



Part Four:
THE SIXTY-EIGHTH FLOOR

"That's the last of it, Lenny. . . "

The burly delivery man slapped the wooden crate unceremoniously on the ground. It made an alarming rattling sound upon impact and Lenny hoped to god that the bottles of liquor inside hadn't shattered. "Ya know, "he began, addressing the man in slight ire, "It says fragile on there for a reason."

The delivery man looked up from the clipboard he was scribbling on. He'd been dealing with irksome customers all day and was beginning to get a little tired of complaints. He glanced from the wooden crate, to Lenny, the owner of the seedy, dirty-looking bar they stood before, and then back again, his face expressionless. "I thought fragile was just a pretty word, "he said sarcastically, "A cute, floppy, squishy, pretty word. Working for a delivery service by trade, I of course would have no reason to know the meaning of such a cute, gut-wrenchingly beautiful two-syllable gem. I play it by ear. I live on the edge. The box may be marked with a cute little fragile, but such trivialities matter not to me. It is only--"

"Enough already!" cried Lenny, throwing his hands up into the air, "Just let me sign for the god damn thing and you can scam." The delivery man gestured to a line on the receipt and Lenny signed his name in annoyance, muttering about how cheeky the younger generation was becoming.

Once the van was pulling away from his tavern, the driver pleased with his wit, Lenny shouldered the deliveries and headed towards his business. His customers would be happy to see him, he knew. They'd drank him dry the past few days, his small bar crowded with the newly unemployed steel workers of Sector Seven. They sought a bit of alcohol to ease their worries and Lenny was dishing it out like water. He felt it his public responsibility as a citizen of Midgar to ease the sufferings of his fellows, even if the easing put gil in his pocket. That just happened to be a convenient little side-effect.

Grunting under the weight of the crated bottles, Lenny puffed his way around the corner and turned into the alleyway between his tavern and the item shop next door. He wouldn't dare enter his bar through the front, he had a feeling he might get mobbed. The alley stank under the heat of the afternoon sun. The rays pounded the trash stacked there, rotting the unspeakable litter crammed into the crowded trash bins and causing putrid fumes to rise from it. Old apple cores, sticky beer bottles, and rancid beef, their respective smells creating a symphony of stench that the flies buzzed through, thick and merciless. Frowning, Lenny turned his nose up, searching for a clear stream of air. He really needed to do something about this alley. Even the rats were beginning to get disgusted. Leaning heavily against one of the walls, balancing his packages precariously in one hand, he reached around and opened up his tavern's side door, barely whipping about in time to catch the crates as they nearly toppled away from him. He was about to stumble inside and deposit the clumsy load on the ground, then swear a whole lot to get his stress out, when a muted movement from his left caught the corner of his eye. Warily, he turned his head to look.

Nearly ten feet down the alley, slumped at the base of the brick wall there, a figure lay upon the cement. Scowling, Lenny dropped the crates just inside the doorway, then whipped about and jutted his fists into his hips. "You can't sleep here!" he called in annoyance, "Go find a park bench somewhere, ya lowlife." He got no response from the fellow, only a low, muffled groan. Damn transients, the bar-owner spat to himself, They're ruining Midgar, I swear. Or if nothing else, littering up perfectly good alleys.

Cursing, he stepped towards the prone figure, ready to place a few well-aimed kicks in the man's sides to get him moving. Before he could make even a movement though, the figure sat up suddenly, as though waking from a bad dream. Lenny watched him, eyes narrowed in caution.

Cloud returned to consciousness with a painful snap, his body numb, his face on fire, his mind raw. He couldn't remember passing out. Only. . . only lying there after his attacker had left him, lying there thinking, wondering. He tried to open his eyes and found he couldn't. Some force pulled at the lids and lashes, welding them together. He heard a sudden hostile voice cry out towards him and had to fight down a feeling of panic. His hands shot up towards his eyes, fighting to free them from their confinement. When his bare fingers met the flesh of his face however, he froze. He was covered in dried, caked blood. It coated his face, had run into his eyes and hardened there. He rubbed at them, the gore flaking and falling away sickeningly, until his eyelids were able to pull free and he saw the world about him again, the sun glaring, the

alleyway looming, and some anonymous figure approaching him in curiosity. Lenny watched the stranger's actions suspiciously. With all that blood, it'd looked at first as though the man on the cement had been wearing some sort of crimson-colored mask, but Lenny realized with horror what it truly was, then saw the unbearable gash that spread across his face, yawning deep, dark, and still oozing red.

"Are you alright, pal?" he called hesitantly. Cloud ignored him. Vision cleared now, though mind still muddled, he searched around for Ultima Weapon. Once his hand wrapped around the massive sword's worn hilt, he used the blade to push himself slowly to his feet. Poisoning made his head spin, and loss of blood weakened his limbs. But he didn't care.

"You want a doctor, man? I mean, there's a phone inside. This is my bar, right here. . . you look pretty messed up. . ."
"Lenny's voice trailed away as Cloud stood motionless before him. The bar-owner tried to stand his ground, though the blood-covered man almost seemed to be Hades himself. Finally, Cloud spoke, his voice calm but strained.

"What time is it?"

Lenny shook his head in disbelief, but looked down at his wristwatch hastily. "Nearly three-thirty," he replied.

Cloud seemed to consider this for a moment, his bright blue eyes blank as he stared off ahead. Finally, he began trudging forward, careful not to move his mouth, turn his head, or blink too hard. The slightest movement made a fire burn in his face. He could feel the gash's trail, a horrible path that snaked from his hairline, down over his left eye, cutting deep through his cheek, so deep he could taste blood in his mouth, knowing that Masamune had plunged straight through to the inside. The gash curved away, following the line of his jaw, ending finally at his ear. Talking was excruciating. The only thing worse was the nagging in his mind that he knew just what shape had been carved upon his face. He passed Lenny without a glance, leaning heavily upon Ultima Weapon, his eyes unblinking and staring straight ahead. The bar-owner backed away in fear. There was something about this fellow that was wrong, he knew, something beyond his hideous appearance, something in his gaze, his walk, his demeanor. He turned and fled into his bar shutting the door tight behind him. Cloud stumbled forward. He was late for work.

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"He ain't come back yet? Hm. I know. Don't worry, honey, he just needs some time to figure things out right fer himself. He ain't like you, Tifa, he can be strong, ya know, but only strong in certain ways, strong with gettin' revenge and swipin' people's heads off. He can't be strong up top, too many things have attacked 'im there, ya know? Weakened defenses, weakened offenses up top. Yeah, I know you know. Cheeky. Call me when you hear from him, 'kay? He won't be gone long, I have a feelin'. Love ya too, bye."

With a deep, disturbed frown, Barret hung up the PHS and stashed it away in his jacket. He hadn't told Tifa that her husband had nearly cut his throat that morning and that was why he'd run off without a word. Tifa didn't need to know that, she had enough things on her mind with CJ and Ifalna.

"Man ain't back yet, eh?"

Barret looked up, his eyes distant. Cid Highwind sat slouched across from him, legs propped casually on his airship's control panel, steering the Highwind merrily along with his feet on the wheel. There was an easy grin on his face, but there always was. His eyes however, from what could be seen behind the cloud of cigarette smoke attempting to conceal them, were bright with concern.

"No, he ain't back yet and Tifa's gettin' frantic. He never showed up at work this morning and no one's seen him. I don't know where he could be. Stupid spiky freak, why's he doing this to her? And to 'imself?"

Barret kicked the wall of the ship and Cid shot him a glare.

"Hey there, tall, dark, and brutish, watch yer damn foot. You put a dent in my baby and I'll take off yer head." In rather poor taste though he wasn't aware of it, Cid made a quick slicing motion across his own throat and eyed his friend darkly, "Why you worrying about the Strifes, man? You haven't given two shits about the lot of them for years, now you're all concerned over Cloud's mental health. Man, Barret, you need to made up your mind."

"Shaddup, Cid. It don't matter anymore anyway. I'm outta that stink-hole Midgar and heading home. Let the passel of loonies figure it out fer themselves."

"You just left your first born in that 'stink-hole Midgar' ya know."

"Don't remind me. Marlene's smart though, like her daddy. She knows to stay outta that mess."

Cid didn't reply, instead turning his gaze out towards the wide expanse of sky visible through the Highwind's large fore window. The day was beautiful, the heavens such a bright, vibrant, living shade of blue that it made the airship pilot wish

he was in one of his numerous planes, flying low over the fields below, soaring through the fleece of clouds, and scaring the shit out of the geese as they honked by. And by rights, he should have been out there racking up miles. He was on vacation that week, his flight crew off with their families, his airship's hold bereft of cargo. He did freelance delivery work now, toting adventurers and their stuff from one corner of the planet to another, occasionally pitching in a hand to help them with their aims. He catered mainly to scientists, geologists and treasure hunters, they being among the few who could actually afford him, but he did occasionally transport stuff for Shinra. Of course, he'd cut out his tongue before he ever told Barret that.

"So, you wanna go to Gold Saucer or what?" Cid asked the question impatiently. He'd agreed to fly his friend home, generously cutting into his own vacation time, but he would've like some compensation. A little fun was always nice.

Barret grinned. The pilot had been bugging him about going ever since he'd stepped foot onto the ship an hour ago.

"Why you wanna go? So I can bust you up at Battle Square again?"

"Woah-ho, them be fighting words! Old man, if I remember correctly, I beat you by about 3000 BP last time. You were on the floor underneath that serpent yelling to the guy outside to come in and end the fight. You got totaled, man. That's bad when you can help save the planet but you get your ass whooped in the Battle Arena." Cid grinned and Barret rolled his dark eyes.

"Ya only did so well 'cause Cloud lent you his damned Ribbon, you cheating bastard. You were slamming away at the monsters while I got zapped into a frog. After that I was jus' too busy trying to keep from getting made into frog-cakes under that big guy's feet. Geez, Cid, I don't know if I feel like turning into a frog today, maybe we shouldn't go." Barret looked away. He hated when he got turned into a frog. Actually hate didn't really cover it. He despised it. There was probably nothing more humiliating in the world. Except maybe getting shrunk and then having a chocobo try to eat you. That was certainly not one of Barret's favorite memories.

"Well, we could just go hang out, watch a play, mess around in Wonder Square."

"What play?"

Cid grinned. "What else? They're putting on Loveless. I haven't seen it in years. . . "

"Hmph, I'll pass, thanks. That shit's about as excitin' as your bed on a Saturday night."

"That's damned exciting then, "Cid laughed, scratching at his hairline beneath the pair of flight goggles he had pushed up to keep his bangs out of his face. "Speaking of bedroom action, old man, when was the last time you got any, eh? I, at least, am married. And I got three kids to prove Shera and I know what we're doing."

"Damn, can ya be any cruder?"

The pilot blinked in surprise, an innocent expression passing over his features. "Me? I thought I was approaching the topic rather tactfully, actually."

"I don't see how it's any of yer damn business. I had a wife. And I'm still faithful to her. It may not hold true for every man, but I know that I personally found the love of my life long ago and she was one of a kind, the only woman for me. She's gone now, and she can't be replaced. So I ain't lookin'." Barret eyed the floor of the airship, his arms crossed huffily and his frown deep, a frown that revealed from the corrugated forehead and hunched eyebrows accompanying it that he didn't like the topic. And Cid knew not to carry it any farther than that. He and Barret had been fast friends ever since they'd met that day in Rocket Town, Barret, Cloud and the others finding him sulking in Shinra No. 26. Their first encounter hadn't been the most pleasant (Cid had cursed them all out for having the gall to want to borrow his airplane) but even then, he and Barret had shared a wink. They were both practical, no-nonsense types, the ones who had managed to keep their feet on the ground during the entire Meteor incident. They'd kept in touch afterwards, and Barret had even been Cid's best man when he was married.

Cid sighed, but he did so quietly. He was rather concerned for his friend. With Marlene gone, he didn't think it was so great for Barret to be living by himself in Cosmo Canyon. He needed someone. Cid sat back thoughtfully, running the list of eligible females that he knew over in his mind, despite what the man had claimed. There were quite a few of them in Rocket Town, their fathers always bitching to the Captain to find them husbands. He didn't really understand that, he was the mayor, not the god damned village matchmaker. But his town lacked young men, most left for Midgar or Wutai as soon as they were old enough. Rocket Town, its rocket long gone, was fast shrinking in worldly importance. The Highwinds would never leave, no way. He and his family would call the village their own with their dying breaths, but he knew that it wouldn't be long until the place of his birth was a ghost town, a random assortment of houses and buildings left abandoned to collect the dust. Cid sighed again, only this one was audible.

"What's wrong, man?" Barret asked, cocking his head to one side curiously. The pilot shook off his brief melancholy and chuckled to set his friend's mind at ease.

"Just thinking of stuff," he said, smiling again.

"Well, thinkin' of stuff is dangerous. I know a lot of people that should do less thinkin', and more actin'."

"And I know people who should do less acting, more thinking. There ain't no one I know that can balance the two very well. Even Shera thinks too much. Shera thinks way too much."

"Bah. Screw it." Barret slumped his chin in his hands, staring dejectedly out the window. The pilot growled at the sight.

"Would you stop thinking about that wonky Cloud?" he asked suddenly, standing and grasping the airship's controls in his hands. "Lighten the hell up, you're bringing me down."

"What? I didn't say any--"

"You don't need to. You're sitting there, all moping like a fool, saying these things as if I didn't know who the hell you were referin' to. If you're not going to help them, just let the Strife's handle it."

"Oh, what, you mean like they left me to handle Marlene by myself all those years ago?" Barret asked the question bitterly and Cid's mouth turned into a wide "O" of discovery and surprise at hearing it. He reverted back to his normal grin almost immediately. Nodding his head slowly towards his friend, Cid winked as though in possession of some huge secret.

"I get it now," he said slyly, "I get why you keep harping on this. You feel guilty. . ."

"No, I don't!"

"Oh, yes you do. They helped you help Marlene thirteen years ago, and now you're turning tail on Tifa and Cloud while their own kids are in danger now. Damn, I'm good. I feel like Sigmund Freud or something."

"You don't know shit about shit," spat Barret, sinking his head between his shoulders and sulkily crossing his arms. "Don't be pschoanalyzin' me, ya flyin' fuck. I'm going home because my business in Midgar is done. My kid's there, settled down, doing fine, and I got work waiting for me back at the Canyon. End o' story. Finito."

"You liar," hissed Cid, jerking around, suddenly angry at Barret's attitude, "You yellow little liar. You ain't got nothing to do in Cosmo Canyon. You're just going back there so ya can grieve over Marlene and sulk about. If your pride'd let you, you'd stay in Midgar and help out, but ya won't. You'd rather have the whole world feeling sorry for ya, and have the people in Cosmo Canyon, and then Red, you'd rather make their lives miserable. I see your whole blasted plan. You've got great ideas of ways to make the world suffer just 'cause your daughter's left you finally. And it's started with Tifa, hasn't it? You've left that poor woman alone without a person to talk to. Alone in her big old house with Cloud feeling too sorry for himself to be of any comfort. You should be ashamed, puttin' your own petty problem above your friend's real one. But then, then not admittin' what you're doing, that's the worst of all."

Throughout his friend's lecture, Barret had sat motionless, shocked that Cid would speak so harshly towards him. He hadn't thought he'd been so terribly miserable since stepping onto the airship. Hell, he'd even attempted to be jovial to the bastard, asking him about life and love and aeronautics, but it seemed Cid just wasn't buying it. After the last of his words hung there in the air, challenging Barret to dispute them, the man looked up towards the pilot, his eyes hard.

"So what?" he said.

"So what?" Cid repeated, nearly gibbering in shock, "So what? So do something about it! Either help Cloud out, look for his kids, be a pal to him, or. . . or go to the Gold Saucer with me. Just do something 'sides what I know you're planning on doing: sitting in your damned house and sulking. Ya just said that you didn't like people who thought too much. Well, old man, if ya weren't black already, I'd say you were either the pot or the kettle."

The two men laughed at the little joke, easing the tension between them just a bit. But then Barret's frown returned and he sighed, wishing things were as simple as they'd once been.

"So, what's it going to be?" Cid stood, one hand on the Highwind's controls, the other jammed aggravated in the pocket of his flight jacket. He hoped that his friend would choose to go back to Midgar. That was the honorable thing to do. Their friends needed him. But the pilot knew that Barret's damned pride was too thick, his will too stubborn, and his head too far up his ass to see this. His next words proved it.

"I'll go to Gold Saucer with you," he said, trying to sound at ease, "No Battle Arena though. Some chocobo racing, some Wonder Square, fine. But the frog thing just isn't going to fly today." The two friends chuckled together at the words, but both laughs were false. From their faces, they didn't look like two people who really wanted to spend the day in a fun park filled with rides, games, and little kids. Cid at least, was glad he wouldn't have to worry about Barret sitting depressed and alone in Cosmo Canyon that night.

"Are you sure though?" he asked, eyeing his friend with one blonde eyebrow arched. "'Cause I've already made up my mind about it. As soon as we're done, I'm gonna drop you off, speed home, grab Shera and the kids and get back to Midgar. I ain't gonna abandon Cloud and Tifa. Or Vincent, as nutty and cold as he is. I'm gonna help 'em find him and the kids. . ."

"Don't try and talk me into that non--"

". . . 'Cause they'd do the same for me. . ."

"--Sense. I gave you my god damned answer, now get off my back a--"

". . . And you."

Barret shut up under the force of the words, then glanced at the floor again, unable to meet Cid's gaze. The pilot turned away, his eyes again wandering out the wide window at the fore of his ship, while his friend was only able to sit and wonder at the events of the day. He was seeing Cloud again, Ultima Weapon in hand, lunging for his throat like a beast attacking. No recognition in his face, no compassion, no conscience. It'd been frightening and Barret was only now beginning to get over the shock of it and recall the event with clarity. He'd nearly died. He'd nearly fallen victim to his friend's insanity. But he was still alive, still breathing to have the opportunity to talk to Cid, to be sitting there on the Highwind, to be on his way to spend GP at the Gold Saucer. Cloud had stopped himself, fighting down the demon inside of him. Just as he had all those years ago at the City of Ancients, when it had been Aeris Gainsborough kneeling beneath the point of his sword. Barret recalled the scene with startling accuracy, seeing again the eerie blue light reflected off the water, the sound of the gently lapping waves and the faint foreign murmur of the Ancients. It had been Sephiroth who'd controlled his actions then. Barret wondered if something else was controlling Cloud now. As strange as it sounded, he hoped to God that was the case. If it wasn't some foreign presence corrupting his friend's mind, then the only explanation for his actions was insanity, that the man had finally gone over the edge. But Barret wouldn't accept such an answer. He was sure that Cloud was stronger than that.

Cid watched the ground speed by, the Highwind casting an impressive shadow over the landscape. Watching the shadow flickering over the terrain gave the pilot a sense of accomplishment, knowing that if he was doing nothing else, he was at least scarfing down the miles. Up ahead the gaudy, hulking shape of the Gold Saucer hovered at the horizon's edge, the heated yellow sands of the desert spreading about its every side like a skirt. The atmosphere in the Highwind wasn't exactly a frivolous one. The two aggravated men inside didn't seem in a very festive mood, they certainly weren't grinning in the way that most of the Gold Saucers customers did on the ride there. But Cid figured it really didn't matter, as long as he was getting Barret to do something. In the distance, that ugly golden statue of Dio waved at him, and Cid swore he saw it wink, as though it knew something he didn't.

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The sound was lilting, dangerously beautiful, like a siren's song it called to him, tempting him to go and join the singer beneath waves of peace and stillness. He was so ready to follow, so ready to leave behind a life of aggravation, annoyances, pettiness, but something pulled at the back of his mind, reminding him that what he heard wasn't real, it didn't really care for him. Hesitantly at first, then with more and more determination, he hauled himself away from the sound, its tentacles clawing at his mind and leaving gashes as he ripped them away. Then, finally, he was free.

"Nanaki!"

The fiery-furred beast tore himself away from the model of the Planet with visible agony, snapping backwards and landing ungainly on the floor of the observatory. Elder Bugah stood over him, his lips pursed, his brow creased in worry. "Are you alright?"

"Yes. Headache though," he grunted, shaking his head to rid it of the creepy black fuzziness in the corners of his vision.

"You should be proud, you were able to pull yourself away without any help that time. Soon you'll be able listen to the Planet without suffering any of these side-effects, ill as they are."

"Yes, well, in the meantime, I want an aspirin and a mug of tea."

"No, in the meantime, tell me what you heard, you great selfish cub." Bugah said the words harshly, but affectionately, stooping down and pushing his student onto his four feet roughly. Nanaki sighed. It seemed they'd been watching the Planet forever, observing its patterns and listening to its cries of rage and still they had nothing to show for it, no explanations, no cause, nothing. They hadn't left the platform of the machine or Bugenhagen's observatory in nearly two days, having all their meals brought to them and their bedclothes set up against the wall. Nanaki wished that Marlene was there to help out, he knew she would have loved such an immersion in his grandfather's contraption.

"It wasn't just random screaming this time. It. . . it said something," Nanaki began, uncertain if he'd even heard correctly. Bugah's face lit up in so much joy at these words that the wrinkles around his eyes all bunched together and consumed them.

Leaning closer to his student, he whispered, "What was it? Tell me quick!"

Nanaki wasn't so eager to say the things he thought he'd heard. In his mind, there was nothing about them to bring excitement. The Planet was pissed, he and Bugah had been able to discern that easily enough. Nanaki also thought he heard a vengeful snigger erupting from the LifeStream, but Bugah had only chuckled and shook his head when he'd been told. The Elder strongly believed that the Planet was not sentient, that its defenses were all automatically triggered, set to strike solely in the name of self-preservation. But it had been the LifeStream that Nanaki had heard muttering about revenge, not the soulless Planet that it inhabited. The red beast was beginning to tire of hearing the two grouped together as one. In his mind, they were separate. With this last argument still fresh in his mind, he was rather hesitant to fill Bugah's order and tell him what he'd heard

"You won't believe me," he mumbled, turning away from his teacher. Bugah frowned and shook his head.

"Maybe not. Nanaki, you've only begun to practice listening to the cries of our Planet. If I don't exactly believe all that you think you hear, you mustn't feel bitter about it. It takes time, patience, and experience to be able to interpret everything you hear correctly. Why it was almost twenty years before I. . ."

Blah, blah, blah. . . Nanaki stared past his teacher at a little spot on the wall beyond. If Bugah knew so much about all that stuff, why didn't he do all the listening his damned self? All the screams in Nanaki's sensitive feline ears were beginning to grate his nerves. They weren't as bad as when the screams penetrated through to his mind, but still, an annoyance was an annoyance.

Sudden quiet made him look up. Bugah had stopped lecturing and now stood glaring down upon him with his tiny wrinkled hands shoved into his sides.

"If you're not going to listen to me, then I'd appreciate it if you told me before I even begin so I can save my breath. Alright? Alright, well, I suppose since I'm so uninteresting and dull, you should try making conversation. What did the Planet say to you, Son of Seto?"

Nanaki shuffled his paws nervously, watching the ground like a scolded kid. He might as well tell his teacher what he wanted to hear. "I heard the LifeStream say," he began, putting special emphasis on the word LifeStream, "I heard it say 'The disease is awake. It must be severed.' Or something." He cleared his throat and would have blushed if he wasn't already naturally such a deep reddish color. Bugah looked upon him skeptically but before he could reply, Nanaki continued. "There's more. It was the LifeStream that said that, you can tell because the voice isn't one voice, but rather a whole slew of them speaking at once. The Planet never speaks at all, it only screams or cries like an animal without a vocabulary. But I heard something else in there just now too though. A different voice. Not the Planet, not the LifeStream. . . different. A man's voice. It kept screaming, like something were hurting him, but then it stopped. He told the LifeStream, at least, I think he told the LifeStream that he'd help it. And then. . . and then. . ."

"Out with it!" cried Bugah nearly jumping up and down.

"He said that Jenova would die!" Nanaki spat these last words out hurriedly, afraid of the name he'd had to say. He sat back on his haunches, nearly panting. Bugah watched him for a moment, eyes blank, turning over his student's words in his mind. He had a look on his face as though he'd just sampled some wine and was swishing it around in his mouth to see whether he liked it or not. Finally, he nodded in grim satisfaction.

"I believe you, Nanaki. It makes sense what you say. The reappearance of Jenova now would explain all of the disturbances we've recorded. I think what you've said about the Planet feeling vengeance towards it however, seems rather far fetched, I do believe that it may be preparing its defenses again, but then we really don't know. I thought you told me you and your friends defeated Jenova directly before destroying Sephiroth."

"We did, Elder. I could have sworn we did. She wasn't much of a challenge either, she seemed rather willing to die, as though wanting us to hurry and finish with her so we could move on to her son, er, I mean Sephiroth. Guess she thought we didn't have a chance against him. Hmph."

"Well, if we believe what you think you heard, than that evil is still alive and ready to resurface again. I don't know why. One would think she'd move on to another world by now, seeing how she's never been able to conquer this one. . . by the gods. . . I don't know if this Planet or its people are ready to deal with that again. I don't know if I am." The older man sat down hard on the machine's platform, eyes distant as he watched the beautiful blue light of the room reflecting off the floor. Nanaki thought he looked very old and tired in that instant. He approached his teacher, nudging him gently in the shoulder with his wet, black nose.

"It's alright, Elder, we've dealt with Jenova before. We took her out once, we can do it again. Besides, that great 'Calamity from the sky' is a coward. She uses other people to achieve her aims, and even then she prefers to run a puppet show rather than an army. I'm not scared of her. And the LifeStream seems to have an ally."

"Ally?"

Nanaki shook his head and offered forth a cattish grin, his beads and earrings rattling merrily. "That voice I heard, it seemed so sad, but it seemed so earnest, ready to fight and end Jenova. And Elder, it seemed very powerful."

Bugah rose to his feet slowly, his bones popping loudly in the still air, and made his way over to the ancient machine's control console. He pushed a few buttons on its surface, wound a few dials, and soon a circular screen mounted into the observatory's walls flickered rhythmically and then began to glow a bright, luminescent green that lit up the features of the two creatures watching it eerily. Nanaki blinked a few times to adjust to the harsh green light, then gasped as he realized what he was looking at.

"LifeStream?" he asked, his voice a whispered growl. "I didn't know we could see inside it from here."

"Oh, yes, we've just never really had the need. Look closely, Nanaki, because your grandfather never liked to use this view screen, and after today, I will probably never use it again. I also dislike spying inside the LifeStream. It's rather like spying into other creature's minds. Do you see all of those people, Son of Seto? Souls of mako energy, their living days done with, their minds occupy their own personal Promised Lands now and they exist in states of happiness and satisfaction, toils done with, pain forgotten. Looking in on them now is rather like looking through a peephole into heaven."

Nanaki stared up at the screen as Bugah worked the controls and the view occasionally changed. He saw many people but their features were blurred and there was very little to distinguish one from the other. Their shapes in fact, were hard to make out at all and he had to squint his one good eye hard to do so. Mainly, it seemed one endless sea of green, broken only by the souls' faint murmurings and mutters. He wondered where his grandfather was, if he'd been reunited with his grandmother and Seto and Aeris. The thought nearly brought a small tear to the creature's eye.

The quiet murmurs emanating from the crowd began to grow suddenly in a very familiar way, and Nanaki's headache, which had nearly begun to fade away, now returned and he winced painfully. The LifeStream was growing angry.

"It should be angry and want revenge," he found himself saying suddenly. "It's the one that saved us all from Meteor, and perhaps it's tired and doesn't want to have to do it again."

"Nonsense," Bugah snapped, "The Planet is simply ill at ease because of Jenova's presence. And don't say such dreadful things, there'll not be another Meteor, the Black Materia is gone." The Elder fiddled with the controls a bit more and they moved farther and farther into the LifeStream, Nanaki wondering what they were looking for. A stray noise caught his keen ear suddenly, something sounding very familiar. The sound frightened him and he stood up, hairs bristling.

"Elder," he growled fiercely, causing Bugah to whip around in wonder at the hostility, "Go left. Move the view to the left." The older man complied, not asking for a reason, but smiling slightly as though he'd been expecting the command. Nanaki kept his eyes glued on the screen as the disturbing stray voice grew closer and closer. Finally, even Bugah, with his ancient ears, could pick up on it and steered them towards it carefully.

"There. There. You see?"

In the center of the circular screen, the teacher and his student were able to observe one lone soul, its outline faint like all the rest but its face turned down to the ground, chin resting on its chest in a gesture of despair and pain. None of the other spirits dared to approach it, but rather kept their distance, shrinking back as though there were an invisible barrier around it. Bugah zoomed the view closer and frowned in recognition. The voice that Nanaki had heard a little time before belonged to this alienated soul. That voice declaring it would help defeat Jenova. Though the spirit's lips didn't move with the words it uttered, Nanaki recognized its face and tone suddenly and knew that the voice could have come from no other.

"That's. . . "Nanaki gulped, "That's Sephiroth."

"Even he has a soul, Son of Seto."

They watched the wavering green figure standing in isolation, his spirit hands wrapped protectively around his chest, his face turned to the ground as he murmured nearly incoherent words about Jenova, Meteor, and the Planet.

"Is he still insane? Even now?" Nanaki asked, feeling nauseous at the sight of him. Bugah shook his head sadly.

"No. Just guilty. He bears the guilt of things that intrinsically weren't even his fault. He cannot find peace. His body is dead, yes, but his mind and memories stay with him. Despite all the evil he did in life, he seems to now be trying to repent by not allowing himself to become lost in the bliss of his Promised Land. He won't forgive himself, instead wallowing in every evil deed he ever did, probably reliving every murder he committed. Instead of letting himself have the Promised Land that the Planet is only too ready to offer, even to him, he has forged his own personal Hell."

Nanaki couldn't stop himself from uttering his next words.

"Poor Sephiroth."

But he immediately shook his head. That wasn't right, that madman deserved everything he got and more besides. He'd

nearly wiped out the world and everyone in it.

"I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong, Nanaki. It was Hojo, Shinra, and Jenova who caused the events of thirteen years ago. Sephiroth was a puppet, his strings attached to this limbs before he was even born. His life was hell, his death shouldn't be a continuation of that. He deserves peace now. I wish there was some way I could give it to him."

Nanaki shook his head slightly but didn't argue his teacher's words. Bugah hadn't seen in person what Sephiroth had done so long ago. He hadn't had friends die by his hand, or watched as he'd manipulated Cloud, laughing in insane hysterics all the while.

"He's the one you just heard offer his help to the Planet."

"The LifeStream won't accept his help. Look, the souls there won't even go near him."

Bugah sighed, beginning to shut down their view screen into the heart of the Planet. "Well, then, if the Planet won't trust him than that ally you spoke of doesn't exist. We'll have to handle this on our own." Nanaki watched as the view screen slowly flickered away, the green glow dying. He kept his good eye focused on that one lone soul, standing like a desolate island amidst the sea green spirits of humanity, his shoulders hunched, his back bent in grief. So alone in life, and still alone in death, for an eternity. Then the image died and the circular screen faded to black.

"So, Son of Seto, it seems our next course of actions is fairly clear. According to the machines, the Planet's cries are focused mainly about Midgar. That's where the disturbance is most profound, most pronounced. Now that we know Jenova's return is the cause of the Planet's distress, we're able to put two and two together and assume that Jenova is in Midgar. Does that sound feasible?"

Nanaki nodded blankly, not looking up at the man and Bugah nearly fumed. His student wasn't paying attention again and it was starting to get on his nerves. The older man kicked him hard in his right foreleg, then cuffed him upside the head, actually cutting his own hand on Nanaki's forehead in the process. The red creature snarled.

"What in blazes was that for?"

"You're not paying attention, you overgrown kitty cat! I don't speak just to hear myself talk, you know!" Bugah looked so funny with his face beet red and his hands clenched at his sides that Nanaki just had to chuckle, glad to do so after how miserable he'd suddenly began to feel upon seeing that lonely ostracized soul in the LifeStream.

"Perhaps if you weren't so scientific about everything that you say, Elder," he remarked, trying to keep the growl from his voice. Bugah looked on him blankly, his fists unclenching.

"What do you want from me? I'm a blasted scientist! Would you rather I speak like an accountant, or a lawyer, or a waiter? I wonder sometimes, Nanaki, if you take life seriously enough."

"You take it too seriously," the red beast retorted, beginning to pace the small room, the flame at the end of his lengthy tail throwing about weird shadows.

"You're impossible," Bugah sighed wearily, following after his student, "But it seems that Cosmo Canyon is in need of your impossibleness once again."

Nanaki froze, turning around and eyeing the Elder in surprise. "How do you mean?"

"You're going to Midgar, Son of Seto. You have to go and survey the situation. You can take the dessert transport when it comes the day after tomorrow and you can stay with Marlene. I know that'll make you happy, if nothing else."

A grin on his face, Nanaki tackled Bugah, knocking him to the ground and nearly licking his wrinkled old face like a puppy. The Elder pushed him off impatiently, trying to get to his feet but failing.

"Stop that at once, I say! This isn't a pleasure trip! You're going to Midgar to try and save the world! Get off of me, you great oaf!" Nanaki complied, then began leaping about the observatory, bouncing off of the models of the planets as though they were stepping stones across a pond. "Quit leaping across the universe like that, ya great supernova. Get down here and let me brief you on what needs to be done."

His movements jerky and aggravated, Bugah hastily shut off the machine, the blue lights disappearing and the platform gently lowering back to the level of the observatory. Above their heads, the inner lights that illuminated the models faded away and soon they were surrounded only by the very mundane mid-afternoon sun of Cosmo Canyon. Nanaki stood by the Elder's side, calmer now, but his tail still twitching excitedly at the thought of visiting Midgar and Marlene again. He might even get to meet with Cloud and Tifa, and he hadn't seen them in nearly two years, not since a very bad attempt at a reunion of the old gang. It had been Tifa's idea and everyone had been invited, but only she, Nanaki, Cloud, and Cid had actually shown up. The three humans had seen fit to drink themselves into a merry mess while Nanaki had snuck upstairs and played with CJ, Ifalna and Cait Sith, the robot claiming he had very little liking of the sake that Yuffie Kisaragi had sent over in her place.

"Do you hear that?"

Nanaki looked up at the Elder as the two were making their way outside, shaking off his old reminiscences. It sounded like very large motors, but there were no such things in Cosmo Canyon, the entire place powered by the immense wind mills even now revolving in the strong November breeze. Still, the motors sounded very familiar to the red beast's ears and he felt he should have recognized them. He and Bugah arrived at the balcony looking down towards the front entrance of the Canyon and both gazed out onto the view below, Nanaki grinning as a twenty foot long, scantily clad lady waved at him from the canyon floor.

"Oh, my. . ." Bugah breathed, immediately swinging his small form out onto the ladder leading down. Nanaki deftly leapt from cliff to cliff in a much more efficient manner, reaching the bottom in mere seconds.

"It's Lady Luck, Elder!" he cried happily to his teacher, "It's the Highwind! It's Cid!" Nanaki ran up to the ship, Cosmo Canyon's other residents following him timidly, curious at this intrusion into their rather monotonous scholarly existences. A door opened in the immense airship's side, stairs were lowered and suddenly Cid Highwind appeared carrying a giant stuffed mog, a brand new Champion Belt, and a few balloons, along with a couple other prizes. He deposited the lot carefully on the ground, slapping a gloved hand to the small of his back and groaning cheerfully at Nanaki's approach.

"Greetings, Cid!"

"How ya doing there, Red? Long time no see, ya know?"

"Hurt your back? "Nanaki called, seeing how his friend was standing. The pilot shook his head.

"Nah, that's just one giant stuffed mog, let me tell you."

Cid stood looking down at his four-legged, fiery furred pal, amazed at how he never seemed to age. He figured that to Nanaki, he must seem rather pitiful with his short, human lifespan.

"Where have you been to arrive with all these prizes? Gold Saucer?"

"Yup. Barret and I spent the afternoon in there. It was, ah . . . interesting." Face nearly splitting in two with the smile, the pilot burst into raucous laughter, holding onto his sides now, rather than his back.

"What's so hilarious, Mr. Highwind?" Bugah called, finally arriving to stand before their visitor. Cid looked at the little man gleefully and shook his head, too full of laughter to speak. "Where is Barret? Is he with you? He wasn't supposed to be back until tomorrow. How is Marlene doing?" Cid just laughed harder at his questions, vaguely gesturing to the breast pocket of his flight jacket as though to answer him. Bugah looked towards the pocket with one eyebrow raised and saw that something was squirming about inside.

"You fellows didn't fight in the Battle Arena, did you?" Nanaki asked, tail flickering suspiciously. Instead of answering, Cid chuckled again, unsnapping his pocket and pulling something out that squirmed and fought in his hand. He held it out to Bugah, Nanaki, and the villagers so they could see.

A small, dark green frog rested there, hopping about in the pilot's palm in a terrible temper, glaring up at the figures surrounding him evilly. Cid tried to scratch it between the eyes but the frog only snapped at him, hopping off his hand and landing on the dusty ground. It sat there grumpily.

"Welcome home, Barret, "Bugah said in all earnestness. Cid cracked up again, and Nanaki laughed too, feeling sorry for his friend, but glad to laugh after the seriousness of his morning.

"They were all out of Maiden's Kiss at the Battle Arena, "Cid explained through chuckles, "But they gave him 500 GP as compensation with their apologies. It was great."

"Well, we'd better fix him up here before he gets a complex and starts eating flies, "Nanaki said merrily. "Hey, Marie, come give Barret a kiss."

The girl spoken to was standing in the back row of the crowd and she approached now upon hearing her name cried out. She was about nine years old, with pig tails and a mouth full of bubble gum. She stood for a moment near Nanaki's shoulder, looking down on Barret in disgust.

"You want me to kiss that?" she asked, pointing a finger and making a face.

"I'm afraid it's the only way to cure Frog status, "Nanaki said, grinning fiercely. Barret hopped around a bit, kicking up dust and trying not to let out a croak. There were a few bugs on the ground nearby, but he fought back the urge and kept his tongue in his mouth. He felt like an idiot. The only thing keeping him from breaking into hysterics was the thought that he was going to slowly murder Cid Highwind very shortly.

"Well, what's in it for me?" Marie asked, smacking her gum. "I could get warts, ya know."

"Tell ya what, girlie. I don't think Barret'd mind paying you five GP or so for services rendered. That fellow at the Battle Arena gave him five-hundred." Cid offered forth a shiny five GP coin and the girl gazed at it eagerly. Without another word

she stooped down and planted a big wet one on the frog's head. Before you could blink, Barret was suddenly sitting on his knees in the dirt, scowling so hard his face hurt.

"That kid hardly counts as a maiden," was the first thing he said, getting stiffly to his feet and brushing himself off. "And I ain't paying for that, you pimp."

"You seemed to enjoy it," joked Cid, lighting up a smoke and sucking at it luxuriously.

"Oh, get the hell outta here, you cheating, ribbon-toting asshole," Barret grumbled, beginning to walk away.

"Language. . ." Bugah sighed. Cid grinned, and began to turn back to the Highwind, giving Nanaki a parting wave. The creature frowned and stepped forward.

"Don't just leave so quick, Cid. I haven't seen you in ages. Besides, I need a favor. . ." Nanaki looked to Bugah who seemed to have already read his mind, nodding in response. The pilot halted and groaned.

"Where do you need me to take you?" he asked, sighing, "I swear, you people only like me for my airship."

"Nah, your conversational skills are a plus too," said Nanaki with a wink.

"Hmph. You'd better watch it, Red, I know where you live."

"Yeah? I know where you live!"

"Is that a fact? Well then, by Hell, we should write to each other more often!"

Nanaki put on a mock scowl, baring his teeth. "I can't write, I don't have thumbs!"

"Email!"

"Can't type!"

"Learn!"

"No fingers!"

"That's it, bitch!"

With a snarl, Cid leapt at Nanaki, tackling him from the side and knocking him over. The two wrestled in the dirt, play-fighting, while Bugah stood by with a tired, aggravated expression, and the citizens of Cosmo Canyon got bored and wandered off.

"I win!" Nanaki declared, rising with Cid pinned beneath his fore paws. The old pilot huffed a bit. By some miracle his cigarette was still in place and he took a drag off it, looking up towards his old friend in good humor.

"Yeah, well, great. Now get off."

Nanaki complied and Cid grunted, getting to his feet and rubbing his head, realizing he was getting on a bit in years if he couldn't outmaneuver ole Red like he'd been able not long ago. If he'd had his Venus Gospel on the other hand, he told himself, he could've whooped up.

"So where ya headed?" he asked, pulling at his nose and gesturing to the airship.

"Mr. Highwind," began Bugah, stepping forward, "There are some things you should be told." He looked up at the airship pilot, his eyes serious. Cid looked right back at him, frowning a bit.

"Yeah, well, there're some things you need to know too there, fella'."

"Then let's go have lunch and pow wow," Nanaki said eagerly, beginning to leap towards his home. The beast was tiring of the seriousness of the past two days, of worrying over the Planet and wondering at its ailments. He wanted some down time, an hour or two with a friend. Not that Bugah wasn't one of these, but he was also a teacher and Nanaki's superior and that made all the difference in the world. Cid checked his watch and shrugged, deciding he could spare the time. Besides, he knew from experience that when the Cosmo Canyon elders got all squirrely about stuff, it was usually a good idea to listen to them.

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By the time lunch was over, Cid found he was right.

"Jenova, eh? Well, that sucks." The pilot sighed, sitting back in his seat. Barret sat to his right, chowing down a couple sandwiches, while Bugah and Nanaki sat opposite them at the table, faces grave.

"But it makes so much more sense now," Nanaki said sadly, "Now that we know Cloud's children were kidnapped. Jenova must want to use them to get at Cloud."

Barret scowled and shook his head. "Why?" he asked through a mouthful of ham sandwich, "T'get even? We all took that bitch out, why ain't she trying to hurt all of us?"

Cid had called home a short time before and spoken with his kids himself so he could back Barret up with this remark. "Yeah, thank Shiva for it, but why hasn't she touched Shera or my brood? Why Cloud?"

"Cloud was your leader," said Bugah simply, "And Cloud played the largest role in each event. He was the one in Nibelheim when Jenova was released. He was the one that nearly killed Sephiroth in the reactor. If there's any one of you whom Jenova should hate, it's Cloud."

"But Vincent's missing," reminded Cid.

"You said he was seen chasing after that great mako beast. He was most likely just in the way and then eliminated. I doubt that he's being held, I don't see how Jenova could have any use for him."

"You think he's dead?" Cid asked the question they all were thinking. The Elder shook his head.

"I have no way of knowing, but I honestly don't see why he'd be kept if Jenova is only interested in Cloud."

"Damn that virus bitch!" Barret hollered, slamming one of his massive fists hard on the worn wood of the table suddenly, "I'd love t'know where the hell she came from and who made her. Then I'd hunt the sunnuva bitch down and kick his ass! Where does she get off resurfacing now and screwing up everyone's lives? Everything was goin' great, this stuff was in the past! Now it's all dug up and underfoot again and dragging in little kids that had nothin' to do with what happened thirteen years ago! Dammit!"

"Woah, Barret, calm down," Cid said, laying a hand on his friend's shoulder. "We'll take care of this, don't worry." Barret shook his head but reined in his temper, relaxing a bit and taking his fist from the tabletop. Cid and Nanaki exchanged looks. Barret was taking all this extremely hard and the old pilot knew why.

"You have to stop feeling guilty about this, man," he said, staring his friend in the face, "We helped Marlene before, and now we'll help li'l CJ and Ifalna."

"Shut up."

"Barret, Cid's just trying to make you feel better."

"Stay outta it, Red, you just don't know."

There was a moment of silence as the four sat there, Barret staring at his sandwich as though it were some amazingly interesting piece of artwork. After a moment, he turned his gaze up to his friends and frowned even harder, a sad, distant look coming into his normally hostile eyes.

"I went to see Cloud this morning," he began, his tone flat, "I was talking to him, trying to. . . trying to apologize for hating him 'cause he went to Shinra. But the spiky bastard wouldn't accept what I was saying. He wouldn't forgive me. So I started going off on him. I said things I shouldn'ta said. And then suddenly, he turned around with this look in his face, like he wasn't there, but at the same time, he was there, just not carin' none. He had Ultima Weapon on him and pretty as ya please, all of a sudden, he came at me with it, striking so's to cut my throat wide open. But he stopped. He stopped and fell back on his ass surprised at what he'd done. Then he said sorry real quick and split out the house. I called Tifa. He ain't been back since. No one's seen 'im."

The silence continued after Barret finished his words, his face strained and ashen.

"You didn't tell me that," Cid said, almost accusing with his tone.

"I wasn't gonna tell anyone cause I know it wasn't really Cloud's fault he did that. It's like it was with Sephiroth. Something's in his head again."

"Terrific," the pilot commented, adjusting his flight goggles in irritation, "This just keeps gettin' better and better, doesn't it?"

"Well there's no time to lose then," Bugah said suddenly. He stood from the table with determination. "If Cloud can't control his actions, then he shouldn't be left alone with anyone. We need to get to Tifa."

"Shit. We need ta get ta Marlene too," Barret said suddenly, "I'll be right back, I'm gonna give botha them a ring." He stepped from the room towards Cosmo Canyon's lone telephone, which resided in the Elder's apartment. Cid watched him go, then shook his head in realization.

"That's why the hell he's so upset. That and the Marlene thing," he said, "Cloud tried to kill him. . . phew, I can think of a lotta things I'd rather see swingin' my way than that damn Ultima Weapon. Thank Shiva he was able to stop himself."

"But he mayn't be able to next time." Bugah's face was drawn and pale, his hands trembling slightly. Nanaki looked upon him in fright.

"Elder, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Son of Seto, just. . . the evil at work here is alarming. We must get to Midgar."

"We?"

"Yes, I will accompany you."

"But you can't leave Cosmo Canyon, the people need you!"

Bugah looked his student dead in his one good eye and smiled comfortingly. "The danger isn't here, the danger is in that city. You and your friends will need guidance. I've ill feelings about Jenova's plans, that they're not as simple as they seem. She's seized control of Cloud and this must mean that despite his denials to us, he was in fact, injected with Jenova cells. Thus that creature can control him just as she did Sephiroth, as his attack on Barret has proved. Her plans with him are unknown to us. I don't know what it is she'll use him for. And I wish we never have to find out. Mr. Highwind, will you fly us to Midgar?"

"Of course!" Cid exclaimed, beaming, "And I'm comin'. I was planning on heading back there anyways to keep looking, but going back with reinforcements and an idea of just what in the hell's going on is even better. I'll just have to call Shera and tell her not to expect me anytime soon. I was going to bring her to see Tifa, but with Jenova lurking around I don't want to risk getting her hurt."

"But your vacation. . ."

Cid scoffed. "Vacation! What's more fun than kicking ass? C'mon, let's go grab Barret and get the hell outta here."

Bravado in place, the pilot sauntered out of the room like a hero and Nanaki couldn't help but feel cheered. The time for a bit of action was finally there. No more skulking about the observatory examining the model Planet and no more trying to decipher the LifeStream's cries. They were going to go really do something about everything going on. Nanaki felt a thousand times better.

"You must prepare yourself, Son of Seto," Bugah whispered in his ear, "You have to prepare for the worst. Ill omens surround this entire affair."

A little less than an hour later, he, Cid, Barret, and Elder Bugah were all boarding the airship, Cosmo Canyon's eccentric citizens pulling their heads from the clouds long enough to wave them farewell. Bugah had brought his most powerful materia and Nanaki wore his father's weapon upon his shaggy head proudly. Barret had reattached Missing Score to the end of his left arm and brandished the gun now a little awkwardly, unused to the weight after so long without it. Cid gave the Canyon's residents a little treat by taking off perfectly and blasting the Highwind's engines to such an extreme that it rocketed out of their view with a sonic boom. Lady Luck waved them goodbye, hope in her pretty eyes.

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Neto wasn't in his office, so Marlene dropped the reports in his mailbox and turned away from the door, glad at his absence. She didn't particularly care for the man, despite his obvious attraction to her. It went beyond his insults to Barret now. He was simply another asshole in Marlene's long list of men whom she knew.

It was nearing six and she was getting hungry, but she had to pick up some things from her cubicle before going home to that night's microwaveable frozen entree. Before heading that way though, she checked her mailbox which was right across the hall and found a note inside saying her father'd called and needed her to contact him ASAP. Probably can't find where we keep the soap, she thought, wondering how he'd get along without her. It made her feel rather nice though, to know she was needed.

Heels clacking loudly, she made her way down the hall to her tiny office, passing a few random techs and other Shinra employees on the way. None said a word to her so she returned the favor. The young woman would've liked some friends in the company, but she was just too shy to take the first step, and her own history prevented others from desiring her acquaintance. Screw 'em, she thought, feeling decidedly anti-social all of a sudden. I'll get some cats.

Turning into the immense room that housed all of the lower class WDD techs' cubicles, she found the place dark and empty, most of its inhabitants gone home for the night. They all had standard shifts of eight to five, and Marlene figured not many of them were ambitious enough to work after hours, coming to this conclusion when the men she'd worked with that day had started complaining at around three that they needed to wrap up the testing. Because they all have so much to go home to, she thought disgustedly, a porn video and bowl of popcorn. The more the woman thought about this, the grosser it became. Eww. Maybe a porn video and a bowl of ice cream with a spoon. Yeah, you'd definitely want to steer clear of finger food.

Her cubicle was the very last one in her row, the smallest too, she thought, but it didn't really matter. It was quite dark back in the corner of the room and Marlene slowed her steps, realizing how loud her shoes were against the room's cold blue tiles. Not bothering to switch on her desk lamp, she ducked into the tiny space and grabbed at her coat and briefcase, knowing just where she'd left them on top of her desk. She was about to leave again, her stomach growling, when something stopped her.

"Marlene."

The blood turned cold in her veins. Whipping around, she peered into the near perfect blackness of the cubicle, suddenly making out the shape of a figure slumped in her desk chair. She must have brushed him when reaching for her things and this thought made her shiver.

"Who's there," she said, unable to quash the shakiness in her startled voice, "Switch on the lamp so I can see."

"Sure. Sorry." The dark shape of a hand moved to do as she'd bid, the fluorescent light illuminating the space harshly. She was relieved to see it was just Cloud, seated rather crookedly behind her desk with his back to her.

"Oh, hey there, Uncle Cloud," she greeted, gladness in her voice, "I thought you might be that mouse Neto. I'm trying to avoid him, I think he has the hots for me." She giggled, then sighed when the man didn't answer. She realized he must be there to apologize for his meanness the night before and she approached him slowly, ready to forgive him. She'd thought a lot about his behavior and no longer felt as stung as she had. He'd been drunk and miserable, and she'd been spying on him. She'd probably deserved it. A friendly smile on her face, she laid a hand on one of his broad shoulders, noticing with alarm that he was still clutching Ultima Weapon. He must want to be ready when he finds whoever took the kids, she thought sadly.

"Ya know, Uncle Cloud, Barret told me what happened this morning."

"He did?" The man sounded a little scared at the words.

"Yes, he did, and I think it's okay if you don't feel you can forgive him just yet. He did say some horrible things to you, and he did do so for a long time. I think it's really disgusting that he was able to do that and it's not something I'm proud of. You two were such good friends. You'd overcome so much mistrust until suddenly, you trusted each other unconditionally. Friendships like that don't happen often, so it's really horrible that dad threw what you guys had away so easily. I'm not asking you to forgive him now, but just think about it. You have every right in the world to still be pissed, er, angry at him, but just remember what great buddies you two used to be after Meteor. Maybe you can have that again. I know Tifa would love it."

Marlene hoped that Cloud would turn around and agree with her, but he only continued to sit, silently. She noticed that his breathing was a little labored and wished that she could see his face and eyes and make sure he was doing alright. An image of how sick he'd looked the night before flashed across her mind, and she frowned, suddenly pulling on his shoulder and turning him around in the office chair.

"My good god. . ."

Cloud showed no signs of unease as Marlene gazed in horror upon his face, the woman unconsciously backing away in fear as she did so. He looked nearly inhuman with his mask of blood and wild, staring eyes glowing through at her, burning a bright, unsettling blue that made the crimson blood all the more grotesque. The massive wound gaped wide, making her nauseous.

"What happened to you? Who did this?"

"I fell." His voice was cold and firm and Marlene wouldn't have asked the question again for all the world. "I was hoping you might take care of this for me. . ."

"Of course. But I'm a scientist, not a doctor. Let me take you down to the medical department. . ."

"No! No doctors. Especially not any god damned Shinra doctors." He opened his mouth too wide in his anger and the gash in his face oozed red, making him wince.

"Alright." The young woman looked at him sternly, a thin frown on her features. "Come on."

She led him from the room and down the hall to a small lab where she knew there was some restore materia lying in a first aid kit on the wall. Thankfully, the hall was clear of people at the moment and the two were able to quickly sneak in and lock the door behind them. She directed Cloud to a chair and she fetched the materia she was looking for, glad the green orb she now pulled from the kit was mastered. She stuck the materia into one of Ultima Weapon's free slots then gave Cloud a look.

"Go ahead."

The man gazed at the materia uncomprehendingly for a moment, then muttered, "Cure 3," beneath his breath.

Immediately he was surrounded with a gorgeous green glow that crescendoed into a light so bright that Marlene had to turn away. When she looked back, and the residue of the spell had died into a few faint sparkles in the air, she realized that nothing had happened. Cloud looked a little better, sat up a little straighter and breathed easier, but the wound in his face still gaped wicked and bloody.

"I don't think it worked. It helped my jaw, and my poisoning and stuff, I can tell that, but from the look on your face, the cut's still there."

"What happened to your jaw?"

"I fell."

"Hmm." She stuck her hands on her hips, looking down at her friend in slight annoyance. With passing interest, she noticed his mako eyes burned a bit brighter after casting the heal spell, but said nothing about it. "Here, let me try." Stooping down, she removed the materia from his sword and then stood and clicked it into the slot on the Gold Armlet that Barret insist she wear under her shirtsleeve. After she cast the spell and the magic died away, she sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, damn, this is just plain weird. I've never seen a wound that materia won't heal. It doesn't make sense. Hmph. I guess we'll have to do it the old fashioned way."

"Terrific."

She spent the next half-hour scrubbing away at the thick blood caked on Cloud's face, trying her best to be gentle but the man was nearly passed out with pain by the time she'd finished. Blood had run down his neck in wide rivulets and once he'd removed his shirt, she could see the grisly trail down his chest too. Soon though, he was clean enough and Marlene was able to look at him properly again, seeing before her a human and not some unrecognizable demon. The gash in his face took nearly sixty stitches to close up but he bore it as though it were nothing, flinching occasionally but staying quiet as she worked.

"How do you know how to do this?" he asked. The young woman shrugged.

"Dad taught me. He doesn't trust materia too much."

"I know."

"Besides, it's not difficult. Just like sewing up a hole in a pair of pants. I'm just glad that first aid kit had the necessary tools. I suppose Shinra isn't entirely shortsighted. Damn, you're lucky this cut didn't go right into your eye. Whoever did it glanced over. On purpose too, directly above, the cut is down to the the skull, as it is directly below, but they deliberately let up pressure while passing over the eye. Very nice of them, don't you think?"

"Yeah."

She noticed he didn't say anything as she remarked that someone had actually done this to him and it hadn't been an accident as he claimed. But she'd known that, she didn't believe for an instant that he'd fallen and gotten this. This was from a blade.

"There, all finished. It isn't pretty, but it should keep you from bleeding to death. Do you want to see?" She turned and fumbled around in her purse for her compact as Cloud gingerly experimented with moving his mouth around, opening it as wide as he could until he felt the stitches strain. He knew he wouldn't have to put up with them for long, he could already feel the gash starting to close as his advanced healing ability kicked in. He just hoped to god there wouldn't be a scar.

"See? Pretty weird shape for a cut. . . "

She thrust the mirror before his face and he paled, shaking a bit at his reflection. Red and jagged, the black stitches only adding to its horror, the wound stretched like a consuming claw over his face, claiming him wholly.

". . . Looks kinda like a 'J'"

"Yeah." He swallowed hard, his mouth dry, wiping sweat off his forehead with a shaking hand. The sight of his pale reflection staring out at him fearfully from the mirror was making him nauseous. "Thank you. . . " he breathed hard, standing suddenly and trying to fight off the dizziness, "Thank you for cleaning me up, Marlene. Tell Barret I forgive him, and that I'm sorry about this morning. And I think I was too harsh on you last night. I-- I don't really remember, I was pretty screwed up. Still am."

Marlene stepped closer to him, alarmed by the desperation in his voice. She tried to put a hand on his shoulder, but he shrank away from her touch, taking a step towards the door.

"C'mon, Uncle Cloud, let's walk to the train station together. It's late, you're off, aren't you?" She didn't want to leave him alone, there was an insane something in his eyes that frightened her, promising terrible things and leaving her heart fluttering in her chest. He shook his head, not looking up at the woman. His hand kept going up to his face, then pulling

away violently. "I can't go home yet, ya know? But I will some time. When I'm ready. When Ifalna and CJ are there to say hey." He glanced up at her once like a frightened animal, eyes darting fearfully from her worried face to the hand clutching at the collar of her lab coat. "Thank you," he said again, then whipped about and dashed so quickly from the room that by the time Marlene reached the hallway, he had disappeared.

~*~

"That's a rather wretched looking wound there, sir," Berk said with concern. "But if the bastard got you that bad, I'd hate to see him. He must be in pieces." The young Turk leaned against the wall of the Shinra Security Office easily, one arm stuck in a sling, the other stuck in his pants pocket. Reno stood to his left, looking like he'd just rolled out of bed with his shirt untucked and his hair in his eyes, while Rude stood with crossed arms on Berk's right, his face impassive except for the curious glance he was shooting towards the Office doorway. Cloud stood there, newly arrived, panting as though he'd been running.

"Damn, you aren't kidding, Berky, look at that sucker." Reno approached his friend, grabbing his chin in one hand and tilting his face for a better view. "Shit, it's a giant J. What the hell did that do to you? Ouch, that's deep. Heh. Tifa won't love you no more, pretty boy, you've gone and gotten all ugly."

Rude didn't comment on the cut, more surprised at Cloud's shortness of breath. "Where's the fire?" he asked, looking at his friend over the top of his sunglasses. To his surprise, Cloud grinned at the comment, an expression he hadn't seen on the man's face in over a week.

"In the bar," he replied jokingly, "You guys better get down there and save Jack Daniels and Captain Morgan before it burns 'em up."

"Hey, you read my mind," Reno said, a smile splitting his countenance at Cloud's sudden turnaround. He parted his arms expansively and began belting out show tunes for no particular reason. Rude looked at Cloud from behind his sunglasses and explained, "Reno's already started evacuating his good friend Jack from the blaze. I have a feeling he's going to run back in after Bud and Coors shortly. He's such a humanitarian."

Berk sniggered and Reno tossed Rude a scowl, elbowing him in the side. He turned to Cloud and winked. "Wanna come with us? We're going to go tear up the town, get sloppy. It's a Friday night and we're three single guys out looking for some tail."

"I'm not a single guy, thank you." Cloud slipped off his glove and showed his wedding band proudly. "Besides, after last night, I think I'll lay off the liquor for a while."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea. I've decided I don't like you when you're smashed. You get all weird and start muttering stuff. You never used to do that though. . . "

"Sorry about that, by the way. . . "

"No problem. I didn't think you were coming in today. Tifa called earlier looking for you, said you'd run off in a temper. Ah, domestic disputes. You can keep the marriage heaven, man, I'll take bachelor hell any day of the week. Anyways, it's a little late to start working now, don't you think? The building's clearing out for the weekend. You should scram, go patch things up."

"Mr. Strife'll find something to do," Berk said, looking to the man cheerily. He, like many of the Turks, admired and respected Cloud a lot. He was probably one of, if not the best, swordsmen in the world. He rather wished he'd accompany them out that night, he was good at keeping Rude and Reno in check if nothing else. "I've seen you, you're a workhorse if you don't mind me saying so, sir."

Cloud forced a smile and shrugged. "If I'm guilty, I'm guilty."

"Yeah, well, if anyone deserves a break from this hellhole, it's you. Don't stay here too late, try going home to your wife for a change, she's probably starting to forget what you look like." Reno frowned, meaning what he said. Cloud gritted his teeth but nodded. "And try getting some sleep. And try eating! Man cannot survive on alcohol and guilt alone!"

"Okay, dad."

Reno punched Cloud roughly on the shoulder, then strutted past him towards the door. Cloud could easily smell the stench of liquor on his breath and the man wondered briefly if Reno was drinking because of him.

"Take it easy, spike," Rude called as he passed, throwing Cloud a wave. Berk kept at Rude's heels, smiling and nodding respectfully to the blonde-haired man as he passed. Cloud nodded back at the young Turk, trying to recall how he'd gotten the broken arm, then remembering the Dragon Weapon testing of the week before. He hoped the man would be able to

use his arm alright again once it'd healed. Berk was one of the finest fighters to ever become a member of the Department of Administrative Research. His skill with a sword and pistol were extraordinary, like second nature to him. He'd broken records for speed and accuracy. Of course he would have to be something special for Reno and Rude to allow him to accompany them on their spree.

Cloud locked up behind the three men as they left, the glass double doors leading into the Security Office closing with a final sort of thud. Turning off the lights, the man was able to drop his cheerful facade, glad to be rid of the strain of it. Running a hand through his matted, knotted blonde hair, he made his way to his own office, dragging Ultima Weapon behind him like a tremendous weight shackled to his hand. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw things that made his mind reel. Barret and Jenova and Sephiroth's mighty figure. He saw the red in his eyes again as Masamune marked him. But mainly he saw his pale face in Marlene's mirror with that horrible black bloody brand upon it. And that wasn't a simple fantasy. He'd see it again every time he looked at his reflection. This thought made him nearly claw at his stitches in fury. As it was, he swung his sword about a few times, the blade whistling cleanly through the air, wishing there was something solid he could allow his blows to connect with.

He kicked his office door open and it slammed against the wall with a crash, making a few of the Shinra-commissioned paintings hung there fall and shatter on the ground. He entered the dark room with slow, cold, angry steps. He was so furious. He wanted to kill something, to make something else feel as miserable, as helpless, as controlled as he did. But he couldn't. He had to keep himself in check, a distant voice in the back of his mind told him this, told him that Jenova was already anxious to take his will away again. He had to stay strong, knowing she'd attack while he was weakened with anger and shock. But it was so hard. He swung Ultima Weapon again, the sword's pure whitish-blue blade leaving a beautiful trail of light as it moved, it's energy and power fed by Cloud's own soul. He'd stuck this blade through many evils, he thought now, looking at his weapon as it arced and moved in the air. It felt good to kill with it. Natural. It'd solved all the problems of his life, killed those things that had fucked with him, tried and succeeded in screwing him over. Why wasn't it of any use to him now? And if it was useless, why did he continue carting it around with him? He didn't even need to finish asking himself the question before he knew the answer. He carried it around for those very reasons. The sword had always been associated with his conquering the demons of his life. It stood for justice and revenge and had served its purpose well when there'd been an actual enemy standing before him, taunting him. Now he could only swing it at the air, desperate for an enemy but coming up short. He let the beautiful sword fall from his hand and clatter to the ground.

"Hey, Cloud! Ya in there?"

He didn't recognize the voice at first. It was tinny and filtered through a speaker. He approached his desk and put a finger to the intercom mounted there, pressing the send button and speaking, though he wasn't really sure why he was bothering to answer.

"Yeah, I'm here, Reeve."

The president of Shinra's voice came back relieved and cheery.

"Oh, I'm glad I caught you. I saw you running past the conference room a minute ago and wanted to catch up and talk to you, but the investors had their claws in me. Did Reno and Rude get a hold of you?"

"Yeah. They uh, went out for drinks, but I have some stuff to do here, so I declined their invite."

"They're already gone, eh? I was thinking of going out with them. I haven't had a social night in ages. The investors are really coming down hard. They're pissed at me because Neto's materia testing is in a royal rut. None of his weapons are working. I've managed to appease 'em for a while though. I told 'em about Marlene and showed her credentials, so now they're convinced we have a total frikkin' mako genius on our staff. Which is probably true." Reeve laughed. "Sometimes I think Shinra had it better in the old days, when we could make all our money off exploiting the people. Now we're honest and have to set an example, relying on outside funds to get the money for research."

"Yeah, sometimes I miss the old days too."

"I know ya do." Reeve's voice was soft through the intercom speakers. He suddenly cleared his throat and said, "Anyways, I just wanted to apologize for not being of more help with finding the kids. It's so hard for me to get away from here--"

"It's alright, "Cloud cut in quickly, "It's not your problem."

"Well, dammit, that's a mean thing to say. I love CJ and Ifalna. I'm Unky Reeve and my alter-ego is their nanny, I would think their disappearance is somewhat my problem."

Cloud frowned in the darkness, feeling like an idiot. He shouldn't have said that. "You're right, "he apologized, "I'm just being an asshole."

"It's okay, I'm used to it, "the president laughed faintly, "I just wanted to let you know I've been thinking about you

guys, you and Tifa and the kids. The old gang too. Sometimes. . . sometimes I think those Meteor days were the best days of my life. I know it's a pretty screwed up thing to say, but it's how I feel."

"I understand. It's not screwed up. Ya know, Tifa tried to have that reunion a coupla years ago and you never showed. You said at the time it was because you were so busy. Was that the real reason?" Reeve hesitated before answering, and Cloud could imagine the sheepish grin that must be on his friend's face at that moment.

"Nah," he answered, a little sadly, "How'd you guess? Hmm. . ." Reeve laughed nervously, "It was 'cause I thought Barret would be there. Barret hates my guts. Cid and Tifa aren't too fond of me either. All that spy business. I don't blame 'em for it for a minute, I was a jerk, an ignorant jerk. I'm paying for it now, I guess."

"I don't think you're a jerk. I think you helped save the Planet just as much as anyone else did, maybe more. You certainly were a bigger help than Yuffie." Cloud found himself laughing, and Reeve joined him on the other end.

"Well, I think if you want to get down to it, Rufus was a bigger help than Yuffie."

They chuckled again, then there was a moment of silence over the intercom and Cloud stood staring down at the speaker as though wishing Reeve were really in the room. He could talk to Reeve. The man didn't hide anything, didn't attempt false bravado, didn't try to cheer him up, letting him be just as damned depressed as he liked. This was a smart tactic since Cloud always seemed to find himself inadvertently cheered by speaking to the Shinra President anyways. For a moment, Cloud wanted to ask him to come inside so they could chat, but Reeve spoke before he could get the words out.

"Well, I'm going to go. Maybe I'll hunt for those damned Turks, they're probably skulking around Sector Three. Thanks for talking with me, man, putting up with my stupid old reminiscences. Tell Tifa I said hey, and don't you stay here too late. This drafty old Shinra building isn't anywhere to be spending a Friday night."

"Take it easy, Reeve. Bye."

"See ya Monday."

Cloud collapsed into his desk chair with a strangely tight chest and stinging eyes. He roughly put a fist to his mouth and mentally bid himself to quit his blubbing. "Stupid, weak fool," he spat, awash in self-loathing. He began to call himself a string of names, insulting words that rolled easily off his tongue and were strangely comforting. He stared out at his dark office, then turned and pulled the blinds apart that covered the large picture window behind him. The blood-red light of the setting sun flooded the room. It seemed beautiful, dying the buildings of Midgar until the ugly, man-made concrete structures fairly glowed crimson. Their long shadows stretched away, each building like an old man marching across the sky. Cloud saw it all through tear-blurred eyes.

The Planet can be gorgeous, can it not?

For a moment, the man thought there was someone on the intercom again, but he soon realized with a shudder that it was that voice in his head. It was her voice, gentle, coaxing and maternal, attacking his psyche with comfort instead of swords. He found his eyelids growing quite suddenly heavy and his limbs weak. The fire in his face however, kept him awake. The mark burned, leaving him breathless, as he continued to stare out at the scene on the other side of his window.

Why are you fighting me?

"Cause I'm a good guy. It's what I do." These words were more mocking than anything else. Jenova ignored him, speaking in a droning voice that was half a song and half a sigh.

I own you. You keep forgetting that, my son. That's why I had my mark branded upon your face, so that you'll be able to remember. I know that you're tired. I know that you feel guilty because your children are dead and it's your fault. Why then don't you let me hold you and you can forget all about the terrible things you've done? You may as well stop fighting me. This can't go on forever, you'll break in the end. You're weak, you're tired, and you'll break. I won't judge you, Cloud. I only want to love you. Don't you feel the weariness in your limbs? You haven't slept in days. Those long, wakeful hours claw at your eyes. The pounding in your head makes you tired. Go to sleep now, Cloud. Sleep, I'll take you up in my arms, and you'll never have to wake.

The invitation was really too much to fight. The man knew that he shouldn't listen to her, but something in her words dragged at his will and then his eyelids and energy, till he felt like he couldn't move. Struggling to keep his eyes open, he continued watching the view of Midgar outside his window, trying to focus on the buildings outside, trying to keep his mind in his own possession. A face suddenly moved between him and the sky though and he looked upon it in weary curiosity. It was Jenova's beautiful countenance, the one she'd worn in the alleyway that morning. She smiled upon his pale face and kissed his cheek lightly.

"There's a good boy," she whispered, stroking his tangled hair and straightening it like a fawning mother. With a voice like an angel's, she began to sing a wordless lullaby. Cloud felt her grip tightening about his mind, but he was too tired to fight her anymore. Faintly, he hoped that his friends would be able to kill him once he was forced to assume the role of the

world's next murderer. He wished them luck in the task. Perhaps it would bring them all together again. Tifa could be friends with Barret again, with him out of the way. Cid and Red might chat once more on the decks of the Highwind. Yuffie would be there, materia in hand, to give them all a laugh if nothing else. All of his old friends together again to take him out, to save the world from Cloud Strife's insanity. The thought was nearly comforting to him. Perhaps it would be best to let Jenova have him. His madness would bring his friends together again and they would surely be able to kill him. Then they could go on as comrades, and perhaps stay in touch this time. Giving them back their friendships could be Cloud's last gift to them, his way of apologizing to Tifa for killing her children, and to Barret for nearly cutting his throat. Excuses secure, he began to slide into a black unconsciousness.

"I've watched you ever since Hojo made you mine, my love. You don't really belong on the side for which you fight. The Planet, ha. You're stronger than it is. We are stronger. You and I and your brother Vincent, a royal family that will rule this miserable rock. I'll make the both of you gods and you can accompany me as I make my rounds of the universe, sucking out its life. I must feed soon, Cloud. I must have life to gnaw upon. You'll help me take this Planet. You'll help me take it for all its worth. How funny I find that to be. You, the one who halted my progress thirteen years ago, shall be the one now to finish my plans. You hated my first son so deeply, with a hatred that drove you mad, but now you yourself shall avenge my dear Sephiroth."

It was there that Jenova made her mistake. That single name shot into Cloud's brain and his eyes snapped open, throwing off furious blue sparks. In one fluid motion, his exhaustion forgotten along with the lies that'd been pumped into his head, he was on his feet, flipping his fist straight into Jenova's face and sending the creature flying back, head over heels. The sudden movement made Cloud reel, nearly falling himself, but he clutched the edge of his desk and stood panting, horrified at how close she'd come to holding him in her claws.

"No," he spat, staring at her glaring, crumpled figure upon the floor, "You won't make me into that. Leave now, leave the Planet or I'll cut you apart."

Jenova stood slowly, never taking her eyes from Cloud. He'd retrieved Ultima Weapon and held it in his hands now, assuming his accustomed attack position, though his grip wavered and shook. "Go ahead and try that again," he muttered cockily, "I dare you." The creature only continued to gaze upon him, disappointment in her eyes. She shook her head slowly.

"We'll try later," she murmured. With an anticlimactic flash, she vanished, leaving the office lonely and dark one more. For a moment or two, Cloud only stood there, clutching his sword. He had hoped to be able to end it there, with one final duel. But no, he thought bitterly, it can never be that simple, can it?

Dizziness overcame him suddenly, his old mako poisoning catching up with him again. He wouldn't rest and give himself a chance to heal so the malady refused to leave him. It, coupled with the loss of blood from the gash he'd received earlier, sent him to his knees, clutching his sides in agony.

She isn't going to leave me alone, he told himself as he knelt on the blue office carpeting, she's gonna hound me until she has what she wants. But there's no way in hell I can let her have it. Not my soul. She won't get control of me and make another Sephiroth, another madman with a sword and a wicked agenda! My God, is this what he went through in the Shinra Mansion? No, I don't wanna think about that now. I gotta think of a way to stop this for good. For good. Cloud's mind suddenly cleared, wiped clean by the same thought that had occurred to him that morning in the alley, after Jenova had first revealed herself to him, letting him know she still lived and that he contained her cells. It was an answer that was brilliant in its simplicity, amazing in its ease. It would solve everything, and save everyone.

Like an old man, Cloud got to his feet, feeling as though he were on a merry-go-round from hell. The office was spinning around him, and it made him nauseous when he attempted to watch the floor. The sun had set outside and the room was finally dark, the sanguine hues of the dying sun retreated behind the distant hills. The man wished it hadn't set so quickly. He would have liked to see it again.

Despite what he knew he had to do, Cloud was calm, calmer than he had been in weeks. But it would be foolish for a condemned man to have worries, he told himself, the dead don't have cares. He wondered briefly if he should write a note, and quickly tried to sketch one out in his mind. The words he came up with were hollow and dull though, so he put the notion out of his head. His face blank, he sat down on the carpet, cradling his sword in his lap. Alone in the nearly perfect night darkness, he knelt, his eyes bright with a feeling he couldn't explain. He was so tired. If he'd let himself, he'd have passed out on the floor right there and slept straight through the night. Absently, he fingered his chest, right over his heart, feeling it beating rapidly. He knew that he could never sleep peacefully again. He'd be plagued by the same sort of night-horrors that Vincent had experienced for thirty years in his coffin. He'd murdered his children. His past had killed them. As this doleful fact stabbed knives into his brain, he could feel again Jenova inching closer to complete control. He couldn't let her do that. He couldn't let her have him. He had to act against her and he had to act quickly. The darkness pressed at him,

the cold air conditioning chilled his sweaty face and neck, making him shiver. Shaking but resolute, he held Ultima Weapon and stood up. He'd fall on it, fall on his sword and let it pierce his heart, destroying the shell of a man that Jenova so longed to possess. He imagined Reno waltzing into his office on Monday morning and finding his stiff corpse curled up in the middle of the room, a sword embedded in his chest with his own hands wrapped around the hilt. The image mocked him, dulled his purpose for a moment, but Cloud gritted his teeth, knowing there was only one real solution. He was about to be the world's greatest hero, saving everyone, but only he would know that his life had been a sacrifice, and not a waste. It almost made him laugh.

He positioned Ultima Weapon, knowing at that instant that he'd been wrong about the sword, that it would in fact, wind up slaying the demons that were screwing up his life as it always did. He shut his eyes, and braced himself, muscles tensing, his mind roaring out protests but his will firm. Suddenly, CJ's face popped into his head, the boy gazing at his father sadly with his large, violet eyes. Then Ifalna stood beside him, smiling softly, her fingers curling in her hair in the absent, darling way that she had.

"I'm sorry!", "Cloud sobbed, lowering the sword for a moment as a wave of grief swept him from his purpose, "CJ, Ifalna, babies, I'm sorry. . . it's my fault you're gone. But I'm gonna come to you. And we'll be together again, where there won't be anyone to split us up or make you cry."

He fumbled for his wallet, a sudden urge to see his children's faces once more making his actions clumsy. Horrible images flooded him, images of his son and daughter's death as Jenova had described it to him that morning. Guilt made it hard for him to breath. He opened his wallet hastily, eyes searching for the pictures of them that he always carried around. Credit card, gil marks, business cards tumbled out. But the plastic liner and photographs were gone. He let it all drop from his hands.

"Fucking fate has apparently kicked me in the face again," he said quietly, venom in his words, "Won't even let me see 'em, see photos of them, a poor substitute for the real thing, but damn. . . it would have been something. Too much to ask, I suppose." Absently, he tried to recall where the photos might be, but already he was raising his sword again. Perhaps not seeing them was for the better, he thought sadly, passionately, It might have talked me out of my aims.

The floor of Hojo's lab. . .

His eyes snapped open. The week before, he and Reno had been supervising the clean-up of Hojo's labs. The room had cleared out, he'd worked some more, than turned to go, grabbing his jacket, and . . . his wallet, which had been on the floor, near the wall. The photos had been in there that morning, when he'd gone to get money out to pay for breakfast, he remembered because he'd been with Rude and the Turk had remarked on how big CJ was getting. . . Hojo's lab.

Cloud blinked hard, again pulling himself away from his sword. Hojo's lab. Who would want to steal pictures of his kids? Something that wanted to know what they looked like. So they could take them. Hojo's lab.

"How could I be so stupid?" he muttered, already moving towards the door of his office, instantly forgetting the suicide he'd been so eager to perform, "That damned lab was sitting there all this time, innocent as you please, and I never realized that it had to be the cause of all this. I don't know how, but it's the cause. CJ and Ifalna are there, I know it. They are."

The office was still dark, but Cloud's eyes no longer were. They blazed blue in hot fury and his teeth clenched so hard a little vein stuck out throbbing on his temple. He clutched his weapon so tightly his knuckles turned white. With a petulant hand, he roughly wiped the tears out of his eyes, looking around him at the room he'd been about to die in.

"No, not yet," he thought ferociously, "Later probably, but not now. The children need me."

He was out of the room and out of the Shinra Security Office in a flash, his footsteps like thunderclaps as he ran down the hall.

~*~

"That blue-eyed man is coming."

The mako beast snapped about at the sound of Chieko's voice, tendrils of his thin hair wafting in the air conditioning. He'd been sitting in silent meditation with the Planet, and coming back to reality was difficult. "How do you know?" it asked, its voice strange and muddled.

"Father told me," Chieko replied matter-of-factly, "He said I must take him. Will you help me?"

"Of course."

~*~

The stairs flashed by under Cloud's feet like frames of a film reel, though each was image-less and brought no illusion of action with the movement. Rage made his mind dull, bitter, burning, blackened rage. In his mind's eye he could see the labs, see the mako room, see the mocking, grinning machinery and equipment that'd caused him so much physical pain years ago and now was tearing at his mind and stealing away his children. He would make that place, and whatever was behind it, pay dearly.

That's right, Cloud. Use your anger, avenge yourself. Kill those who've wronged you. You are a good son and your mother's proud.

"Shut the hell up!" he shouted, voice catching as he climbed. He wished he wasn't so tired. He wished he'd slept instead of skulking around the past few days. Weariness pulled at him and his sickness kept consciousness a shaky thing. His hand suddenly slackened and he dropped Ultima Weapon. It clattered down the stairs loudly.

You dropped your sword, Cloud. In SOLDIER, warriors who lost their grips on their weapons in battle would be given night watches for a month. If they weren't killed by their opponent, that is. Perhaps that's why you never made it in.

Cloud ignored her, retrieving his sword, then continuing his climb. It was only seven flights or so up to the sixty-eighth floor and he was half way there. He hadn't wanted to risk taking the elevator, it would have been too easy for a potential foe to surprise him on his way out. This way was better anyway. The way he and Tifa and Barret had done it thirteen years ago.

You failed then too. Sephiroth killed President Shinra and then got away, leaving you and your pathetic friends scabbling to find him again.

"We went in there to save Aeris. And we saved her."

Only to have her dead such a short time afterwards.

There being nothing to say, Cloud didn't answer, only picking his feet up higher and faster, taking the stairs two at a time now, though his lungs were burning. A hand went up to wipe a rivulet of sweat from his eyes and his finger brushed the grasping cut on his face. He shivered, reminded of its presence and its significance.

All these years, you've carried me inside of you, never even realizing it. I couldn't manifest myself in you, not with all the mako that inundates your blood, it cancels out my cells in a way, and has control of your body, keeping you young, keeping you strong, healing your wounds. But I have control of your mind, Cloud, there is where I can manifest. The mako will keep your body strong, I will control that body through your mind. It all wraps together so nicely, so conveniently. I don't know why you won't just surrender yourself to me. All this struggle and strife for nothing.

"Go to hell."

He turned one last corner in the stairwell and a large white door loomed up before him. "Research and Development" it read and a large, black and blocky 68 was painted below the words. He inserted his key card and the door slid soundlessly open. He stepped through and it closed behind him, leaving him alone in a still, blue darkness. Deja vu washed over him.

Thirteen years ago though, he thought, I wasn't following instinct or my kids. I was following a trail of blood. And I wasn't by myself, I had my friends with me.

The hallway he was in was deserted, the walls bare, the fluorescent lights fled along with those scientists who'd toiled beneath their glare. He made his way down its length carefully, his anger quelled just a bit by bad memories and the stillness of the air. He could nearly see the place as it had been long ago on that horrible night. Bodies strewn about, internals spilled from gashes inflicted by Masamune and the sword's dark wielder. He'd been here just a few short hours ago, looking for Marlene, but the place had been populated then and held some life. It was so different now. The hallway branched suddenly, leading down to the WDD. He passed it, hoping Marlene had gone home for the night and not hung around worrying about him.

Ultima Weapon blazing before him, he advanced, knowing that the passage leading to Hojo's old labs lay at the end of the hall. He expected something to attack at any moment, and each second that ticked away with him still alone in the hall left him surprised. But worried too. They had to be in there, he thought desperately. Finally, he halted at the end of the hall and stood before a closed metal door. It was scratched, rusted and beat up. The rest of the floor and the rest of the building for that matter, had been cleaned and repaired after Meteor had swept through and wrecked the place, but they'd been too scared to even touch Hojo's old chambers. The sign on the door still read his name, and then "Planetary Studies and Mako Research" beneath in smaller letters.

No more hesitation, Cloud. Go and kill, it's what you do best, what you were made for.

The man found this to be the only thing of worth she'd ever said to him. Inserting his key card, the old door opened with a screech of neglected machinery, circuits emitting a burning smell. He stepped through, sword before him, ready to follow Jenova's advice.

Entering from this way as opposed to the secondary employee elevators, Cloud found himself in the mako chamber. Nearly perfect blackness surrounded him on all sides, but he nudged a stray chunk of ceiling between the door and the wall to keep the two apart and retain the thin line of hall light that flooded through. It glinted off of the examining tables and radiation chambers, giving them all teeth and claws. Cold fear crept into the back of Cloud's throat. He stepped farther into the room, eyes hard and darting to his left and right, the silence buzzing in his ears.

Without a single sound of warning, the light from the hallway disappeared as the door slid shut behind him, leaving him in utter black.

"Who's there?" he called out, doing his best to keep his voice intimidating. All he could see were the tops of his hands revealed in Ultima Weapon's faint blue illumination. He circled in the darkness, fighting down panic, fearing attack from all sides. He did a quick sweep with his sword, a lightning-fast maneuver that swung 360 degrees all about him, slicing through eye level and knee level. Anyone within range would have been cut in half, but to his disappointment, Cloud didn't feel his blade connect with anything. Then he remembered how he'd been unable to harm the mako beast as it'd held his children in its claws. He didn't know what he'd do if he was up against a completely invulnerable foe.

"Cloud. Are you Cloud Strife?"

The voice erupted from the blackness like a bursting welt and the man jerked about towards its source. He saw two dimly glowing brown mako eyes in the darkness. Cloud noticed with a start that they weren't human but bestial, the pupils slit-shaped, large too, much too large for a normal creature. The voice that their owner used to address him was equally animalistic.

"Are you Cloud Strife?"

He shook his head and asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Chieko. I have been waiting for you, we both have. We have plans-- "

Cloud cut her off, shaking his head slightly, his voice barely above a growl. "I haven't come here to bicker, to argue, to hear your ramblings, or your stupid plans to dominate the world. I don't care what you are, who you are, what you want, not any of it. Give me my children back, you sick fuck. And after you do, perhaps I'll kill you quickly."

His words threw Chieko off for just a moment, as did the look of utter loathing he was shooting towards her.

"CJ!" he shouted out before the beast could reply, "Ifalna! Call to me, guys, let me know where you are!" He swung his sword out towards Chieko's shaggy head, guessing it would be a target though all the man could see of her were her softly glowing eyes. He needed to find a light switch or something, this strange beast he faced held too high an advantage over him with the night vision he was sure she possessed.

Chieko sidestepped the awkward blow, launching one of her own that smacked him squarely in the chest and knocked him back against the wall. He hit it with a crash, curling into a ball to cushion the impact. Immediately though, he leapt to his feet, feeling the wall behind him with speed born of desperation. He flicked a switch found there and heard a few ancient machines begin to click and whir. He flicked another and heard the air conditioning come to life with a roar. He flicked a final switch and the overhead lights snapped on, momentarily blinding him as they plunged his poor eyes from total darkness, to stark white illumination. Sword in hand and squinting, he turned around to get a good look at the beast who was challenging him.

"You wouldn't happen to be any relation to a creature called Nanaki from Cosmo Canyon now, would you?" he asked, head cocked slightly to one side as he looked her over. Chieko had been crouching in an attack position, prepared to follow up her initial blow with another to her opponent's head, but his words sent a blood fury into her brown eyes and she reared back and charged him, roaring curses.

Warmed up now, his blood pumping adrenaline through his veins, Cloud met the attack expertly, waiting until Chieko's fangs were just a hair's width from his face, before kicking back with his right foot to follow the momentum of her movement, then grabbing a hold of her entire massive head and wrenching it savagely backward and squarely into his left knee. He released her head and leapt backwards and away, readying Ultima Weapon in his grasp. She hit the floor roughly, and scolded herself for the fury that had made her clumsy. As she stood and turned, she saw nothing but a bright blue arc of light, then searing pain in her right foreleg. Cloud sliced his sword the length of the limb, through skin and muscle, nearly reveling in the horrible cry she screeched. Then he pulled himself away from her, a little unnerved by how hard it was to keep from finishing her off.

It felt good to fight, to strike out and clear the insanity from the air. It made him feel alive again and happy almost. The

past week had been a collage of dark nights and dark thoughts. This was real. The sword in his hands, the blood on its blade, the nearly electric tingle of energy that had flowed up its length, into his arms and spine and brain as the cold steel had met and severed the flesh of his opponent.

Kill her. You know you want to feel that thrill again. Put the sword to her throat and pull.

Jenova's voice startled him, she'd been silent for a while. As though he were doing exactly as she wanted. Shaking his head, Cloud shoved the thought away. He was doing what he had to, he'd deal with her insanity later.

"CJ, Ifalna!" he called again, desperation at the edge of his voice, "C'mon now, it's dad! Tell me where you are!"

Chieko stumbled onto her three good limbs, the fourth oozing thick, strangely dark blood onto the cold blue tiles of the lab. She was wounded now, and it appeared her foe was stronger than father had told her. Things were not going well. She looked Cloud dead in his blue eyes, momentarily marveling at their brilliancy, then stared long and hard at the savage brand that stretched its presence across his face. A few of the stitches had popped in the fight and the thing oozed streams of bright crimson down his cheek and chin. She burst into a stream of laughter, a frightening sound that was half snarl, half cough. The man clutched at his weapon, not giving her an inch.

"What's so funny?" he hissed, "Get a glimpse of your reflection?"

"No," she said, her laughter fading away as the wound in her leg throbbed, "No, I simply see that you've already been visited by my mother. I find it amusing that she's seen fit to mark you, like a child marks her toy."

"What do you know about anything?" he snapped, staring her down. The lion-like creature smirked in a feline way.

"I know much, Cloud. My father has told me much of you and of your children and your friends. You're the reason I've spent my life locked in this god-forsaken laboratory, ostracized and kept away from the rest of the world. You're the reason my father is as he is, and the reason my brother Sephiroth, my mother's son, died so horribly years ago. I'm told that I should call you brother now, but I won't. I hate you with every shred of my being and if I had my way, I'd take off your head and chew it like a gumball. If I had my father's permission, I'd roast your children over a fire until they screamed. You are the cause of my suffering and my imprisonment. Despite what Jenova says, I'll never call you brother."

Cloud lowered his brows and sneered. "Sounds good. As long as I never have to call you sister, you walking bag of shit. I swear this is all like a soap opera. Father, mother, sister, brother, everyone's related to everyone else. And just like one big connected family, no one seems to get along."

"Yes, laugh, make light of it now, while you're able. You'll be screaming soon enough. Great Beast! Appear! I need your help to bring down this wretch!" Shouting out these last words, Chieko lunged at Cloud again, claws spread wide before her. The man blocked, thrown off a bit by her speed, as his own began to wear away, adrenaline spent and his exhaustion returning. A fast and furious series of strikes and parries ensued and it was all Cloud could do to keep his sword up, much less block each terrible swipe that Chieko made towards him. A few got through, and soon the front of his shirt was shredded and red, as was the skin beneath. She pushed him back against the wall, the pain in her leg forgotten in her battle lust as she took out years of loneliness and frustration on her foe.

Cloud felt his back hit the wall and his heart sank ten feet in his chest. She had him cornered. One of her massive paws swung past his defense and slammed him in the head suddenly, so he saw stars and welcome blackness creeping into his peripheral vision. But no, he couldn't pass out now. Calling on some vast secreted away well of stamina, he shook off the creeping unconsciousness and ducked at Chieko's next attack, pushing off the wall behind him with one foot and sliding between Chieko's legs, skidding along the tiles on his knees. Once clear, he sprang back to his feet, fighting off his dizziness as well as the barrage of blows that met him as his opponent turned roughly around and assaulted him again. She brought her large, strange leathery wings down and slammed into his head with them, slashing at his scalp and painfully ripping the gold earring from his left ear. He cried out and swung at her face, landing a large cut on her brow that sent her cringing backwards. He would have taken advantage of her short retreat with another attack, but something caught at the corner of his eye and made him refocus his attention.

There was a ventilation grate mounted in the opposite wall, right above a row of anonymous machines. As Cloud kept his gaze glued upon it, he saw a thick, curling green vapor begin to pour from behind its screen. It drifted down towards the man, gradually solidifying into a four-legged, shaggy animal, nearly twenty feet tall from the horns atop its head to the large clacking claws resting on the tile floor. As its face became visible, its features blurred but undeniably firm, it grinned at Cloud, saliva-coated fangs bared wide and foam dribbling down its furry lip.

"I know you. . ." Cloud breathed, forgetting Chieko and taking a step towards it as though in a dream, "You bastard. . . where are my children?"

Instead of answering, it hissed, a long drawn out breath of air that made Cloud gag, it was so inundated with mako. Too late, did he realize his error. The mako beast advanced, offensives raised, and when the man tried to back up, he felt

Chieko's hot breath on his shoulders. Pincer attack.

~*~

"Ummm. . . hot dogs with lotsa mustard. And a strawberry snow cone."

"Nah, hot dogs are gross. I want fried chicken and mashed potatoes with that canned gravy stuff. Yeah. And a coke, with ice and a cherry." CJ closed his eyes, imagining a banquet table spread far with his favorites, far as he could see, with an extra long dessert section. "And mom's chocolate cake, but only the chocolate cake from when she spilt all the extra chips in the batter. That's when it was best."

Ifalna was inclined to agree there. She shook her little head, pigtailed bobbing. "But I don't like chicken," she said with a grimace, "What about you Vincent? What would you eat now if you had anything you wanted?"

Vincent was standing in a far corner of the cage, staring out into the gloomy blackness beyond. His crimson cloak hung dead from his back, while his claw tapped a harsh melody on the bars.

"O-konomiyaki to. . . manjuu. . ." Vincent's mouth watered and the kids just stared up at him blankly. "O-hiya ga o-cha."

"This isn't Wutai," CJ called in annoyance, "English please."

"What? Oh, sorry." The man smiled to himself. He was losing it, he never slipped like that. He hadn't spoken Japanese since he was a kid in Wutai, and he hadn't been back to his hometown in nearly. . . well, he couldn't even remember. He supposed it was when they'd arrived there chasing after Yuffie, but no one had recognized him. This was probably because before then, it had been thirty-nine years since he'd set foot there, or rather set foot out of there, on his way to Midgar to apply at Shinra. Anyone who'd known him in the small town had to think he was dead.

"Man, I'm so sick of bread, water, and mystery meat that I could spit," CJ whined, plopping down on the floor of the cage. "I'm so sick of this cage! Vincent, when are we busting outta here, man?"

"I've told you, if we try to escape, we'll just get caught and they might split us up into different cages."

"You wouldn't get caught if you were by yourself. You should just leave me and Eef here, and go get my dad, then come back and whoop up and that'll be that."

"No! I don't want Vincent to leave!" Ifalna cried, tears beginning to form at the edges of her pale violet eyes. CJ shot her an annoyed glance and elbowed her, to which she elbowed him right back with gusto. Vincent shrugged towards the boy, then turned back to his staring match with the darkness.

"You see?" he said flatly, "But it doesn't matter anyway. I won't leave you alone here."

"Well, I wouldn't care." CJ glared out beyond the bars, giving the mako beast crouched there a very mean look. The great green monster glared back, hissing slightly.

"You would so care, liar," Ifalna snapped, resting her chin on her fat little knees. "You keep telling me you're glad Vincent's here, cuz you think he keeps Cheeko away."

"Shut up!"

The little girl stuck her tongue out at him and squinted her eyes. "You're scared of Cheeko!"

"It's Chieko, retard, and I am not!"

"Are so, liar!" She stuck her tongue out harder, making an ugly face, to which CJ replied by making one of his own and shoving her in the shoulder so that she tipped over and landed sprawled on the cage floor.

Vincent barely heard the noise they made with their scuffling. He was watching the mako beast, as it sat like the Sphinx near the exit of the room. It'd entered only a few minutes before, taking Chieko's place guarding them, while she went off to he knew not where. The mako monster was nervous though, he could tell by the way it kept whipping its great hoary head about towards the exit, as though thinking it heard some noise there. Vincent also thought he heard something going on on the other side of the wall, but he couldn't be certain. Even with his genetically-altered senses, the sounds were so faint as to be nearly nonexistent.

"Yeah, well at least I don't cry every time that green monster comes too close t'the cage. Baby!" CJ scowled at his little sister, glancing quickly to Vincent. Usually he wouldn't have cared what Ifalna thought of him. Usually, he would have admitted the truth and told her that yeah, Chieko did scare the hell out of him. But he couldn't say such a thing with Vincent around. As much as the man made him nervous, CJ admired him fiercely. He didn't want him to think he was a total wuss.

If Vincent was aware of CJ's admiration, he didn't show it. He was still gazing in curiosity upon their monstrous guard,

raising an eyebrow when the beast suddenly lifted its head and stared intently towards the exit. The man strained his hearing, closing his eyes and letting the things that Hojo had done to him rise to the surface and alter his senses and genetic makeup as they would. He felt the muscles of his body vibrating with power, his arms felt ready to rip something apart. He smelled the rankness of the air, the mako's beast's deadly odor, and the scent of his own blood on his clothes. But since it was his hearing that he was concentrating on, the effects on it were the most marvelous, or rather, the most disturbing. He could hear, loud as a snare drum, CJ and Ifalna's hearts beating, he could hear a helicopter taking off from the roof of the building they were in, and he could hear, just as though it were he were two feet in front of him, Cloud Strife's voice calling.

"CJ! Ifalna! Call to me, guys, let me know where you are!"

Vincent thought he had to be dreaming. A voice he'd been wishing to hear for days suddenly screaming in his ears. He kept his altered senses blasting, and soon, to his dismay, heard Cloud discoursing with Chieko, and then the sound of battling, the violent clashing of steel and claws. He was puzzled though. Why didn't he hear Tifa, or Cid, or any of the others? Surely Cloud wouldn't come alone.

"VINCENT!!"

The noise was like a gun going off right in his ear and he staggered back beneath the sound, snapping around and seeing CJ peering towards him. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"Whisper! Whisper!" He fell back against the bars, rattling the entire cage. He sat there, head ringing and feeling as though it might never stop.

"Why should I whisper? We never had to before."

He looked up at the boy standing over him, wincing with each syllable though at least now it was bearable. Kids, even when they were trying to be quiet, never really achieved the effect. Apparently he shot CJ enough of an angry glare because the boy backed away from him slowly, staring in horror.

"What is it?" he asked in a pained voice. CJ shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said, taking extra care to whisper now for some reason, "I didn't mean to make you mad. . ."

"What is it? What do you mean?"

"Vincent, your eyes are weird. And you got vampire teeth." Ifalna's voice was faint as though she might burst into tears any moment. Vincent realized what she was saying and turned away, reddening slightly. He kept his face averted from them to hide the effects of Hojo's experimentation. It'd been so long since he'd used his "gifts" that he'd forgotten their consequences. It seemed Hojo had just finished reading Dracula when he'd tinkered around with Vincent's battered body all those years ago. He'd altered him in some very useful ways, but also left him with some very strange attributes whenever he used them. Vincent had a vague idea why. Long ago, when he'd been a Turk and first met Hojo, the warped scientist had made a remark about Vincent's dark hair, eyes, and complexion. They'd been standing in President Shinra's office and he had just been told of his mission: he would accompany Hojo and his wife Lucrecia to the Northern Continent to assist them with their research. It had been a cold day, the young Turk had just stepped in from outside and was still wearing his black overcoat, with his dark suit underneath. Lucrecia had stood there and looked him over quickly, flashing him a smile that he gladly returned. She'd been beautiful and at first sight he was easily captured by her graces, enthralled by her sparkling green eyes, her feathery soft hair and milky complexion. The smile he'd offered to her had been filled with love and passionate fascination. Hojo had seen this smile and marked it. "President, I thought you said you were sending a Turk to accompany us. Not a bloody vampire. Watch out 'Cretia, he may bite." Those had been the only jealous words he'd ever heard Hojo utter. Vincent assumed the things he'd done to his body after shooting him was Hojo's idea of poetic justice. Maybe his idea of a joke. But there'd been nothing funny about locking him up in a coffin for thirty years. Nothing to even chuckle about.

Still, even for the kids' sake, he couldn't get rid of the vampire-like effects just yet; Brightly smouldering red eyes and inch long fangs. He didn't want to miss what was going on outside by shutting off his hearing.

"Don't be scared," he said softly, not looking back at the children for fear of frightening them again, "I'm not mad, it's just something that happens to me sometimes. I just need you two to hush for a minute. I think I hear something from outside."

He heard the kids stop breathing and assumed they too were trying to hear what he heard. He felt bad for scaring them. He hadn't liked the look he'd seen in their faces when he had. It was a look he got often enough from most people he came in contact with but it hurt him someplace deep inside to see it on CJ and Ifalna.

"Great Beast! Appear! I need your help to bring down this wretch!"

At these words, the mako monster rose enthusiastically to its four feet, then immediately drifted apart, its fur, skin,

flesh, everything dividing into molecules of green, misty mako. The vapor hung suspended for a moment, gathering itself, then rocketed out of the room, leaving its three prisoners alone.

"NOW'S OUR CHANCE!! Ooh, sorry, Vincent. Now's our chance, let's bust outta here while they're both gone! C'mon!"

Vincent clutched at his head, ears ringing. Slowly, he pushed down his heightened abilities, concentrating so hard that sweat beaded out on his face. Imperceptible to him at first, then gradually, his hearing reverted to normal, and his fiery red eyes burned softer until they only smoldered in their usual way. The fangs disappeared, and the unnatural animal energy left his limbs. The process made him nearly ready to keel over in a dead faint, but he fought back the weariness, grabbing at the bars of the cage for support.

"Is that better," he asked, opening his eyes through the exhaustion.

"Much." Ifalna waddled towards him and hugged his leg and even CJ looked more at ease. Still, the boy was fairly hopping up and down in excitement.

"We have to hurry, they could come back any second! Please! I'm sick of being in here, if I'm in here any longer I think I'll die!" Vincent looked at the boy wearily, but said nothing. Cloud was outside at that very moment by himself from what the man could discern, and he had to do something. His friend didn't have a chance in hell of defeating both Chieko and the mako beast on his own. Especially if what Vincent had seen that morning hadn't been a hallucination, if he had actually seen Jenova attack him in that alley. From what he'd observed there, Cloud was ill in body and in mind, with Jenova's influence thick upon his will and her mark carved into his face. He needed his help.

Giving that help would be easy enough in theory. Vincent had already tested a few of the bars to the cage in private and found there was one that with a good solid kick, would give way easily and open up a gap wide enough for him to squeeze through. The thought of leaving that cage was a tempting one. He'd been trapped inside for over a week with absolutely nothing to gaze upon but its interior, the pitch dark air around it, and the faces of two kids who were bored to death and ready to leave. He imagined himself on the outside suddenly, stretching his legs in a blinding run towards the exit, his claw bared and ready to deal death to those who'd kept him locked away like a dog. The Chaos demon liked this thought. It roared agreement from Vincent's mind. His limbs ached, ready for the exercise, but the man had to shake his head. He couldn't leave Cloud's children alone. He had promised them and he had promised himself that he wouldn't.

He exited his thoughts to find CJ staring at him. The boy nodded slowly, understandingly, as though he could read what the man was thinking.

"It's okay," he said, "We'll be okay. We'll just wait here, while you go get help. There's someone outside, ain't there? Well, ya won't get this chance again. Please go, Vincent. I wanna go home." CJ looked to him with pleading eyes while Ifalna glanced away, bright tears on her red cheeks.

"What do you say, Ifalna?" Vincent asked her quietly.

"I want to go home." She frowned up at him and her sadness gave him strength somehow, strength to strike at those who'd put the tears in her eyes.

"Alright," he relented at length, "I am not leaving though, I am not leaving here without you two. I'm just going to pop outside and see what's what, alright?" The children nodded and CJ grinned. "Mr. Strife, I'm leaving Ifalna in your care. You keep her and yourself inside this cage until I come back, no matter what."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Valentine, sir." CJ threw the man a smart salute, clacking his heels together though he wasn't wearing any shoes. A faint smile flitted across Vincent's lips, but then without another word, he turned from the boy and approached the bars of their cage. After his eyes roved over them for a moment, he suddenly reared back and released a single, savage kick expertly into the second one from the left. It came away cleanly from the rotted wood that encased its ends and with blinding speed, Vincent darted forward and caught it before it could clatter against the ground. He quickly slid his narrow frame sideways through the new gap, then alighted onto the floor, cloak billowing behind him. Glancing back once and waving to the children, he began to make his way into the blackness, soundlessly disappearing in the same direction he'd seen Chieko go. CJ and Ifalna had their fingers crossed for him.

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For the fiftieth time that night, Neto read through Marlene Wallace's report. The things written there refused to change, no matter how many times he ran his bloodshot eyes over the text. Not a single weapon functional, not a single result from any of their speculation. The young WDD head was beginning to fear for his job. President Reeve had called him personally that evening and quite politely, quite casually, threatened him. Results very soon or else Neto would be transferred to the Shinra Sanitation Department, which maintained Midgar's sewers and specialized in designing more

efficient toilets.

"Damned dinosaurs," he muttered, flinging the report away, "Materia is a thing of the past. We may as well revert to steam power while we're at it. Why do they insist the WDD waste its time with this? Didn't they see Dragon Weapon? That was a hundred percent modern Shinra technology, not a shard of materia in the thing, and look how successfully it handled those Da-Chao dragons! Materia and mako are trendy right now, is all. Those fat head investors think it sounds like a good thing so they insist we work with it. God damned money men, dragging down the heels of science and progress."

Neto rested his elbows dejectedly on his desk, wishing for a sudden flash of genius, a ray of inspiration to come and smack him in the head. He needed something to appease President Reeve, but he didn't know what would do that aside from the materia equivalent of a hydrogen bomb. And Neto could barely cast a simple fire spell much less blow up an entire continent. Of course, there was no one materia or spell that could do that, not since the Black Materia. No, that was where technology would have to come into play, magnifying the Planet's power, focusing it, changing it. But Neto didn't know enough about the entire materia mystique to even begin to design such a device. Sighing in misery, he picked at his fingernails, gazing upon his torn cuticles apathetically. Marlene Wallace is going to get my job, he thought matter-of-factly. How humiliating is that, I ask you? Barely here a week and she's going to take away the position I've had for six years. And she wouldn't go out for ice cream with me.

Neto picked up the stapled stack of papers from his desk again, looking at Marlene's neat writing, gazing at it almost, as though trying to imagine the beautiful, slender hands that had penned it. The only woman to ever come along and actually catch his eye was going to ruin his life and his career. But Neto knew that this would have to happen some day. When he'd been in grad school, he'd always told himself that he'd never love a woman unless she was more intelligent than he was. Well, he'd met that woman and she was making him miserable in fifty different ways. But what a sweet misery it was.

Rubbing at his eyes, the young WDD head glanced towards the glowing red letters of the digital clock on his desk. It was getting close to nine, he needed to head home and feed his goldfish. The last line of the report caught his eye sadistically as he tried to turn away and put on his coat. "Reaction: achieved, Final Results: not achieved (a smoldering hole)" Marlene had scribbled this line in and slapped a little happy face besides it gleefully. Neto tried to be angry with her, but the emotion just wouldn't stick. An entirely different emotion filled him instead, but he managed to push it away, stand from his desk chair, and turn towards his office door, flicking the lights off on the way. This would all happen on a Friday, he thought bitterly. It gives me all weekend to worry and stew.

Stepping out into the dark, deserted hallway, he locked his office up behind him. He was about to turn and head for the elevators when the sound of fighting came to his ears. It nearly sounded as though one of his techs had left a tv on in the laboratories, with some sort of action/sword fight movie playing, but after a moment of careful listening, Neto could tell it was real. Either that, or some damned fine surround sound. Whichever it was, it was coming from Hojo's old labs.

Figuring his day couldn't get any worse, the WDD Head shrugged and made for the labs, thinking dejectedly that if he didn't do something impressive really quick, his next big project would probably be designing President Reeve's new urinal.

~*~

Cloud surveyed the situation carefully. Directly in front of him stood the newly solidified mako monster, its jaws clacking open and shut intimidatingly and flicking sticky foam into his face while its white eyes stuck into the air like knives. Every so often it would release a burst of mako towards him that he'd have to avoid or else have his lungs start burning and his vision start spinning. Turning his blonde head carefully, he saw Chieko behind him. The giant lion-like creature was obviously in pain, bleeding freely from her forehead but most prominently from her leg, which now glistened all over with bright crimson and left red paw prints on the tiles as she moved. Chieko didn't look very happy. Every time Cloud glanced to her face she seemed ready to bite his head clean off and "chew it like a gumball" as she'd so eloquently said she'd like to earlier.

"Death by mako in front of me. Death by teeth and claws to the back of me. At least I have options." Cloud nearly chuckled, tightening his grip on Ultima Weapon. He wouldn't have minded dying so much if only he knew whether his kids were really there or not. They could be just off in the other room. Or they might not be there at all.

They're dead, you sentimental fool. . . I told you before. Your only concern now should be slaying these ignorant creatures flanking you. They are weak, unworthy opponents and your sword, with enough persuasion, will cleave them into horse meat.

"Where are my children?" he asked of the monsters, his voice without fear as though they didn't in fact, possess the advantage over him. Chieko snarled lowly, hating Cloud more than she hated anything else. She would have sold her soul

to rip him apart right there, convinced that he was the reason she'd lived her life in isolation and agony. But her father needed him alive. This fact alone kept him thus. Still, she could hurt him. She could twist the knife that she knew was embedded in his psyche, twist it further and sprinkle guilt, like lemon juice, on the wound.

"Dead," she hissed, taking pleasure in the expression of pain on his face that greeted the word.

"I don't believe you."

"It doesn't matter whether you believe me or not, cretin. Dead is dead is dead. We killed them because they were yours. Perhaps then, you murdered them yourself."

Kill her, Cloud. You know you want to.

"If your name wasn't Cloud Strife, and if you hadn't done what you've done, the mako beast never would have had reason to go to your home and steal your slumbering babies. They would be there as we speak, at peace, alive. But you are Cloud Strife. You have murdered, and betrayed, and stolen. And so that is why your two children are even now two still, cold, pale corpses. Because they belonged to you, cursed from the days of their births." Chieko nearly purred in satisfaction.

Why are you waiting? Strike!

"And so what will you do? Will you slash at us, simply because we performed the inevitable? Or will you turn that blade on yourself, as you should, and strike down the true murderer? Maybe you should wait and give Tifa the pleasure of killing the slayer of her children herself. What will it be? Let your own conscience decide."

Hatred, that hot, bubbling hatred burns a clean hole in your chest. But don't hate yourself. Hate your opponent. That sneering, self-righteous animal before you. Hate makes you strong, my son, hate makes you do things you never thought you'd be able to. Don't let it go to waste. Avenge your children.

Cloud was ready to scream. Voices assaulted him both inside and out. He had to cut his way to freedom. Freedom to think, freedom to act as he wanted, freedom to live or to die however he decided. Since Chieko stood before him, directly in his line of vision, he made of her the wall that had to be cut apart for him to be able to see that beautiful freedom on the opposite side.

The lion-like creature sneered, sure that she'd finally snapped the little man's frail mind like a chicken bone. He stood with his gaze turned down to the floor, the fight seemingly gone out of him, his entire frame trembling and his mighty sword wavering in his hands like a toy. She nodded to the mako beast to begin to poison him, readying herself to lunge and sink her fangs into his neck to deliver her own venom, when Cloud suddenly looked up.

Mainly it was Jenova in his eyes, though he was there too, to a small degree. It was certainly his own will that made him grip Ultima Weapon like a bat and begin flailing it towards Chieko, who could only watch in morbid fascination as each strike of the blade tore chunks of her tissue away and sent her own warm blood splattering on the floor. It wasn't all Cloud though. A small part of the man watched his actions, distantly, and was horrified at the way he was mercilessly, joyfully, cleaving the four-legged, fiery creature to pieces. But it felt too good to cut loose, to replace his guilt with a blood lust, his grief with anger, and his confusion with action. It felt good to let something else take control for a little while. If he'd known he was allowing to happen exactly what Sephiroth had allowed eighteen years before in Nibelheim, he probably wouldn't have felt so elated.

Once his arms were burning so badly with exhaustion he could barely hold Ultima Weapon much less swing it again, he stopped, his vision clearing. Chieko lay in a heap on the ground, nothing more than a furry, bloody lump. A puddle of dark crimson spread about her prone form, widening with each moment. Cloud didn't know if she was still alive, but he doubted it. The mako beast had backed off, bleeding from a few cuts on its face. It hadn't thought that the man's attacks could hurt him, but somehow, he'd found a way. It stayed at a safe distance, looking towards Chieko apathetically.

Cloud's arms were bloodied up to the elbow and he cast a weary gaze about himself, examining the lab for whatever other enemies might be lurking in its shadows, but saw only Vincent, standing coolly in the doorway that the Shinra maintenance men had claimed couldn't be opened.

"Vincent!" he cried out, stepping towards his friend, his voice like a sob, "I thought you were dead!"

"You've been thinking a lot of things that aren't true," the red-eyed man said calmly. He didn't say a word about the brand on his friend's face, though the sight of it sent a shiver through him. It meant that the scene he'd witnessed that morning had truly happened, and that Jenova's horrible plans were real.

"Are you alright?" Cloud asked, feeling as though he were dreaming. Vincent looked paler than usual and there was blood caked in the fabric of his clothes and in his hair too, though it had turned nearly black. The man nodded curtly.

"Remnants from old wounds," he remarked, brushing himself off casually to set his friend's mind at ease. He would have asked Cloud how he was doing, but he didn't need to. Cloud looked half-dead, as though his hold on life would expire

any moment. He shook with his every movement and his breaths rasped harsh in his chest. But his eyes were the worst. They glowed intensely blue and were wild, darting, shining, feverish. They seemed the eyes of a madman. Over it all, gaped the "J", claiming everything it touched.

"Together at last. . ."

Both men looked towards the hissing voice in alarm. The mako beast had gathered its courage together and now approached in a half solid, half vaporous form. As Cloud and Vincent watched, the monster began to grow as mako seeped in from cracks in the walls of the room, green vapors that seemingly appeared from thin air to feed the beast and make it huge. If they'd had a view outside the Shinra building, they would have seen the surrounding plants, trees, and many animals suddenly wither and die, dropping where they stood as the Planet reclaimed the energy from their forms to feed its creation. Before it was done, the creature was nearly twenty feet high, its horned head scraping the ceiling of the lab.

"That's not good," Cloud muttered, brandishing his sword in blistered, bloody hands. Vincent was inclined to agree. Before either man could utter another word though, the creature pounced, moving lightening quick despite its bulk. They scattered, splitting up to avoid its attack and to make its next more difficult. The mako beast landed from the leap, finding with disappointment that there wasn't a body beneath his claws, then looked to his left and right, trying to decide which of its foes was the most dangerous. It quickly picked Vincent, seeing Cloud nearly ready to collapse, severely weakened by his brutal attack on Chieko. Deliberately deadly, it moved towards him.

Vincent watched the approaching creature calmly, claw twitching at his side. It felt wrong somehow, to be reduced to fighting only with the razor-sharp claw at the end of his left arm. He would have preferred the cool grip of Death Penalty, the reassuring kickback after firing, the clean sound of the shot going off and then the satisfying thud of a bullet penetrating flesh and bone. It was cleaner that way. He'd always preferred projectile weapons for that very reason. But he supposed none of that mattered now anyway. The thing coming towards him had no flesh or bone to speak of. Vincent was rather unsure of how to go about attacking a thing without a body. He stood waiting, features a mask of emotionlessness.

Cloud saw the beast turn from him and approach his friend menacingly. He wiped Chieko's blood roughly on his pants, the sticky red making it hard to grip his sword, then lunged forward to attack, not one to take being ignored lightly. As hard and as fast as his exhausted limbs would allow, he slashed out at the thing. To his disappointment, Ultima Weapon did nothing, the great blade slicing through and momentarily displacing the mako, but the green energy immediately flowing back to reseal the gash. His actions did cause the beast to look up and that was all Vincent needed. He made a very strategic retreat, dashing from the monster's path in a blur of black and crimson. He didn't however, move fast enough. Whipping back around to face its prey, the mako monster saw him fleeing and lashed out with a savage claw, hitting the man square in the back and sending him flying into the wall. Cloud saw his friend go down and growled, releasing attack after useless attack into the mako beast's seemingly invulnerable body. The thing laughed at his futile efforts.

"Spawns of evil," it hissed, "You destroy the very thing that keeps you alive. The Planet sacrifices all for its creatures, but you lash out against her. . . you shall die. Now that you both are here in my sights, there'll be no escape and no more waiting. You both shall die."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Cloud asked, trying desperately to catch his breath. The room was spinning about him, and he was feeling decidedly light-headed.

This is your real enemy, Cloud. This is what truly threatens you and Vincent. Only I may harm it, all other attempts are futile. It is an ambassador of the Planet and it wants you dead. Composed of life, only I may destroy it. You must accept the powers that possession of my cells gives you. Only then can you kill this vile nothing. Use those things you were blessed with.

Cloud shook his head, not trusting Jenova for a second. He really wasn't sure what she was talking about, he only knew not to believe a word of it. The man backed up, trying to inch closer to Vincent's crumpled, but twitching form which lay at the base of the wall behind him. The mako beast copied his movements, following him deliberately, waiting for the best moment to strike.

Vincent felt an explosion going off in his head. His eyes were shut, but bursts of acidic color clouded his vision, pain threatening to send him into unconsciousness. But he forced himself to wake up, forced his body to do as he bid, until he could feel the cold hard floor beneath him, and the blood running down his face from the cut in his head. There's a concussion, he groaned to himself. He rolled over, sensing something approaching and saw Cloud and the monster coming closer. He sat up as quickly as he could, fighting back the creeping blackness, and made himself get to his feet. His chest burned, and he felt broken ribs. He'd been hit with a hell of a force in the form of that creature's blunt claw. But he knew it would do worse. He recalled that day in the cage when it had approached him and promised to kill him eventually, telling him the fact in hopes of crushing any ideas the man had had of escaping. Vincent knew there was really only one thing he could do. He knew that only Jenova could harm this creature composed of life. Only the death that she brought could harm

the Planet. Only Chaos could hurt the mako beast.

The demon liked this idea a lot, and Vincent had to concentrate intensely to keep it from taking control right there. He couldn't transform. He remembered all too well what had happened when he had before. That had been when Jenova had come, invading his mind and causing him more pain than a thousand swords or a thousand bullets ever could. If he reverted to Chaos, she'd be free to do so again, and Vincent didn't know if he'd be able to fight her off. He was utterly vulnerable as Chaos, his own personality, his every thought, dream, memory, everything that made Vincent Valentine, Vincent Valentine, locked away as Chaos's desires took command. If Jenova came to control his actions then, there'd be nothing he could do to stop her. But there was no other way. If he didn't do something quick, the mako beast would kill them both and that would be that.

Vincent sighed, rubbing blood out of his eye. His transforming was their only hope. But before losing himself to Chaos, he had to tell Cloud the situation. However he needed to somehow do so without their enemy hearing. Oddly enough, he had a pretty good idea how to go about doing this. Concentrating so deeply that his eyes blazed red, calling up the very things in his genetics that he despised, Vincent spoke. Sort of.

Cloud. Um. . . hey, Cloud.

"What?"

Um. . . turn around a moment.

"I can't, this bastard's eyeing me like I'm the frigging blue plate special."

The mako beast laughed, lashing out with a blow that Cloud easily deflected.

"I wouldn't dirty my insides by devouring you, filth. I only want to see you dead. Who are you talking to, vermin?"

"Who do you think, genius?"

The mako beast lunged suddenly and Cloud dashed to the right, barely escaping the set of glistening fangs brushing past his head. These quick actions switched their positions, so that Cloud was facing Vincent with the mako beast between them. The man swiped at his opponent's head and the monster laughed as the sword sailed uselessly through, then it shot a few tendrils of mako out into Cloud's face. He blinked hard, breathing it up before he could stop himself, a dull familiar fire beginning to burn in his chest. He shook the sting out of his eyes and then shook his head roughly, trying not to keel right over. Vincent watched the actions and sighed, then tried again. Facing his friend now and able to clearly see his face, Cloud got his point right off this time.

Cloud, listen to me. Only Jenova can harm this creature.

"What the hell. . . ?" the blonde-haired man swore, staring at Vincent blankly, eyes wide and disbelieving. He heard his friend's voice right in his ear but as he listened, he saw the man's lips didn't move with the words. It was coming right from in his head. Just as Jenova's voice did. "Get outta my mind, Vincent."

No, it's alright. We both possess Jenova cells. We share a link, strange as that is. This morning, when she attacked you in the alley, I was there as long as she was. I saw everything that happened. And I think you saw me as well, towards the end.

"This is fucked up. . . ." Cloud lowered Ultima Weapon a bit, using one hand to clutch his head as though to stifle all the foreign things screaming in his skull. "How do I-- how do I know you're Vincent and not Jenova?"

Vincent looked to his friend as he stood still and staring, gazing upon him with sadness and a million questions blazing in his eyes. He wasn't so sure now if using this telepathy had been such a good idea. He felt he might simply be feeding the flames of madness that Jenova was slowly building up within Cloud Strife. But there was no other way. He and his friend were trapped between Jenova and between the Planet, two contrasting forces, neither friendly, neither cutting them any slack. He would be almost happy to let Chaos take him now, to leave all the cruelty that fate and the world was heaping upon him.

You want me to prove that I'm truly Vincent? Then listen. CJ and Ifalna, your son and daughter, are alive and waiting for you in a room just beyond this one. They're hungry and they want their mum and dad and they want to go home. Now in order for us to arrange this, we need to take down this mako creature. Only Jenova can harm it however. So I must revert to Chaos and let that demon battle it, it's the only way, since Chaos is a Jenova-spawned mutation. The bad thing about this is that she can take over my mind when I'm Chaos, because I lose consciousness and control as the demon. If this happens, and I attack you or do anything suspicious, I want you to cut me down without a second thought. Alright?

Cloud listened like a man in a dream. It could all be a tremendous lie, a hoax by Jenova, but he'd rather believe a lie that told him his children were alive than a truth that told him they were dead. Blinking away tears, he concentrated and attempted to answer. It was difficult at first but after a few words, his inner voice gained confidence.

I know that only Jenova can harm this thing. Jenova told me herself. Go protect my kids, Vincent, like ya been doing the

past week. I owe ya more than I can ever repay for that. Jenova told me I can use my own powers to fight this thing. I don't want to risk losing you to Chaos or to her. Let me handle this. Go tell my kids I'm coming.

Vincent didn't know how to answer this so he didn't. He wasn't sure he trusted Cloud to control himself, especially if the man allowed part of him to be consumed by Jenova. It would be a physical part undergoing the transformation, rather than a piece of his will or mind, but that burning J on his face seemed too all-consuming for Vincent to allow himself any ease about it. Cloud was right though. It was probably better that he attempt to fight the mako beast, since at least he'd still have his free will while doing so. As Chaos, Vincent wouldn't be able to control his actions, or keep Jenova from influencing his mind.

"Alright," he relented, surprised how good it felt to speak aloud. Cloud nodded.

"What are you two little insects planning?"

"We're planning on kicking your green ass!"

Without another word, Cloud took off, running surprisingly fast despite the deadening weariness that'd moved permanently into his body. On instinct, the mako beast took off after him, leaving Vincent standing against the wall, free to do as he wished. He knew if he stuck around, he'd simply be vulnerable. The beast could use him as leverage to keep Cloud from attacking, he could take him hostage or injure him, distracting the man. Muttering wordless prayers to whatever sadist gods were watching the mad events, Vincent ran off towards CJ and Ifalna, his head aching, his busted ribs throbbing, but worse than all this, a terrible feeling gnawing at his heart saying he'd made the wrong decision.

~*~

Cloud was running to kill time. He picked his feet up high and put them down again, watching Hojo's nutty labs fly past as he moved from room to room. The mako beast was at his heels, the only thing keeping him there being the head start Cloud had achieved by running off without warning.

Are you ready, my son? You've held much power all these years, every since Hojo injected you with my cells, but you never knew enough to take advantage of it. The mako counteracted my power, its larger amount taking precedence in your body. But you need me now, don't you? You need my strength. You must only surrender yourself to me and I can use your body to slay this Planetary nuisance.

Cloud wondered if he had any other options. Nope. Without warning the mako beast slashed at his back, its claws leaving a trail of dripping red through his skin. He staggered forward, and Jenova screamed instructions into his skull. He felt a sudden burning in the ends of his arms, which instantaneously elevated to such a degree that he couldn't hold Ultima Weapon anymore and the weapon fell to the tiles, its glow dying as it left his hands. But still, he kept running, legs stretching out as far as he could make them, until he saw the elevator doors looming directly before him, announcing his arrival at an aptly named dead end.

Stop running.

With no where left to go, he was forced to comply with her command, skidding to a halt and turning around, expecting to see his pursuer's jaws opened wide and ready to devour him with fangs and mako. The monster was there, yes, but it no longer looked ferocious. Rather, it was cowering. And it had its reasons.

Cloud looked down upon himself and felt drunk. Where his arms had once been, two immense, scaled strangely-shaped things poked out, thickly-muscled, purple, and tipped by barbs. They glistened wet with his own blood, the remnants of the skin of his old arms laying in folds at his feet. He experimented briefly with these new weapons and found he could control them easily, and also that if he thought hard enough about them, they would change. At his command, they each grew a hand-like shape at their ends, each finger tipped by a serrated claw.

"Cool."

A distant voice told him that these new additions to his body should be terrifying the shit out of him, but that voice just didn't quite register. He actually felt quite at ease with the claws, and a strange, sedate feeling passed over him. That is, until he recalled the mako beast cowering before him. Then he got pissed.

Lunging forward, not even remembering what it was like to be tired, he struck out, sinking his right claw into the monster's shoulder with a sickening lurch. Cloud felt satisfaction as the thing cried out in pain, then was fascinated at the oozing, blackish-green blood that poured from the gash he'd made.

"You bleed pretty well after all," he remarked, advancing on the beast cockily.

"Jenova demon," it hissed, drawing back and nursing its shoulder. "You don't know what you're doing."

Cloud smiled wickedly, flexing his two twisted arms.

"Oh, I think I do. I think I realize it now. Mako's plagued me all my life, hurt me, made me different when I didn't want to be different. It keeps me from aging as I should, keeps me from being a proper father, a proper husband. Makes people look at me funny, and stare, wondering at my eyes. But now, I see I've been given a chance to make mako, no, make the god damned Planet atone for that. Hmph. Atone through you, my friend."

Giving a savage cry, he lashed out, slashing the vaporous beast across the face, sidestepping its fumbling attempts at a counterattack, then striking again. He withdrew his claws, shaking the green blood from them like water. He was enjoying himself. The mako beast cringed and cried out, wanting to beg for its life, but trying to remain proud and stoic in the name of the Planet that it stood for.

"No, you don't understand, you pathetic little puppet! "it roared, "You and that red-eyed man and Jenova are what's evil! The Planet, the LifeStream, and I, we are good! See through your clouded mind, you deluded human, and witness the truth! Jenova will have you and your friend devour all mako here, leaving the Planet a barren rock and all forms of life but withered shells! Jenova is death! When you fight against me, you are fighting against life in her name!"

The words made Cloud pause in his attack. He glared at his foe suspiciously.

"If that's true, then why do you fight side by side with that Chieko beast? She was evil."

"She was of Jenova, it's true, but I used her like a pawn to lure you and the red-eyed man here. I needed her help to contain your children. I never harmed your children, they were merely bait to bring you to me. Chieko is dead now. . . "the beast sounded momentarily saddened, "But I would have had to kill her eventually. All things Jenova must be exterminated from this Planet, if life is to have a chance to thrive."

"I suppose that includes Vincent and I?"

The mako beast glowered at the man through his pure white eyes and hissed.

"Yesss. . . I was created for the sole purpose of cleaning this world, purifying it of the death, the virus, the disease that is Jenova, the calamity that fell here 2000 years ago from the sky and has tainted the Planet ever since. You are one of her sons, as was Sephiroth, as was Hojo, as is Vincent. All of this wicked family shall die. Life will be safe once more."

"Why do you protect this selfish Planet? Everything it does it does to keep itself safe. In order to feed you the mako you required to grow to the girth you're at now, it thoughtlessly killed everything in a quarter mile radius. It created you without a single thought going towards the loneliness you'd feel while locked away in this lab waiting for your time of usefulness to arrive. It doesn't care. It does not care."

The words had come from Cloud's mouth, but they weren't his. Jenova spoke through him, her every word drenched in hot hatred. But the mako monster shook its dripping head, sending flecks of its green blood flying in the air. The droplets caught the light, shone silver, then died away.

"No, "it said simply, quietly, calmly, "The good of the all outweighs the good of one. There can be no individuals. I do not matter. The continence of life is all that is important. It may be a cold, heartless system, and it may be a cold, heartless Planet, but in the end, it's all that we have, and it's more than worth dying for to protect."

"But the individual is all that matters in the human mind. You cannot tell a man that his one life isn't the most important thing in the universe. His mind cannot grasp it being anything but that. So how can humanity and the Planet ever find a common ground? The Planet puts itself above everything else, while mankind fights to do the same. Always at odds, never at peace."

The mako monster held its head up nobly quite suddenly, staring down at Cloud with wisdom in its white eyes. "You do not understand, Jenova. The LifeStream is that peace, is that common ground. It is where humanity and the Planet finally see eye to eye, and mankind is finally able to comprehend his place in the great system of things."

"Understanding only in death then?"

The monster lowered its head and shut its eyes. "Sadly, "it replied, "For most, yes."

"You are a miserable species! "Cloud cried, throwing his arms out to his side. Jenova granted him control again suddenly, and he found his limbs reverted back to normal. He flexed his fingers, the flesh grown anew and without scars. It was like waking up from a dream, and he felt foggy and disoriented. He couldn't quite remember what had happened in the last few minutes. The last thing he really recalled was a horrible burning in his arms and then he'd dropped Ultima Weapon. He saw his sword laying forgotten on the floor nearby. He dashed past the mako beast and retrieved it, holding it securely in his recently renewed hands. He turned about in time to see the great, bleeding creature charging. He hadn't time to act and it tackled him, throwing him roughly to the ground.

His earlier attacks had drained much of the energy from it, and the mako beast had greatly diminished in size, but still it

stretched nearly eight feet tall and pinned the man easily. Again and again, it buffeted Cloud with its immense claws, pushing them in and raking them across his chest, legs, arms and face. He burned everywhere, his body was on fire, a red, sizzling ache that made tears spring from his eyes and as he breathed in his opponent's mako, his lungs and head matched the stinging, crippling blaze. He thought he felt his soul burning away in the fire fueled by his body. He knew for sure that he was in the process of dying. The creature had him locked fast in his grip, each blow knocking more of his life away, literally tearing him apart. He prayed for the blackness of death to hurry and arrive and end the torment. Razor claws shredding his flesh, merciless fangs spilling his blood. It lunged its hoary head down, jaws wide, and bit right into his shoulder, grabbing hold of his collarbone, pulling on it and snapping it messily, shards of bone flying out and striking his face. Its head came up, again, mouth dripping crimson, then lunged again and repeated the action with his other shoulder. Cloud screamed.

No, my son. No, my warrior. You won't die today. Take up Ultima Weapon, and forget everything else. Take it in your hands and hold on harder than you have to anything else in your life. Forget the pain, forget the struggle, forget even your enemy. Mother will handle this. . .

Spasmodically, Cloud grasped the hilt of his sword, clutching so hard he left fresh impressions in the leather grip. The mako beast's claws punctured through his ribs and tore a hole in his lungs. He coughed up a stream of red, then choked on the blood as he tried to draw a breath. But still he held the blade. Ultima Weapon drew its power from Cloud's soul. It used his very life energy to function, and normally glowed a bright, blazing, whitish-blue, almost like its master's eyes. But now, as Cloud began to feel a creeping sensation wash over him, unsure of whether it was long awaited for death or Jenova's gripping control, the blade began to burn crimson, blood red. Small purple tendrils snaked deep in the sanguine glow, and beautiful silver glimmers skated over its surface.

Suddenly, pain disappeared, consciousness disappeared, and the last thing Cloud saw were his own red-streaked hands raised over his head, sword grasped tightly.

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Neto had stood just outside the door to Hojo's lab for nearly ten minutes, listening to the insane goings-on inside in morbid fascination. He'd heard two creatures, then two men's voices, one of which he could nearly swear was Cloud Strife. At first he'd assumed the other must be Reno, but a moment's careful listening disproved that assumption. Now, there was little to hear. The fighting noises had moved off deeper into the lab, out of earshot. Now, it seemed only deathly still on just the other side of the rusted metal door. Neto figured it would probably be reasonably safe to enter now and see just what the hell was going on. Normally, he would have high-tailed it to the nearest phone and called one of the security guards, but he thought that Marlene might be inside working late, and didn't want to pass up the opportunity to dash in and make sure she was alright, possibly racking up a few points in his own favor in her book. He didn't know what was happening on the other side of the door, but he was sure it could be resolved with his helping, rational hand. He had no idea what was really going on. He'd never seen a real monster, not since he'd been a kid in the pre-Meteor days and his school bus had been attacked by some really viscous mutant squirrels. His knowledge of the creatures extended little beyond that. He figured he could handle squirrels.

Upon opening the door and seeing just what was inside though, he changed his mind. There was a blood-soaked, red-furred something collapsed on the floor nearby. A few of its limbs were severed and its head lolled unhealthily to one side, bright pink tongue hanging out like a strip of bubble gum. The tech peered closer, unable to pull his eyes away, and saw guts and intestines spilled out onto the cold blue tiles. Neto turned green, nearly losing his lunch beside the carnage. He backed away quickly, hugging the wall and inching closer towards the room's rear where he could hear the sound of voices, Cloud's and then some hissing, spitting voice, that almost seemed to speak like a mad cat would if it could. Moving towards the source, he kept one eye on the butchered creature at his feet, swearing he could still hear a rattling breath reverberating in its chest and a slow, lazy heartbeat struggling not to quit. Neto doubted the monster would ever awaken but the young WDD Head certainly didn't want to be around if it did.

After many slow, deliberate steps, he reached the hallway that branched off from the mako room and led back towards the rest of dead Hojo's old labs. Pressing close to the wall, he peered off through the dimness, to make out the owners of the agitated voices he heard. As his vision adjusted to the dim light, and the dust motes finished filing past his eyes, Neto decided he definitely didn't like what he saw.

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When Cloud came to, he nearly passed out again. The muscles of his arms throbbed and his legs wobbled like jelly. This feeling was familiar. It was the exhaustion he customarily felt after performing the Omnislash technique. The move took a lot out of him, but he didn't seem to remember having done it at all. But he didn't remember a lot of things all of a sudden. For instance, how was it he was standing? He couldn't recall getting to his feet and by rights, standing should have been impossible. He recalled each wound that the mako beast had inflicted upon him only moments before, and many of them had been fatal. However, when he inspected himself, he found he was unharmed. Tired, confused, yes, but there wasn't a scratch on his body. Desperately, he peeled off his gloves, then the shredded remains of his jacket and shirt, tossing them messily to the ground. He was coated in blood, but as he smeared the fresh liquid away from his skin, he found no gashes, no cuts it could have bled from. The terrible mark on his face came to mind suddenly, and his heart leapt with hope as an idea popped into his head. He was still holding Ultima Weapon, the sword returned to its normal blue. He wiped away the coating of green blood upon it and looked at his reflection in the blade. The brand upon his face glared back defiant, black and red against his flesh.

"That mark will never. . . will never leave you, Jenova demon. . . "

The mako beast's voice was weak. Hearing it now, Cloud knew it was dying. The remnants of the proud vaporous monster lay at his feet, a collection of limbs, a skeleton-like frame, and its majestic horned head. It glowed slightly with the mako it still possessed, but black streaked the once pure green. Looking down, Cloud realized now that he was covered in the beast's dark green blood, and it was puddled at his feet, soaking into his boots. He saw it mix with the red of his own blood on his clothes and form a horrible dead, brown color.

"Interesting. . . "the monster remarked, noticing the foul results, "Perhaps all of this is futile after all. The blood of humanity and the blood of the Planet mix to make black. Red and green cancel each other out when combined and all is neutrality. Perhaps we should heed the significance in this."

"No," Cloud insisted, shaking his head, "Red and Green, when side by side, enhance each other, red makes green glow all the brighter and only green can show the true purity of red. They're complements, beast."

The thing didn't answer him. It only lay, white eyes half shut, staring at nothing. Cloud gazed upon it in shame. He'd given Jenova control and he'd killed this ambassador of the Planet. It was Cloud who was evil and the mako beast who'd been trying to stop him. He realized this now. Laying Ultima Weapon aside, he knelt down towards the creature, ignoring the clouds of mako and the thick stench of death that the thing's blood gave off.

"Beast," he said solemnly, "I vow to carry out your mission. I will kill the disease Jenova."

The mako monster made a strange noise that Cloud first interpreted as a cough, or a death rattle. But no. It was laughing at him.

"You'd do better to just cut your throat now, human. You cannot destroy your mother. Rightfully, you should rise, seek out the red-eyed man, slay him, then slay yourself. That would leave Jenova powerless and she might move on from this world, leaving it in peace. But you won't. You'll attempt what no human can do, what you and your friends tried years ago and failed at. You cannot kill her. She cannot die by the hands of humanity."

"I will succeed!" Cloud swore, his fists clenching at his sides, "And if I can't, then, then, I will take my own life. For the good of the Planet, for my children, for Tifa, and for my friends."

"Do you swear this?"

"I swear it by everything I hold dear."

The mako monster's white eyes slipped shut finally, almost peacefully.

"Then the Planet shall be with you. . . "

Cloud watched it struggle in anguish for a few seconds, and then it died, the consciousness that had mysteriously began in it long ago, just as mysteriously ending. The remaining mako dissipated and hung in the air, leaving only the blackish-green puddle of blood underneath to mark that the creature it had formed had ever even existed. Head bowed in shame, but eyes bright in determination, the man rose from its side, gripping his sword anew. What had he done?

He didn't know what would be the proper action now. He no longer wished to die. He only wanted to see CJ and Ifalna and take them home. He wanted to have a drink with Reno and Rude. He wanted to have another chat with Reeve, he wanted to be annoyed by the mundane aspects of his job. But more, more than almost anything else, he wanted Tifa to hold him, and stroke his hair, and whisper love in his ear. His angel's face stood before his eyes, but he blinked it away. He wanted his family and he wanted everything else to just disappear.

But I am your family, Cloud.

"I wouldn't recommend pissing me off right now, Jenova."

The voice quieted, and he thought with a degree of satisfaction that he'd intimidated it. He turned to leave, heading towards the mako room and the door he'd seen Vincent appear out of earlier. As he approached the hallway leading back, a thin, mouse-like man hopped out at him. On instinct, Cloud raised his sword to launch a blow that would have taken the fellow's head off, but stopped himself in time, blinking hard.

"Shit! It's Dr. Neto, Mr. Strife! Stop!" The little man held his arms defensively over his face, as though that pathetic protection would have shielded him from the attack anyways. Cloud lowered Ultima Weapon, glaring at the WDD Head in annoyance.

"What do you expect when you jump out at me?"

"I apologize." Neto fought to catch his breath and slow his heart, eyeing Cloud suspiciously. "Just what's going on in here?" he asked, "I just saw you murder that green thing, and there's some kinda red thing in the room back there, and dammit, I want answers!"

"I don't have any to give you. I only know that my kids are in here somewhere and that those "things" you were talking about are the ones that took 'em. Now move aside, please, Neto." Cloud shoved past the young man, sheathing his sword at his back. He walked the length of the hallway, Neto snapping questions at his heels. Cloud momentarily glanced at Chieko's still, mutilated form laying in the mako room, then approached a dark open doorway set in the wall. Just before he stepped inside, Vincent materialized out of the blackness and eyed him in curiosity. He saw Neto and wasn't sure whether he was friend or foe, so he voiced his question silently.

Is the beast dead?

"No more mind talk, Vincent, "Cloud muttered irritably, "I get enough of that from the bitch in my head. Yes, it's dead. But we shouldn't have killed it. It was fighting for the Planet and only wanted us out of the way because we're of Jenova. The mako monster was the good guy. We're the bad guys. For once, the bad guys have won."

"No, Jenova is the quote unquote bad guy. Don't let anything tell you differently." Vincent glared darkly, his words adamant. He gestured towards Neto with a flick of his head and asked, "Who's he?"

"Dr. Matsuo Neto, nice to meet you." Neto stuck his hand out and Vincent raised an eyebrow. He shook the man's hand rather stiffly, then pulled away.

"Give Cloud your lab coat, Doctor, "Vincent ordered in his politest tone.

"What the hell? Why?"

"Yeah, why?" Cloud asked, looking up.

"So you can wipe the gore from yourself. You're covered in blood and your kids don't like that."

With these words, Cloud practically ripped the white coat from Neto's body. He scrubbed at his face, chest and arms, till the white fabric was died a ruddy, brownish hue, streaked by red and green. Underneath the blood, Vincent was surprised to see there were no wounds, only whole, perfect flesh. Except of course, for the stitched gash on his face.

"They're back there, "the man said finally, moving aside so his friend could pass. Cloud took off down the hallway and Neto tried to follow, but Vincent held up his claw to halt him.

"Give them a minute, "he said.

After over a week of agony, Cloud at last breathed easy. He held his two children tightly, one in each arm, tears rolling down all threes' faces.

"Daddy, I can't breathe!" Ifalna gasped, trying to wriggle out of his grip. Cloud engulfed her face in kisses and she laughed. "Where's mommy?" she asked.

"Mom's at home, waiting for us."

"Let's go!" Ifalna hopped out of the cage and onto the floor outside, looking around cautiously, then glaring in impatience at her brother, as her dad held him tight by the waist and hoisted him off the ground.

"Dad, "CJ giggled, voice thick with happy tears, "Put me down! Cut it out!"

"You little punk, "Cloud laughed, running his fingers through CJ's hair until it stuck straight up, "Why didn't you tell me you guys were here?"

"I didn't have any change to use the payphone, "CJ said sarcastically at which Cloud tickled him until he was purple. Finally though, he released his son reluctantly, setting him on his feet and looking him over. Aside from being filthy, tired,

and in his pajamas, the kid looked great. So did Ifalna, he saw, peering over his shoulder at the little girl. Both children stared at their dad with different emotions though.

"Didja get in a fight?" CJ asked, suddenly quiet. Cloud touched the mark on his face, the problems of Jenova and the Planet seeming distant and trivial now. He shrugged, grinning wide.

"Yeah, I had to whoop up a little."

"Did you beat up Cheeko and that green monster?" Ifalna asked, eyes wide, "I didn't like them."

"You don't even need to worry about them anymore, sweets. They never even existed."

"Awesome, "CJ breathed, admiration in his eyes as he looked to his dad, "But you got cut up or something, are you okay?"

"You forget who you're talking to, Ceej. They had nothin' on me. You guys wanna go see Vincent? I heard he's been babysitting you both the past week."

"Yeah! Let's blow this pop stand. The food sucks and the service is terrible!"

Cloud's heart soared as he laughed at his son's quip. He'd gone from the lowest pit of misery to the highest peak of joy all in the same hour, thinking he'd lost his children forever, and then discovering they'd been there waiting for him all along. He picked Ifalna up in his arms and held CJ tightly by the hand. They exited the room merrily, the man swearing he'd never let anything separate them again.

~*~

They couldn't see her, but Chieko watched the red-eyed man and the pale doctor closely. The wounds covering her body, and actually severing her body in some places, burned relentlessly but she put her mind someplace else, focusing on the humans and ignoring her own pain.

"So, just who are you?" Neto was asking Vincent as they stood near the doorway. The WDD Head seemed nervous at being left alone with the dark man, and Chieko found this humorous. If that doctor only knew what he was capable of.

"Vincent Valentine."

"Ah, you're one of them, then, eh? One of the saviors of the world? Which are you, the uh, airship pilot, the AVALANCE leader, or the ex-Turk?"

Vincent chuckled, amused by how easily the media had summed them all up years ago. "The ex-Turk, "he replied.

"Interesting, "Neto grunted, not sounding particularly interested.

Chieko shut her eyes, feeling unbearable pain wash over her. She was trying to shut it out, but this new pain was different and insisted upon being heeded. She'd been awake for a while, playing dead. This was easy to do, considering it required very little acting. She was amazed to still be alive at all. Her own will and the Jenova cells in her body kept her going, though truth be told, she wouldn't have minded death.

"If that's true, then why do you fight side by side with that Chieko beast? She was evil."

Cloud's words rang again in her ears. She'd heard he and the mako beast's entire conversation. Her friend's response had shoved a dagger into her blackened heart.

"She was of Jenova, it's true, but I used her like a pawn to lure you and the red-eyed man here."

A pawn. Her only friend in her entire life. . . she'd been only a pawn to the creature. It made her sick. It made her want to shed tears, a human-like action that she'd never attempted.

"I needed her help to contain your children."

That was all she'd been good for to her friend. She'd been a tool and the mako beast had never cared for her, not really. Sadness engulfed her mind, and she realized that all those years pacing in the deserted labs with only the green vaporous creature for company, she'd truly been alone. Except for her seldom seen father, she'd been alone. Life could not be more cruel.

"Chieko is dead now. . . but I would have had to kill her eventually. All things Jenova must be exterminated from this Planet, if life is to have a chance to thrive."

Was she evil? Chieko wondered. Was her mother Jenova truly evil? No, it was not possible. The only mother she'd ever known could not be all those terrible things that the beast had claimed. She would never believe the horrible words that'd sprang from the maw of that wretched, traitorous mass of mako. If Cloud hadn't done it the favor, it would have killed her

in her sleep, she knew. Now, now she had died by her new brother's hands instead of her friend's, but she was betrayed either way and dying nonetheless.

"Can we go in now? That bloody corpse is giving me the heebies. . . "

Neto's voice drifted to her ears and she imagined herself as she must look now; horribly mangled, a piece of slaughtered meat.

"Yes, we must all leave this place. Something is not right. . . Come on. . . "

She heard faint footsteps that quickly died away as the men left. Chieko shuddered with pain. She too would die away now. And good riddance. No one cared for her anyways. Her one friend in life had been revealed as a Judas and where was her father? Where was he to comfort his dying daughter?

"I'm right here, Chieko."

"I failed you, father," she sobbed, forcing her eyes open.

"No, you didn't. The fight isn't over yet. We are about to strike the decisive blow. Stand up."

"I can't. I am killed."

"Hardly, child. Jenova! Wherever you are, make our daughter whole again! I offer her to you now as a weapon. Use her as you will!

Chieko, noble beast. Relinquish yourself to me.

Chieko couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her mother had never addressed her, not once in all her life. Father'd always told her it was because she was unworthy, and she should try to become a stronger fighter in order to please her, but no matter how she'd practice, Jenova's voice would never comfort her when she cried out for it. But now, here it was.

"Mother? Where have you been?"

Never mind that now. I'll explain everything later. Right now you must let me in.

"Of course. . . "

Immediately, Chieko lost consciousness as Jenova seized control of her body and mind. Within seconds, the horrible, fatal contusions began to weave closed, pooled blood oozing back into the gashes it had spilled from. Her severed forelegs joined to her body again, bone and muscle, tissue and nerve all mended instantly. Her father watched the process with wide eyes, a sneering grin on his face.

"How I love the women in my life," he laughed.

~*~

". . . And then Cheeko bopped 'im right in the head and beat 'im up. Me and Ceej were really scared."

"Yeah, Chieko didn't like it when Vincent said she looked like Nanaki."

"Well that makes sense, she got really mad when I said the same thing."

"Man, I'm glad we're free, I'm so hungry I could eat a house."

"A horse, you mean?"

"Nah, too small, I want a whole house, walls and roof and everything."

Cloud laughed, punching CJ in the arm and squeezing Ifalna tighter. As they rounded a corner in the hallway, they ran into Vincent and Neto which nearly gave them a heart attack. Vincent saw Cloud with his children and thought he'd seen very few more beautiful sights in his life. His friend looked better already. He still seemed ready to collapse from exhaustion and stress, but there was life in his eyes now, and not just that horrible glimmering insanity.

"Is everything alright?" he asked and Cloud nodded happily, making a look as though the question were a ridiculous one. "Good, then let's go. Ifalna, CJ, and I have been in this evil place too long. I'm beginning to forget what the sky looks like."

"It's still there," Neto sighed, confused about the whole scenario but no longer caring enough to ask questions. The three men and two children walked quickly down the hallway, glad to leave the dark of the secret chamber behind and cheering at the sight of the fluorescent lights of the mako room just ahead. Vincent would have liked to hang around and look for Death Penalty, but he decided it would be best for them not to push their luck.

"We found Yunata," Cloud said suddenly, the thought popping into his head. Vincent brightened.

"Is she alright?"

"Oh, yeah. Some guy in Wall Market found her and was trying to sell her. We paid a pretty penny to get her off him."

Vincent smiled faintly, eyes dark. "I'll have to pay him a little visit and get your gil back," he said.

"Who's Yunata?" Neto asked.

"Don't worry about it, Neto," Cloud said lightly, "Be happy that you're clueless and wandered in late enough to miss the action."

"From what I did see, Mr. Strife, I can appreciate it."

"Maybe you didn't miss all of it, Dr. Neto. . ."

Cloud, Neto and the kids looked to Vincent, the same question on their lips, but he only shook his head at them and gestured ahead.

"Oh, fuck. . ." Cloud moaned.

As they exited the darkness of the hall and stepped from the doorway into the mako room, a sight soured their eyes, assaulting them just as violently as the room's harsh fluorescent lights.

"Daddy, what is that?"

Chieko hovered in the middle of the expansive room, only it wasn't Chieko anymore. Her wounds had been healed and her life restored, but her body had mutated to such a degree in the process that she was hardly recognizable. She'd tripled in size, and the large, leathery wings she'd always had flapped strongly, supporting her bulk and keeping her afloat. Her face no longer looked like Nanaki's, except for perhaps in its basic shape. Her eyes were wide and staring, lacking pupils and glowing purple with some all-consuming fire. A strange blue liquid dripped down her furry cheeks and splattered on the tiles beneath her. Her horns were covered with the same horrid stuff as were the tentacles that'd sprung from the rest of her body and the thick black tail that slapped at the floor. Chieko turned and looked with disdain upon the humans now standing before her form. Her black lips parted in a feral grin, exposing row upon row of glinting silver fangs. Blinking slowly, lids covering and uncovering her eyes with a sick, sucking sound, she asked, "How do you like my new look?"

"Cute," Neto said faintly, his knees beginning to knock together and his blood turning to ice. He turned to the two men behind him, cold sweat running into his eyes, "This is cute. Really really cute and imaginative. I'm impressed."

"Shut up, Neto," Cloud muttered, feeling sick, "Take the kids and get back through the door--"

"No! No more fighting!"

Chieko roared these words, moving before Cloud even had time to draw his sword. She lashed out, the anonymous blue liquid flinging from her face and splattering the group. Cloud covered his children with his body, keeping the stuff from hitting them, but then he went down, clutching at his burning flesh. "Acid. . . !" he said through gritted teeth. He heard Neto's screams from his side, as the liquid burned into the young tech's face.

"Daddy!" Ifalna cried in a panic, standing over Cloud and pushing his shoulder to get him to look at her. He did so, getting a single glimpse of her tear-streaked face, before she was snatched away again by Chieko's lashing tentacles. Before he had a chance to cry out, Vincent did him the favor.

"Release her, you spawn of hell!" the man roared, getting painfully to his feet and clutching his ribs. Cloud had never actually heard his friend raise his voice, not once in the entire thirteen years he'd known him. He didn't have long to ponder the outburst though, as Chieko laughed wickedly and shot another tentacle out, this time wrapping it tightly around CJ's neck. Cloud grabbed at his son, clutching him tight around the waist. The boy gagged, choking and turning blue, clawing at the acid-coated tentacle burning his throat inside and out.

"Hang on, kid!" Cloud cried, the events swirling about his eyes as though he were in a nightmare. And this was so much like nightmares he'd had. Chieko pulled viciously at his son but Cloud kept his grip tight. CJ gasped and sobbed.

"I'll snap his neck if you don't release him," Chieko growled, tugging harder. Vincent appeared suddenly, lashing out with his claw in an attempt to sever the tentacle holding CJ, but Chieko shot an arm towards him, smashing him right where his broken ribs were. He flew backwards and landed in a heap, gasping for air and coughing up blood. The world was turning to shit all around him, but he couldn't think about it. Chaos was attempting to break free and he had to use all his strength to keep the demon at bay. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chieko spit more of her blue acid into Cloud's body, hitting him with a sizzling sound, like bacon frying in a pan. It ate away at his skin and the man fairly doubled over in pain. Needless to say, he lost his grip on his son.

"CJ!" he wailed, voice thick but broken in anguish and agony. The boy rocketed upwards, legs flailing as Cloud tried to follow but managed only in falling forward onto his knees grasping at nothing. Chieko drifted high above the crawling little man, the two children held tight in her many serpentine limbs. CJ hollered out but Ifalna only stared, eyes wide, cheeks

devoid of color.

"I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" the boy cried, struggling furiously, "Let me go, or my dad'll kick your ass!"

"I'd like to see him try."

Cloud stared up at it all, blue eyes blazing, the mark of Jenova stark on his face. He hadn't slept in days, had spent that week in a living death as he blamed himself for the disappearance of his children. That morning, he'd nearly killed one of his best friends, then been assaulted by Jenova, cut into by Sephiroth, and left like a broken doll in a dirty alley. Then the sun had set and things had really began to fall apart. He'd tried to kill himself, to stop from becoming the murderer that Jenova desired, then had realized all along his stupidity and raced to free his children from their prison. Then the attack by Chieko, her slaughter, then his slaying of the mako beast. All of these activities piled high upon Cloud's mind and body. If felt as though the conflict would never end, as though he'd fight forever with nothing to ever show for it except failure after failure. There were his children, the only things that mattered to him in the world, held high above his head like a carrot before a donkey's nose. He could look all he liked, but he couldn't leap high enough to clutch them in his embrace again and take them home to Tifa.

Tears streaming down his face, he fought to keep on his feet, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. Chieko looked down on him in contempt.

"What's the matter, bastard? Have I taken your toys away? It doesn't feel very nice to have your possessions stolen from you, does it? But that's what you did to me. Took away my freedom, and my chance to live a normal life. For over twenty years I've lived my existence here. It only got worse after Meteor struck and the labs were shut down. Then there was no one talk to, the scientists all died or ran away. Poor Chieko! was cried by no one though. I was a simple casualty, a forgotten participant in a failed experiment. So I sat here, waiting for the day when I could exact my revenge on the man who my father says is the cause for it all. It's my time now, Cloud Strife! You stole from me! You stole my life only you didn't hold it above me so I could see it and marvel. No, you broke it in two before my eyes. Well, an eye for an eye, human. I'll break your toys, your little squirming dolls and let you feel some of the pain you've inflicted upon me!"

With these mad words, Chieko reared up, her thickly-muscled tail lunging towards the back wall of the mako room. With unimaginable strength, the appendage sunk into the thin, steel walls, and they screeched as they dented. Again and again she pummeled them and eventually the steel broke and split apart with an ear-splitting squeal, revealing bare concrete. This only needed one mighty blow. The cinder blocks and lumber supports that made up the barrier between the mako room and the outside air exploded in a shower of debris. Stone, plaster, and wood mixed with shards of metal flew everywhere and the kids screamed and Cloud cried out. When the dust had cleared, they all saw that a huge gaping hole had been ripped in the side of the building. The serene but cold night air blew in, smelling of chimney smoke. Below them, sixty-eight stories down, Midgar slumbered. It was into this black, thin air that Chieko thrust Cloud's children.

"Hopefully," the creature began, glaring at Cloud with dark amusement, "Now you'll see I'm not playing around with you." She held the boy and girl out threateningly, her tentacles loosely gripping their waists. Neither dared to breath, much less shout out. They hovered in the void, motionless in fear.

"Please," Cloud said, addressing Chieko, nearly blinded by the salty tears in his eyes, "Please, I'll do anything you want. Anything. Please, don't let them go."

"What would you do if I said I wanted nothing of you but pain? Revenge? What does it feel like to know there is nothing you can offer me that will keep me from flinging these two little insects that you hold so dear out into death? Because that is the case, you bastard. That is all I want."

Cloud gritted his teeth, shaking his head in disbelief, waiting for time to stop, for the world to end, for something to happen to spare his babies.

"Chieko!"

Suddenly, that miracle he wished for happened. At the sound of her name, the dripping, hovering creature froze, tightening her loosening grip on CJ and Ifalna. She looked about for the source of the voice, as did Cloud and Vincent. Neto only lay sniveling on the floor, convinced he was dreaming and waiting to wake up.

"Chieko, do not forget yourself in your anger."

"Yes, father. . ." she mumbled, and Cloud thought that she sounded sheepish, like a rebuked child.

"Who is that?" he heard Vincent ask, his voice strained as he forced himself to sit up despite the fiery pain in his chest. "Who is your 'father'?"

"Why, Vincent Valentine, you old creature of the night. Don't you recognize my lovely swansong of a voice, my friend?"

It took a lot of effort for Cloud to force himself to take his eyes off his children, but he did so, just for a fraction of a second, to glimpse towards Vincent questioningly.

"Who--?"

Vincent shook his head, fear in his normally impassive features. He pounded a fist into the floor in rage and denial, teeth clenched and eyes dark. He knew. He knew who the damned voice belonged to.

"You're horribly, evilly, wretchedly dead," he spat, and all there gazed upon him in curiosity as he used a tone they'd never heard. "I killed you. You hear me? I killed you thirteen years ago!"

"Yes. . . "the voice relented, "Yes, you did."

From out of the small, dark doorway that led off to the cages and to the pitch dark hidden chambers, a figure emerged in a very unobtrusive, unspectacular way. It was a human sort of figure, but there was something off in the coloring of its skin, too green, too pale perhaps. The thirty or so extraneous, snake-like limbs that sprouted off its body at every angle might also strike the casual observer as odd, as might, perhaps, the globs of stringy, pulsing tissue that covered its flesh at certain points in its anatomy, most strikingly reaching across its forehead, right between its beady black eyes. Other than that though, the face was normal, twisted in insanity and foul intentions, but normal. Thinning black hair, pointed, sharp features, thin lips that trembled with a hidden humorous thought. The creature was dressed only in tattered black pants, the remnants of some dead security guard's uniform, and its chest was thin and not very muscled. More of the thick, stringy, foreign flesh stretched across it too, and Cloud realized with a distracted sort of interest that it was actually scar tissue, where the thing had healed from old wounds. Cloud looked at it, examined it in fascination and horror, recalling as though it were yesterday how he, Vincent and the others had inflicted each of those gashes on the thing, and of how Vincent had struck the final blow, by putting a single shell between its eyes.

"Vincent, Cloud, how are you doing? We've always seemed to meet in the most unfortunate circumstances." Professor Hojo's smile seemed to split his face in two. The two men looked upon him in broad, undisguised horror. "You both look so surprised. Well, perhaps it's understandable. I think it's probably not the fact that I am alive as much as it is the fact that it's been thirteen years since our last encounter that startles you. I've been waiting for Jenova, you see? I've been waiting for her to collect her remains enough to be able to strike out at you. You did nearly kill her in the Northern Crater, but you didn't destroy her completely. In the time since then she's been able to ah, "pool" herself together so to speak, gathering those stray cells of hers that weren't destroyed and reforming her body. I've waited for her here in my labs, hidden away in the sealed menagerie, where we'd keep the test subjects in the old dead days of Shinra's golden reign. But Jenova is ready now, as I'm sure you've both witnessed. The time for secrecy and for hiding away in the dark is done. Vincent, Cloud, welcome home."

Hojo chuckled, pleased his little speech had gone off so well. He'd been practicing it for thirteen years. He rubbed his thin cold hands together, watching as the two men worked their ways past the initial shock and into the logical anger and confusion he knew would follow. Hojo loved the human mind. It was so predictable, so able to be cataloged and ordered.

"What do you want with us?" Cloud asked, shaking off his stupor. He turned back to the view of his kids hanging out the gaping hole in the Shinra building, dangling precariously over death, and tried to wink at them reassuringly. He didn't do a convincing job.

"It isn't what I want, Cloud, it's what Jenova wants. Jenova is all that matters. She has such a wider scope than all of us, and we should heed the advice she gives. Her every word is a pearl, you know."

"You're as mad as you always were, you know that? Hmph. At least nothing's changed. You've just acquired an appearance to match the ugliness in your head." Cloud got off his knees, disgusted at the way he'd nearly been kneeling before the man. He stood shakily, ignoring the hissing acid snaking down his chest. Hojo let a little sigh escape his lips. He'd been expecting this defiance of course, but it really seemed to hurt him almost. It didn't matter though, he knew exactly what to do to quell the fires of rebellion.

"Chieko, show Cloud how serious we are, will you?"

The monster's ears pricked up at her father's words. As Cloud and Vincent looked on, she slowly loosened her hold on CJ and the boy began to slip out of her tentacle.

"I'm falling! Stupid Chieko, hold on, don't let me go!" CJ clawed at her slippery skin, wincing as the blue acidic liquid burned his fingers. Suddenly, Chieko released her hold altogether, and CJ shouted as his body began to fall, gravity playing its cruel little game.

"No! CJ!"

Before he fell ten feet, the monster grabbed him roughly by his leg with another tentacle, and he came to a halt with a rough snap. He hung there, upside-down, trying not to throw up.

"That is not a ride I wanna go on again," he moaned.

"Ah, but child, I can give you a better, longer version, with a much more interesting end," Hojo promised, moving

forward. He didn't walk with his own two human legs but rather kept his entire body suspended as the tentacles circling him held him aloft and moved him along, nearly like some inverted marionette.

"Like hell you will!" Cloud shouted, eyeing the man in hatred. Hojo clucked his tongue.

"Don't forget who's in charge here, my friend. Never forget that. But we needn't fight. You can save your son and daughter easily. All I ask is that you and Mr. Valentine kindly step into those radiation chambers yonder. Then the promising young fellow on the floor there, what's your name, m'lad?"

"N-n-neto!" the WDD Head mumbled. He wouldn't look at Hojo, focusing instead on the tiled floor and rocking back and forth slightly in the curled fetal position he was in, turning stupid in his fear.

"Neto, pleasure to meet a fellow man of science. Anyway, Neto here will close the doors behind you, and then I'll have Chieko release your children and that, Mr. Strife, will be that."

"You promise not to hurt them?"

"I promise that Chieko will release them, not lay a finger on them. And I'm a man of my word."

Cloud looked to the faces of his children. CJ stared at him wildly, still upside down, the night breeze blowing in his hair and his pajama shirt bunched up about his face, exposing his pale little stomach. The boy's teeth were chattering in the November chill and Cloud wished he could hold him. Ifalna was whimpering. Cloud looked towards her, making a face as though he was thinking really hard and the little girl giggled weakly, then shut her eyes and sighed, her expression seeming too old on her young face.

"It's all going to happen again, isn't it?" Cloud asked, not taking his eyes off his kids, "If I do what you say, those things you did to me all those years and years ago after Sephiroth burned down Nibelheim, you're going to do them to me again, aren't you? I remember. I remember what those five years were like. In any other circumstances, I'd cut my own throat before I made myself your prisoner again. But--"

"But I have you by the balls, is that what you were going to say?" Hojo chuckled, "Get in the chamber, Cloud. Chieko may be strong, but I'm sure she tires of holding the children aloft for so long."

Scowling in fury and helplessness, the man complied. Neto got to his feet weakly and shut him in to the thickly-built, lead lined chamber, turning the wheel that locked the door tightly. Cloud looked out of the little round window in the side, watching the situation and throwing murderous glances to Hojo.

"Now it's your turn, Vincent."

Vincent had remained relatively quiet since Hojo had revealed himself. Mainly this was because he was only fractions away from becoming Chaos, the anger mounting in him to such degrees he could taste it in his mouth. This was why he'd stayed in Icicle Inn for years, isolating himself from humanity. Humanity did this to him.

"I would rather. . . "he began, trying to regulate his breathing and clutching at his broken ribs, "I would greatly appreciate it if you simply killed me right now. I don't want to be on the end of your scalpel again, Professor."

"No, Vincent, Jenova has plans for you. You won't escape that easily. Besides, you are a lecherous pig and I would see you suffer. You carried on an affair with my wife behind my back years ago. I'm not sure you know how much that yet stings my pride."

"She was your wife in name only, you twisted bastard. You married her only for her body, needing someone to carry out your experiments on, but I --"

"Loved her?" Hojo finished. There wasn't amusement on his face any longer, or even sadistic pleasure, "You loved her, you fucking Turk? Did she love you, do you think? More than she loved me? Answer me!"

Vincent nodded, a smug smile nearly breaking out over his face. "Lucrecia loved me. I learned that a long time ago. She was married to you which was unfortunate. But her heart belonged to me and mine to her. For eternity. Her death, the things you've done to me. . . none of that can change the facts." The man spoke the words confidently, knowing things the scientist never could. Lucrecia's last name may have been Hojo, but fate had tied her soul to Vincent's and in the eyes of heaven, that union was stronger than a flimsy marriage certificate.

"I should have let you bleed to death all those years ago. . . "

"Yes, you should have. Why didn't you?"

"I wanted you to suffer."

"Your plan worked. My life for a long time was just that. But it's different now. Time heals all wounds, it's true. I can live now, the many joyous memories of her more important than the few tragic ones. Yet death would not be unwelcome to me. Lucrecia is waiting. I know she's waiting."

"But she'll continue to wait. And you'll renew your suffering! Chieko, toss this adulterous swine into that other chamber!"

Using a few of her free tentacles, the massive beast complied, grabbing Vincent roughly by his torso and flinging him into the chamber besides Cloud's.

"How do you like what I did to you, Vincent?" Hojo called mockingly, "My little idea of a joke, ya know. Arranging your genetics so that you'd evolve through a veritable movie marathon of horror movie monsters: The Galian Beast, Death Gigas, Hellmasker. And you yourself was dracula. . . I tell you, I was nearly in stitches as I was stitching you up!"

Vincent lay on the floor of the radiation chamber, a line of bright blood running from the corner of his mouth. He wiped it away absently and marveled at Hojo's insanity.

"And then of course, Chaos was my real brush of genius. My real "gift" to you. A demon capable of total destruction, possessing his own will and personality. That dark presence was the teddy bear I tucked you in with. Did he haunt your mind and memories as you slept that thirty year sleep, Vincent? Such was my plan, but I'm no psychologist, I played it all by ear. Did it work?" When Vincent only stared at him icily, not giving an inch, Hojo nodded, pleased. "I thought it might. Yes, I thought it might. Hmph. You slept and dreamt nightmares for thirty years in that coffin in the basement while the world went to shit around you. I'll wager every jilted husband in the world wishes he could exact such a revenge on his wife's lover. Ah, yes. . . but it's peculiar. My hatred towards you hasn't died with the years as your guilt towards Lucretia has. No, my anger's only smoldered and grown. We'll have to see what can be done about that these next few days. Neto, or whatever your name is, close the door on that lecher, I tire of him."

Shaking uncontrollably, Neto was too frightened to do anything else. The door shut on Vincent with a metallic clang.

"Now let them go!" Cloud cried, peering out the round window, his voice muffled as it traveled through the chamber's thick walls. Hojo rubbed his forehead with one of his serpentine tentacles, sighing wearily. He looked towards Chieko who met his eyes suddenly and something passed between them.

"Yes, Cloud, "the scientist agreed, "That's a good idea. Chieko, release them."

Cloud clutched at the raised rim surrounding the porthole-like window his face was pressed against. He watched the massive monster's movements desperately, hoping, praying to see her swing his children back over solid ground and allow them to drop safely to their feet. Chieko searched for his gaze, then held it locked in hers, mako brown against mako blue. They stared for a long time.

"Daddy!" Ifalna shrieked, as Chieko loosed her hold on the girl. Instantaneously, CJ echoed the cry, grasping upwards at the monster's snake-like tentacle but unable to find anything to dig his nails into. Infinity stretched around his small body, the cold, unforgiving ground laying in wait sixty-eight stories down.

"Hojo! Hojo! You sadistic fuck! You swore!"

Vincent pulled himself to his feet and looked out his own small window, eyes wide in fear. Hojo glanced at him, then looked back to Cloud. "I did swear. So let them go already, Chieko, Cloud's getting anxious."

"No. No, no, Cheeko, no!" Ifalna moaned, but the cries were short.

"Don't do it, please God, don't!"

With a hellish grin of satisfaction, Chieko let her grip fall away, flinging the girl's small body into the void. CJ followed her a moment later, feeling the tentacle sliding sickeningly from his ankle and then gravity clutching hold and yanking him down so fast he couldn't breath. He found breath enough to scream though, and he and his sister did so all the way down.

~*~

For a long time, Cloud and Vincent watched the empty air. After a while, Vincent slumped down in the chamber, his narrow back to the wall. Hojo peeped through the window but couldn't see anything, the man's long, black hair hung in his face. Eventually Chieko reverted back to her normal form, slumping unconscious onto the floor. The night breeze blew chilly into the mako room and she shivered uncontrollably despite her thick red fur coat. Neto stood by, palms pressed flat behind him against the wall, watching the swirling insanity in disbelief. Those children-- without a second thought-- gone.

"Calm down, Neto, "Hojo said, moving towards the rear of the room. "Come with me. I want to talk to you. Let's allow these men to grieve, eh? It's the tactful thing. Jenova, what shall I do next? We're going to have visitors shortly."

Leave that to me.

"As you say."

Neto listened to the man conversing with thin air, and his head spun around in terror. This was the legendary Hojo; a psychotic murderer. Neto had known the scientist's history well, everyone in Shinra did, but for some reason, he'd always found a certain attractive mystique about it. A man who'd plunged into insanity because of his passion for discovery. He was a scientific martyr in a way and Neto had found it appealing. But this mutated mass of sadomasochist horror wasn't the powerful idol that the WDD Head had always imagined. He was twisted, ill, and evil. He had just killed Cloud Strife's children. There was no telling what he'd do next.

"What do you know about genetics. . ?" he asked as he led the way from the room, Neto too terrified not to follow as he instructed. The young tech shivered and hoped he'd get to leave the Shinra building alive some day.

The mako room was quiet after they'd left. Midgar's night noises drifted in from outside; the sound of distant televisions and radios, dogs barking, cats meowing. Far away an ambulance rang its sirens but the noise quickly died into silence. Vincent looked up suddenly, silence the last thing that he heard. There were only those two shrill screams, and Cloud's piercing cry, sounding for all the world as though someone had struck at him with an ax. A line of wet ran from Vincent's right eye. He touched it with his good hand, staring at it. Tears. He almost didn't recognize them. From the chamber next to his, he could hear heavy, broken sobs as Cloud cried tears of his own, a thousand times more bitter, infinitely more sad, putting Vincent's grief to shame. He thought that he might attempt some clumsy, comforting words, but thought better of it and only laid down on the cold metal floor of the radiation chamber, wrapping himself in his bloodied cloak. His broken ribs were throbbing and the concussion he'd received earlier pounded in his skull but he pushed it all aside. Hojo was alive, CJ and Ifalna were dead, and he and Cloud were captured. The future seemed a bleak, uncertain thing.

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Onward to Part Five: November Storms

Email me with your comments, criticisms, whatever.

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