vincent nearly screamed in frustration, sickened as he watched his friend sinking under her terrible words. "She. . . she did the same thing to Sephiroth." Vincent despaired. There wasn't anything he could do.

"No."

The word came from Cloud like a prayer. He straightened, looking her in the face.

"Humans aren't evil. My children are human. My wife is human. And to hell with Hojo and all he's done to me, I'm still human!"

Vincent grinned, relieved. His friend glared at Jenova viciously, his grip tightening about his sword. The woman watched him, unperturbed.

"Do you really think you're human?" she asked. Surprisingly, her words weren't cutting, mean, or spiteful. They were soft and almost sad. "My child, don't you know who I am? Who you are?"

"You're the figment of a diseased brain," Cloud said bitterly, "I'm a failure too weak to face my problems so I've concocted you to blame, and take my mind away." Vincent listened to the man's words with a blank expression. There was so much pain there. He'd never realized he contained so much self-hatred. It seemed to fester within him like a sore.

The woman shook her head at his response, nearly releasing another tear. "No," she breathed mournfully, "I am real. I exist. I am JENOVA. You are my son."

"Yeah, sure, lady, whatever. My mom died in a fire a while ago. And if you want to get into details, you being Jenova, that would mean your son killed her. I could be very bitter towards you, if I wanted. But I'm not, because you're not Jenova. That creature died right before we gutted her 'son'. We left 'em both to the LifeStream, somewhere deep in the Northern Crater. That's a very dated part of my history, so try another one on me, eh?"

Cloud turned to leave the alley, suddenly sick of the whole conversation. Upon turning though, he found that there was no way out. The path that'd led out into the street had vanished. There was only a solid brick wall there, completely caging him in. Vincent had a sudden feeling of *deja vu*.

Without warning, Jenova sprang forward and released a lightening-quick punch to Cloud's jaw, knocking him backwards. He lay stunned for a moment, his back against the cold, wet cement, then regained his feet and stood rubbing the side of his face painfully.

"Did that feel real to you?" the woman asked, standing placidly by and smiling. Cloud nodded.

"I suppose so." He tasted a bit of blood on his mouth. "My lip's bleeding, so yeah, if nothing else, your fist is real."

The woman smiled, some of the gentleness gone. Suddenly, throwing her arms back above her head, her hair whipping out wildly about her like Medusa's locks, she began to grow larger, quickly filling up the small space of the alley. Her skin darkened, turning purplish, her robe flew off, revealing a frightening, twisted, alien body. A thick tail dropped from her torso and razor wings sprung from her back. Jenova suddenly stood before Cloud Strife in all her glorious, satanic splendor. The man's jaw dropped.

"How. . .?" his voice trailed away. There was a pounding ache beginning to form in his head. It was making it hard to reason.

"You contain my cells. . ." the creature said suddenly, the voice echoing through the air, through the walls of his skull. She spoke as though it were all so obvious, "You are my son. You and others have carried me about inside of your bodies for thirteen years. You tried to destroy me, but that is alright. Many have made the attempt. You and your warriors were the first to come so close. But I cannot die. You may as well attempt to kill the air, or the sea. I am Jenova. I am the calamity from the sky. I cannot die."

Vincent watched the thing with narrowed eyes. He assumed she meant himself with her talk of "others". He looked towards Cloud, expecting the man to take up his sword and shut her up. He wished he'd been there in person with Death Penalty in his hand and a shell in the chamber.

"Cloud," he called, not caring that his speaking was futile, "Why don't you introduce her to Ultima Weapon?" He turned and watched his friend, his bravado suddenly dissipating. Her words had struck Cloud a fatal blow. Eyes squeezed shut against the sight of her, he'd sunk to the ground, still hanging on to the sword. He was gasping in the air, teeth clenched, so that he made a sort of whistling sound.

"I do not have your cells. I do not. . . , "he said insistently, "I do not. I do not. . ." he spoke the phrase a dozen times or more, each repetition growing fainter. Jenova laughed.

"Of course you do, my pathetic little fellow. Why do you think I could so easily control you thirteen years ago. I did pass

that control onto Sephiroth, but it was my control. You were our obedient little puppet. Well, obedient to a point, anyways. You killed him. And nearly myself as well. But you're behaving perfectly civilly now, aren't you? Hmm."

"Why?" Cloud cried, his voice a gash of anguish against the cold morning air, "Why, dammit? If this is true, why now? Why come now?" Vincent was alarmed to see tears streaming from his friend's wide blue eyes. He would have done anything to have been able to offer him a few comforting words. He wanted to cry out to him that his children were safe, that they were all locked up in Hojo's lab somewhere, but they were safe and he was with them. He wanted to be able to suddenly allow Cloud to hear their breathing, to feel their warm, innocent breath against his skin. It killed him to see the man suffering like this. He wanted to gut Jenova with his claw.

"Stand up." The creature's command was short, concise, almost barked. She had a firm grip on Cloud's will, the man too tired, too ill, too weak to fight it. With no say in the matter, he stood and faced her, his shoulders shaking. "You. Are. Mine." Every word was a nail in his coffin. He physically cringed with each one. Vincent watched, horrified.

"What do you want with me?" the man asked quietly. Jenova flicked her thick tail this way and that, throwing up the trash and debris in the alley. Her translucent wings caught the morning sun and shone beautiful and opalescent.

"You're my new host," she murmured "Like that man before you whom you so unceremoniously slaughtered, I'll make you insane, infect your mind, and control your actions. You're my new marionette. My new weapon. We'll confront the Planet together."

"Like hell you will!" said Vincent, flexing his claw against his side.

"You're already half mine, thanks to Dr. Hojo. There's just some refining to do, some finishing touches, and we'll begin the conquest. What my son did years ago was a mere practice run. A speed trial. You'll be the one remembered. The larger chapter in the history books. That is what you wanted, isn't it, Cloud? To be remembered when you're dead? To not fade quietly into the LifeStream? I'll grant you such a boon, and in return, you'll kill for me." A broad, fanged grin spread across her horrid face, images of death filling her minds-eye. Death. It was her favorite. So clean, so final, so clear. Things were certainly coming along.

Cloud watched her blankly. The pain in his head was nearly unbearable. He hadn't known. He'd suspected that like Vincent, he also contained the cells of the creature in his bloodstream, but he'd always shrugged it off, figuring the mako was enough to deal with. But he was a monster too. He wasn't even human. He wasn't. . . even. . .

"No!"

He heard a scream and realized it was his own. A solution came to him suddenly. He had his sword clutched in his right hand. The familiar weapon winked at him in the sunlight. It was an easy solution. It would solve everything. Everything.

"No," he repeated forcefully. Then, softer, "No."

His movements faster than the eye could see, he twirled Ultima Weapon about in his grasp and swung it point first towards his chest. He tensed his muscles and pulled it to him in a terrible embrace, using all the force he could muster to penetrate his breastbone. Vincent grabbed at his arms, trying to stop him, crying out as his hands passed through helplessly.

But Jenova wouldn't let him get away that easily. Grinding her teeth with the force it required, she almost physically lashed out with her two clawed hands and grabbed onto Cloud's will, freezing his motions with a grunt. As she did so, he fell over, sweating and still struggling to push the sword through his chest. Relieved she'd managed to stop him, but hating her even more because of her selfish, evil reasons for doing so, Vincent watched as the winged creature vanished in a flash of light. Frowning, he knelt over his friend on the ground.

"Cloud," he said, an uncharacteristic catch in his usually impassive voice, "Cloud, you bastard. Why'd you try to do that? There's always another way." Shivering, the sword fallen from his grasp, the man lay on the ground like a broken toy, pale, soaked through with sweat, and sobbing silently.

"You're so weak."

Vincent snapped his gaze around at the sound, red eyes wide in disbelief. He knew before he saw the face who he'd find standing behind him. It was the thing that had attacked him so viciously in Lucrecia's cave. It was a thing so real that it wasn't real, that nothing could hurt it because it was already dead. Cloud's eyes opened and focused in utter incomprehension on the green pair staring at him. The name stumbled off his tongue, steeped in fear.

"Sephiroth. . ."

"Weak. Weak as you always were, unless you had your companions to stand by your side. A common Shinra trooper, a nothing. A nobody that got lucky. A little boy who couldn't make it in the big league because he had a screw loose. Hello, Cloud. Long time no see."

Standing high and imperialistic, his Masamune drawn and quivering, Sephiroth glared down at the man in disgust, a smile playing across his thin-lipped mouth. Cloud gibbered, crawling backwards trying to get away, his mind gone in his all-consuming terror.

"I knew you'd never really die, "he whispered. "I knew you couldn't really be dead. All the nightmares, you always kill me in my dreams. That must be the reality. And what really happened inside the crater, in that space of nothingness where I could swear I remember cutting you apart with Omnislash, that. . . that's the real dream, isn't it?"

"Yes, "the black-mantled man said almost soothingly, "The only reality there can be is you impaled on the end of my sword. Everything else is pure fantasy. Cheap lies."

Vincent watched his friend's face, knowing that this thing he faced was really an illusion, a trick played upon the mind by Jenova. But Cloud didn't know that. He only knew terror, seeing the stuff of nightmares made solid before his eyes. If it was Jenova's plan to make Cloud insane, the man thought, she was certainly going about it the right way.

Grinning, Sephiroth approached, Cloud backing up further until he hit the wall. Nothing had changed. He was still the weaker opponent. He still couldn't stand up to the man who'd destroyed his life. And now, he thought, it was fitting that that man would physically end his life too. End it now. End it. .

"Your children are dead, you know, "Sephiroth said the words experimentally, casually.

"That's not true. I'm right here with them. They're safe and sleeping. CJ knows you're coming to get him soon--"

"Dead. The mako monster killed them right after it took them from you. It suffocated them in poison till they stopped breathing. All because of you. The Planet is angry that you tried to make a life for yourself after Meteor. It doesn't approve of your marriage to Tifa, of your attempts to be happy, to have joy. You were born to live up to your last name. To kill. To be controlled by the strong, like me."

"I don't want to be controlled." Cloud raised his sword feebly, making himself get to his feet. Sephiroth laughed at his efforts.

"You weren't born with options. One path. One choice. One master."

"Stop saying that!" Cloud finally found his voice and tapped into his anger, gripping the sword. His blue eyes tear-filled but snapping in ire, he barked, "You're dead dammit, I don't care what my stupid head keeps spouting. I killed you. This pathetic loser killed you. Twice, if you want to be specific. Once on Mt. Nibel. And then for the last time in the crater. Without the help of my friends. You're dust."

Moving too fast to possibly be human, Sephiroth grinned and then shot a kick to Cloud's right hand, instantly disarming him and rending the hand useless. Then a few quick blows followed; to the kidneys, to the sternum, a punch in the face, then a sweep of his legs that sent him tumbling down painfully to the cement.

"You'll never learn, will you?" the man asked, looming over him, hands on his hips and silver hair separating into shining strands in the breeze. "Hated by your friends, controlled by your enemies, murderer of your children. All this, and you haven't learned." The man reared a leg back and launched a single savage kick into Cloud's neck. The man gasped, trying to breathe, his windpipe nearly crushed. "Just take it!"

Vincent trembled in rage. He watched Sephiroth draw Masamune and stand over Cloud's prone form, the tip of the cruel katana to his friends pale, tear-stained cheek. He couldn't watch what happened next. He'd seen horrors too terrible to recount as a Turk working for Shinra. He'd seen things that would make a religious man believe the world was godless as he'd traveled with Cloud in his hunt. But this was too much. He had to look away, overcome by the cruelty of fate.

A black-booted foot holding down each of the nearly unconscious man's muscled arms, Sephiroth stuck Masamune into Cloud's brow, cutting down hard. He traced a line down over his right eye, down through the delicate skin of his cheek, then curled the line around once he'd nearly reached his chin, curving in back almost to his ear. Cloud screamed in pain, claspng at the wound as soon as Sephiroth stepped off his arms. Before the gushing, bright-red blood obscured the shape, Vincent glanced to his friend and saw that a gaping "J" had been carved in his face. Branded, he thought sickened.

"Maybe you'll remember who you belong to now, "said Sephiroth quietly. Smiling in satisfaction, he wiped Masamune lightly on Cloud's black jacket, then stepped away, fading suddenly into a dim white light that eventually died. Vincent stooped down next to his friend, next to the broken, branded man. He couldn't offer a comforting hand. He couldn't offer a reassuring word. He was. . . they were both denied it.

"I'm sorry, Cloud, "he murmured, "I'm sorry I couldn't do anything. But we'll make that monster pay. You and I, we'll lash out. In the meantime, they're safe. Your son and daughter aren't dead, don't believe Jenova. They're with me." Vincent bowed his head, unable to look at the grotesque red coating Cloud's face, running into his eye and lit by the blue light there. A tear dropped, a single sympathetic tear fell from the man's eye. Instead of falling through Cloud's body as everything else did though, it struck his shoulder warmly.

"Vincent?" the word was weak from Cloud's tongue, his lips awash in blood. His eyes were shut now. Vincent looked at him in sudden excitement, but it sank in his chest as he felt the strange connection joining them begin to fade as Jenova's presence, their one link, left them in peace for a while. Cloud opened his eyes and saw his friend's mournful face gazing down on his sadly, though the face was rather transparent, he could see the brick of the wall behind it.

"What're you doin' here? Where've ya been?"

Vincent tried to answer, to shout out that they were in the Shinra building, locked in a cage in Hojo's lab, but their link wasn't an aural one, and his words went unheard. Realizing there were only seconds until they faded from each other's sight altogether, he concentrated and mouthed the words, "CJ and Ifalna are alright." He was sure that Cloud understood, but he couldn't know for sure. His vision went suddenly black and he opened his eyes, back in the cage, the children still blissfully sleeping. He tried to return to his friend's side but couldn't, there was nothing behind his eyelids now but darkness.

~*~

Cloud lay on the cement for a long time, his eyes unblinking, cold, empty. They were actually a brighter blue than the sky above him. That sky was paled by the sunlight in places, was obscured by gray thunderheads and a thin, soupy mist. His eyes on the other hand, were pools of pure pigment, unclouded. He himself was the Cloud, he thought apathetically. He drifted in and out of people's lives, destroying them. In his eyes, he mocked the world with a perfect sky that could never be attained. Never attained because of his presence. It was a cruel, cruel joke.

Blood pooled beneath his head as the gash in his face offered his blood onto the chilled cement. The cold November breeze blew through his hair, contrasting with the fire of the wound. Other than that pain, he felt disconnected from the rest of his body. He couldn't move. He didn't want to move. He wanted to die, right there in that alley. He was mad, out of his skull. The world had no use for him anymore.

The apparition of Vincent Valentine hung in his mind. It'd said that his children were alive. More than anything else in the world he wanted to believe this, but he'd no doubt it was another cruel trick his psyche was playing on him. He could nearly physically feel that psyche teetering, processing all he'd seen, heard, and felt in his mad hallucination. It threatened to back-fire, to overload. So, he thought blankly, this is what it is like to be insane.

~*~

"3600 epr bio-cannon. Tested at thirteen hundred hours today in chamber C. Mastered Poison materia catalog #436 used. Broden Generator and V98 cables used as specified. Reaction: achieved. Results: not achieved. Final Status. . ."

A smoldering hole.

Marlene grinned to herself silently, her foot tapping in time to the music blasting from her Walkman. She was seated at a rusty iron desk, a clipboard in her lap and a pen in hand, finalizing the reports for the day. What a day it had been. "Another red-letter twenty-four hours in Marlene Wallace's calendar," she thought. That morning upon arriving, Neto had met her at the doors to the WDD, a group of five squirrely-looking techs behind him. Her fellow "materia researchers". After a quick lecture, he'd ordered they head down to the mako chamber and begin what he'd called, "A foray into the naturalistic sciences." What a crock. Apparently their great "foray" consisted of little beyond testing materia and mako based weapons. Marlene could understand this, it was the Weapons Development Department after all, but the way that Neto had spoken to her last night, it'd sounded as though he were interested in real research, in something beyond using the marvels of the Planet as only a means to hurt it and its creatures. It came down to the old adage of any idiot can destroy, but it takes something more to create.

The young woman scratched at her ear beneath her headphones and scribbled something else down on the report. Not that they were even doing that right. Not a single one of their weapons had tested in working order. That at least gave Marlene a sort of smug satisfaction. They didn't know what the hell they were doing. Here she and her techs were, in possession of some of the Planet's strongest materia with the resources to really research the stuff, and Neto was interested only in using it to blow things up. Hmph.

Sighing deeply, feeling a little sorry for herself suddenly, she leaned back in her chair. The thing creaked and screamed as she attempted to revolve the seat a little and she couldn't help but cringe as the metallic screech tore through the silence of the air around her violently. Marlene was edgy. She was sitting painfully alone in the dusty, rusted mako room of Professor Hojo's, her feet propped up on the desk built into the wall at which she sat. It was nearing one in the afternoon,

and she'd just dismissed her underlings, relinquishing them to the fierce cry of the commissary. The Shinra chefs were making meatloaf that afternoon. Yum. The bachelor scientists ate the stuff up joyously, it was as close to home-cooking as they got in their diets of TV dinners, mac and cheese, and cigarettes. Marlene wasn't hungry though, there were too many things stewing in her brain to allow her mind to process anything as mundane as hunger, for in addition to her disappointment about the materia research, her heart still hung heavy after her tearful goodbye to Barret that morning. He'd left after returning from the Strifes' on the Highwind, the old ship soaring from the clear skies to swoop him away from her and back to the tranquility of Cosmo Canyon. He'd seemed pensive and even nervous ever since getting back from Cloud's, but her questioning hadn't turned anything up. He'd only said that Cloud was bad off and needed time to sort things out for himself. Marlene managed to translate this as, "We didn't make up." Her attempts to help her friend deflated, leaving her feeling even worse. Everything was going to crap. So much for her wonderful new life in Midgar. Barret was gone, Nanaki was in Cosmo Canyon, the only friends she had in the god-forsaken city were unavailable, grieving for their lost children, and her "great" job had turned into an exercise in monkey work. Frowning down at her clipboard, she sighed, feeling more alone than she ever had in her life.

Oblivious, the lab stretched quiet around her, the emptiness nearly tangible. She kept feeling the thick stuff creeping up and tickling the back of her neck, even though she had a rock station blaring at her through her headphones. But this sort of quiet wasn't anything that could be broken by common noise; this stuff was indestructible, feeding off a soundlessness in the mind, rather than that of the ear. It'd been like that all morning and afternoon as she and her techs had gone about their testing. They'd make polite chat, discuss the results of their work, even laugh at each other's lame attempts at levity, but all the while, this silence buzzed at them.

With a satisfied "Humph!" she jotted down a few last notes and tossed the clipboard aside. Causing a cacophonous screeching, she made her chair swivel around so that she could lean her weary back against the edge of the desk. Sighing, she tried to relax and crossed her legs, surveying the lab.

Looking upon it now, all she could think about were the bizarre things that had happened in the place years ago. It almost seemed as though the screams of the long dead patients and experiments had fused with the walls, still audible to those who'd lend them an ear. The streaks of rust and grime snaking down from the ceiling seemed to be those screams made visible. This mako room was the worst though. The rest of the lab had been stripped and disinfected, but this chamber still held the original equipment, though much of it was damaged or hidden by fallen ceiling plaster. Nevertheless, the radiation chambers were there, the needles, the machines, the unsettling noises of the massive generators embedded in the walls, still pumping electricity though there was no need for it anymore. Squinting her eyes to make them out, she noticed photographs scattered in a far corner, records too horrible to look upon, of mutated bodies, altered for the sake of an insane man's vision, for a science that wasn't really science, rather madness gone astray. Part of her, the scientific part, the curious part, wanted to rise from the chair and go flip through the photos, perhaps learn from a colleague's mistake. But the rest of her, the moralist, made her stay her ground and leave the images in the past. Stories she'd heard came to mind suddenly. Barret's graphic depictions of Hojo's insanity, and then tales that'd traveled through the labs. Many of her co-workers had been trying to scared the "new girl" that week. A fair share had succeeded.

"So, how goes the day's work?"

Marlene jerked about violently at the voice, breath stopping painfully in her throat. Before she could catch herself, she toppled out of the unyielding rusted chair, landing roughly on the floor. For a few seconds, she just lay there, cheeks reddening, feeling like a fool. Then Neto approached her with a grin, and offered a hand.

"My goodness, Dr. Wallace, did I startle you? I'm so sorry."

"It's alright, sir, it's just that it was so quiet in here and I was lost in thought. It's not your fault."

The young tech pulled the woman to her feet as best he could, blushing himself, though Marlene hadn't the faintest notion why. Once standing, she rubbed her bottom sorely and smiled, politely removing her headphones. She was actually kind of glad that someone had decided to enter the lab. For a moment, it'd began to feel decidedly creepy in there.

"Well, anyway, how it is going?"

"It goes as well as can be expected," she replied coolly, sitting back in her chair. His insults towards Barret the day before were not entirely out of her mind yet. However Neto didn't even seem to remember whose daughter she was anymore. He only knew she was quite intelligent and quite beautiful, screw details. He smiled at her, his hands behind his back and a strand of his thin hair in his eyes as she elaborated. "We're nearly complete with testing the batch of prototypes you gave me. The mako radiation chambers are working quite well, they're holding up to the blasts grandly."

"Well, I thought they would. One thing I was always told about the late Professor Hojo was his love of his equipment. He'd insist everything always be kept in perfect working order, treating his machines as he did his test subjects, with a cold sort of concern. Tell me, what's the success rate so far?"

Marlene had to hide a smile. "Zero." Neto paled slightly, but then almost immediately his thin skin was lit from underneath by a deep blush.

"Surely. . . surely our incompetence with this stuff isn't that complete?" he muttered, his voice incredulous, "My god, that's months, even years of research and work wasted. None of our designs tested with any degree of success? Dr. Wallace, you have to do something about this."

Marlene's eyes opened wide and she stared at the man in disbelief. "Me?" she asked, forgetting herself and sounding horribly unprofessional, "Me? I've been here less'n a week and you want me to solve every problem in the Department? Neto, I can hardly do that."

"I'm not asking that. I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to come out like that. We're just so unknowledgeable about the Planet. But I'm sure I don't need to tell you that, Dr. Wallace. You've seen it first hand now. Hmph. If only I could say that I felt personally ashamed, but I won't lie to you." He looked up suddenly like sheepish little boy about to confess to a lie, "I have very little interest in materia myself," he said, "Until a year or two ago, using the Planet for energy seemed so. . . so passe, so yesterday, so dated. But a lot of the bigwigs and money men see it as a real possibility. They don't want to go to the extremes that Shinra has in the past, with the reactors and all, but they're really interested in using materia for it's destructive capabilities. It does seem to be a vast well of potentiality, they're right about that. It's too bad the WDD is so incompetent with it. You have to help. I don't want to see this potential wasted."

"But you have no personal interest. . .?"

Neto blinked, realizing that he'd probably said something foolish, yet he elaborated regardless, "I honestly don't. I consider mako a tool of the past. It's. . . forgive me for saying this, sloppy. Unrefined. Barbaric and random. It's the chaos of a thunderstorm. What we want is the predictability of a sprinkler system. That's why anything that I do want done with it requires the materia be used in conjunction with our own technology. We have to bend the stuff to our wills, bend it to suit us, not the other way around. The only way I'm convinced that materia and mako will have any influence at all in scientific pursuits in the future is when it is enhanced or controlled by technology."

The young woman stared at Neto as though he'd just told her the world was flat. Her hopes fell as he continued, becoming incensed with the topic.

"Consider it like this: You have a log, maybe a branch that you just sawed off a tree. The hunk of wood would make a pretty fair weapon and you could probably bash someone's head in with it in a very efficient manner, but what if you carve that wood, you mold it, shape it, make it better. Make it into a bat. Then you can hold it easier, likewise swing it easier, faster, better. Then, then you have a weapon. It's the same with materia. We do have something now, but we could have so much more if we look into other possibilities."

Easier, faster, better. It seemed the human race's goal for everything. Was it really a noble goal, Marlene wondered, looking at her superior with barely hidden disgust, or was it selfish? Would it save the Planet, or send it into the night for good?

"Well, Dr. Wallace," finished Neto wearily, "Go ahead and complete the rest of the tests. Are you sure you're reporting everything properly? All results, all errors, everything? Next week, we'll have a conference and go over improvements that can be made to these weapons. Gods, I can't believe none of them are functional. The appropriations committee is going to have me dismembered. But it doesn't matter. We'll make progress if it kills us." The young tech crossed his arms in cheery determination, his embarrassment over the Department's materia ignorance forgotten. He looked around him at the lab thoughtfully. "If nothing else, Professor Hojo finished what he started. Or at least tried to as hard as he could. By being in his old labs, we've given ourselves a standard to live up to. Hmph. I'll see you later. Drop your reports by my office before you leave tonight." Neto smiled in a friendly manner, waved, and ambled back the way he'd come, wondering if Marlene was watching his butt. He'd heard that women put a lot of stock in men's posteriors. He tried to keep his wiggling provocatively as he walked, so that he left the lab with a sort of penguin waddle. Marlene thought maybe he had hemorrhoids. She sure hoped that was the case.

Straightening in her chair, she stapled the reports together, then let them drop with a thud onto the desk. She had to suppress a sudden urge to scream out.

What was happening? Her coworkers were all money-hungry, shallow, undedicated fatheads! She suddenly heard her father's deep voice: Welcome to the really real world, hun. The train ride jus' gets bumpier from here on out. But no! she told herself, vehemently shaking her head, was she the only one who had any interest in the science of discovery, as opposed to the science of power and making lotsa money? Did no one else in the WDD care to do real research? She answered her own questions.

No, as a matter of fact, her mind snapped loudly, No one else gives two shits about it. This is science, this is what you longed for for those three years. This, my girl, is Shinra. Enjoy.

"Oh, brother. . ." she mumbled, laying her chin down on the edge of the desk and rubbing her eyes with her hand, "Even my mind is being mean to me. Shaddup in there. Don't you think I've realized all this? I'm the only one with any dedication. And I'm lonely already. That's a bad sign."

She nearly began to cry when it occurred to her how she could have dropped this whole silly dream of hers and fled back to Cosmo Canyon, back to the safety of Bugah's lessons, and Nanaki's friendship, with Barret that morning. Her father was probably already back at home. Marlene tried to picture him with his feet up, a beer in his good hand, reading from a magazine as Nanaki chatted to him from next door, his low growled words falling on a deaf ear. But the picture just wasn't right. She wasn't there. She was holed up here in a dead lunatic's old labs, studying mundane ideas which she'd tried before on her own and seen fail when she was only an eight year old. This was frustrating, this was unbearable, this was elementary. . .

"But this is what you wanted."

What a lot of disappointment. The biggest disappointment of her young life, a life which was turning out to be taking a nasty nosedive after she'd been so sure she was on her way to soaring to the top. She didn't want to lead a department like this. This wasn't really science, this was ignorance and egotism. They couldn't control mako or materia with their stupid technology. They were humans, she was a human, they could only bow before its awesomeness and humbly try to understand it. Attempts to control it were blasphemy and arrogance. It had been arrogance that had brought down the old Shinra, that'd nearly brought down the world. Marlene wouldn't let that happen again, she decided.

This thought made her raise her head suddenly, her chin sore from laying against the desk's hard surface. Rubbing at it thoughtfully, she repeated herself. I won't let that happen again. I won't let that happen again. Hmm. She doubted her colleagues were as bad as all that, as bad as the staff that'd occupied the Shinra labs thirteen years ago, they weren't crazy, that was for sure, but still Marlene wondered. And then with a slight smile, she made up her mind.

"Screw them," she said out loud, propping her head up in her hands resolutely, "I'm gonna straighten them up. And I won't let them repeat the mistakes of thirteen years ago. I'll lead the WDD yet, I'll teach these asses the real value of materia and the Planet. These arrogant men need to learn that they can't control everything. They need to learn that sometimes it's enough, more than enough, just to be allowed to watch as miracles happen. You don't always have to be in control of them. It doesn't always have to be men's hands that cast the miracles."

Suddenly cheered, Marlene sat up straight, ignoring the protests of the old chair. She had a purpose, a goal, planted solidly in her mind again. The young woman was most comfortable this way. Life was so much simpler with goals. It was when these disappeared, or were achieved too fast, leaving her in a fog flailing around for a purpose, that her life sometimes felt achingly pointless. But not now. Now, she would become the WDD's, no, Shinra's top scientist. She'd show her entire species the error of their mode of thinking. And she'd do it with materia.

The summon materia that Bugah had given her flitted to her mind suddenly. Absently, she poked a hand beneath the desk and drew out her satchel, laying it open on the desktop. The gently glowing red orb rolled out onto her palm from the bag's bottom. She cupped her hand slightly, raising it closer to her eyes and hunching her entire form over the sphere. She felt like a thief. By the laws of the mako board, it was illegal for her to own this small summon, whatever it was. But she didn't care. It was a gift from her teacher and it was beautiful. Peering close beneath the surface, she saw the tightly curling spirals of mako hovering deep inside the materia, melting into each other in gorgeous snake-like patterns. The Planet is amazing, she thought to herself, awed by the sight before her eyes though she'd studied the countless materia in Bugah's collection since she was a child. I hold perfection in my hand. How can we humans every hope to surpass this?

Neto is an arrogant bastard. . .

They all are.

But it didn't matter. She'd teach them, it was that simple. That was just her purpose.

Reigning in her grand, ambitious thoughts, Marlene juggled the small summon back and forth in her hands, watching it sparkle contentedly. Whatever it summoned, it was something she'd never seen before. Usually she could identify any materia immediately, she'd used every summon, every spell known to exist at some point in her life, since Bugah had owned one of each and insisted she become a proficient magic-user. So she should have been able to name the summon materia in her hand as Odin, or Leviathan, or Knights of the Round. But no. It was something different. It called upon some anonymous entity who was unknown to the young woman, having never cast its like before. She itched to test it. It would be so easy to walk over to the mako chamber, slide the orb into one of the slots and watch through the thick leaded glass as the unknown summoned creature appeared and wreaked havoc in the empty air. It could be anything, she thought, her curiosity peaked. A God, or a monster, or a demon. Or even a big fat chocobo with a taste for blood. But she couldn't test it out now, her techs would be back from lunch at any moment. If she was caught with an unregistered summon, the mako board would seize it from her so quick her head'd spin. And then, as a special treat, they'd slap her in cuffs and haul her off

to jail for possession of illegal materia. Hmph. Rules sucked.

Oh, well, she thought lightly, tossing the orb back into her satchel and turning away to hunch over her reports again, another day. I wonder if Bugah knows what it summons. Of course he must, he's the one who found it. I should give him a call and ask. I doubt I want to go and test this sucker out in my apartment. The landlord might not appreciate me taking out the whole neighborhood and half the Sector. The thought made the young woman grin mischievously, and she proofread Neto's reports with merry eyes, her melancholy gone, her confidence returned.

Unknown to Marlene, on the other side of the wall directly before her, their movements muffled by soundproof insulation, CJ and Ifalna Strife dozed, their small backs pressed against the rough walls of their cage. Like an unmoving gargoyle, Vincent watched over them, his articulated claw twitching as he imagined the day, hopefully soon, when he would be free to tear the appendage through his oppressors' throats.

Chieko had just left from checking up on her prisoners. She'd gone about the task in her usual manner, managing to scare the hell out of the children by her sudden seeming appearance out of nowhere. She'd been paying more careful attention to her captive's lately, mainly out of a lack of anything better to do. The mako beast had been rather uninclined to hold a conversation with her these past few days for some reason, and Chieko's father hadn't called to see her in nearly a week. The large, lion-like creature was bored. She nearly wished the red-eyed man would attempt an escape, giving her something interesting to do, but she knew he was stupid and wouldn't leave the boy and girl behind. If he were willing to do that, he could have escaped days ago. The cage bars were old, rusted through in some places, simply nonexistent in others. It would have been an easy task for the man to knock out a bar and flee. But it isn't the bars holding the man captive, thought Chieko curiously, it is those wretched children, they are the real shackles. Her father'd been correct. Chieko had told him about the rusted cages and their inability to act as efficient prisons, but he'd only laughed carelessly. She knew why now. The red-eyed man wouldn't leave the children. The thought confused Chieko, but it disgusted her also. Weak humans. . .

More weak humans had spent all of the morning in the labs, causing the monster to keep herself hidden away behind the walls. They made loud noises and chattered about like chipmunks over whatever silly tasks they were performing. Chieko hadn't really paid much attention to them, they weren't important enough to deserve it. Now, however, she'd noticed much of the noise had died and the labs sounded quieter, nearly empty. Expressionless, she padded slowly down a hallway branching off from the cages and towards a closet-like space with a single ventilation grate. Standing on her hind legs, fore paws pressed firmly against the wall, she was able to look out through the grating and survey the mako room, squinting to make out the interior in the dim lighting. Nearly empty. Not quite. A thin, white-coated, long-haired scientist sat hunched over a desk, scribbling away. Chieko didn't recognize her. She knew all of the Shinra employees from the spying missions she'd sent herself on to alleviate her boredom, and the young woman's face before her was new. The creature cocked her head, her features softening in child-like curiosity

"Marlene Wallace. . ."

Her father's grating, strained voice drifted into Chieko's keen ears, answering her question. He approached her now, emerging from the shadows soundlessly. "Barret's brat, all grown up. . ."

Chieko didn't know who Barret was, but she nodded anyways. Her father was in a weird temper, a stranger frame of mind than usual. He regarded the frail young woman on the other side of the wall with disgust, maybe a little hostility. The creature looked through the grating at her again. She seemed harmless enough, her face young and naive beneath the crown of chestnut braids she wore. But her father knew all, while she knew nothing. Chieko accepted this fact without hesitation, preparing, if her father willed it, to make an enemy of this Marlene person. She moved a bit to the side as her father suddenly reared his head up and put an eye to the grating. The yellowed, misshapen eye roved in its socket, taking in the young woman's every feature. But then it widened in surprise as she did something it hadn't expected. Chieko looked out and saw the woman suddenly remove a small red orb from a pack at her feet, her hand cupping around it and her face staring eagerly down towards its red glow. Father gasped.

"What is it, sir?" Chieko asked fearfully. She'd never heard her father utter a cry of surprise before. Anger, loathing, disgust, sarcasm, sure but never surprise. The being beside her made a strange sort of slurping noise as it moved away from the grating. After a moment, he spoke.

"The Planet. . . is being a bitch, "he said in a high, pained tone, "It's created that shard of materia for a reason, Chieko. Oh, yes, it plans to use the orb against us. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. . ." The voice broke off into an insane giggle, then a rattling noise as her father fought to catch his breath, coughing a bit, then laughing some more. "But what will it summon against us? What does it matter? All it can do now is prolong the inevitable. Jenova is on the prowl. . . Chieko, are the children alive?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Vincent, how is he?"

"He's recovering from our battle. I'm afraid I was harsher on him than I should have been."

"Hmm. Nonsense. Jenova will not let him die. Not so easily."

Her father gave a strange little grunt, then began moving clumsily down the hall, vanishing in the darkness without a word of goodbye. Chieko watched him go, his violent chuckles sounding in her ears. After a moment, she heard humans again moving in to occupy the labs, their pathetic, mewling voices seeming to stain her ears as they discussed lunch and work and other human things. The creature turned her back to them and followed her father down the hallway, her footsteps silent and sure. Soon, father's plan would be complete and she'd be able to leave the awful confines of the lab and the Shinra building. As she'd dreamt of all her life, she'd be able to step into the light of the world, unafraid of its occupants, and roar at the sun.

~*~

Onward to Part Four: The Sixty-Eighth Floor

Things ain't looking up for anyone yet, eh? In fact, seems the world's going all to hell, heh heh. Never fear though, it's always darkest before the dawn. Or some optimistic crap like that. Part Four is an action feast with tons of the fighting that I've been building up to, so read on, mates.

Oh, and what do you think of Too Much In The Sun so far? Email me and let me know. If you don't I may just go and kill everyone off, mwa ha ha ha ^_^

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