



Part Five:  
NOVEMBER STORMS

"Six-B Squad to Six-A Squad. Come in if you please."

Howard the security guard heard the radio on his desk sputter to life suddenly and he jumped, nearly falling from his chair. The unruly radio spat static and he stared at it sleepily, only half paying attention to the conversation suddenly beginning upon it.

"Six-A to Six B. I copy. What's happening?"

"Disturbances from Sixty-Eight. Something's going on up there."

"That's the WDD floor. There've been things going on up there all day, they're testing materia."

"I understand that, but the memo I received today stated there'd be no unauthorized usage of the mako facilities after ten."

"You're going to make us come up there, aren't you?"

"Affirmative."

"Damn you. Over and out."

The radio died again and Howard leaned back in his rickety office chair. Here he was on the graveyard shift. Again. He sighed, scratching himself. At least he was pulling easy lobby duty. Those security guards on patrol in the upper floors were always running back and forth, paranoid over noises and climbing the stairs fifty times an hour. Shinra security was tight, he thought smugly, Four guards to every ten floors, each four split into two groups of partners, group A taking floors 1-5, group B taking 6-10. Sleepily, he itched under the waist of his pants, the elastic chafing and uncomfortable. Hence, the Six-B Squad patrolled floors sixty-six all the way up to the top, the seventieth, President Reeve's massive office. With the majority of Shinra's research going on up there along with the entire company's data banks located up on sixty-nine, Howard understood why Squad Six-B was the jumpiest.

The lobby guard surveyed his domain, the harsh fluorescent lights revealing every inch of the luxurious Shinra foyer. The bulletproof, tinted main glass doors stood to the front of him, locked and barred against intruders. He stared at his reflection in them for a while, wondering if he could get any more bored. As though in response, there suddenly came a massive thundering from somewhere far above his head, followed by a trembling so deep that the line of dark doors before his eyes shattered one by one, throwing their tinted glass all over the newly scrubbed lobby tiles. Repeated tremors rocked the building, each louder than the last, each causing the lighting above his head to flicker and potted plants to tip over and spill their soil. As the last one faded away, Howard slowly opened his eyes. He hadn't meant to close them, but he'd been afraid the ceiling would come crashing down.

"Shit--!"

The lone word spat from his crackling radio, now on the floor, and Howard stooped to pick it up, cradling it in his shaking hands. It spoke again as he held it and he nearly dropped it in surprise.

"Six-A to Six-B. What in Christ was that? That was from your floors, boys."

No answer. Howard felt his heart sink.

"Six-A to Six-B, do you copy?"

Still no answer. From the hollow sound of Squad Six-A's voice, Howard could tell the two men were in the stairwell. After a moment of contemplative silence, one of them spat, "Six-A requesting back up now! Second Class!"

Immediately, voices chimed over the radio in response, the command triggering the training and emergency strategies that all of Cloud and Reno's guards knew.

"Backup A copies. Hold on up there."

"Backup B, copy!"

"Backup C's coming."

Howard licked his suddenly dry lips and put them against the radio. With one trembling finger he depressed the talk button and muttered, "Backup D, on my way." He clipped the small radio onto his belt, then quickly checked his pistol. He'd never had to fire it and hoped he wouldn't have to break that record tonight. Giving the lobby a quick once-over, he turned and huffed off towards the employee elevators.

Leaning against the rear wall of the tiny compartment after boarding, the sappy Shinra elevator music tinkled quite unsoothingly in his ears. The car zoomed upwards, traversing the sixty-eight floors quickly. Too quickly, Howard thought, a single cold bead of sweating sliding down his flushed cheek. He stood there and took back every complaint he'd made about his boredom. There was a terrified feeling in his gut about what he'd confront when those elevator doors opened.

"This is Six-A. Backups, report your status."

The voice that responded was broken with panting as its owner huffed frantically up the stairwell. "Six-A, "the guard began, "A, B, and C have all joined and are currently on 46 and ascending."

"Backup D, where the hell are you?"

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Howard raised the radio to his lips.

"I'm on the elevator. . . uh, floor 32 and ascending."

"You got to be kidding me. . . Howard, your fat ass is supposed to take the stairs in emergency situations. You're going to come out in the old labs, while we'll be at the end of the WDD corridor. Don't you pay attention during drills?"

"Umm. . . "

"Backups meet and then travel as a group to those requesting them. It's safer that way. Damn you, Howard!"

Squad Six-A's leader sounded decidedly annoyed and Howard knew he'd probably tell Cloud and Reno of his screw-up on Monday and get him fired. It just wasn't fair. There were so many stupid security guidelines and measures and rules to remember, and Howard just wasn't good at that stuff.

"Six-A, what should I do?" he asked, trying to keep the fear out of his voice.

"Push the emergency stop on the elevator. It's better that you just stay there than go wandering about by your--"

A loud crackle of static interrupted him and suddenly one of the guards from the disappeared Six-B Squad's voice came through. "Don't come up here!!" the man pleaded, his voice tight with pain, "Oh, gods!, evacuate! Evacuate now--!" There was a screech of tearing metal, the sound of gunfire, a man's scream. Then there was only the white noise of empty static. Howard paled.

"Six-A?" he whispered into his radio. There was a moment of contemplative silence.

"We're going in. . . Howard, stop your elevator. Backup, move your asses."

"Six-A, could you put your speaker on?" Howard asked meekly. The Squad responded in the affirmative and the security guard quickly depressed the bright red emergency stop button on the elevator console. The employee elevator screeched to a halt halfway between the forty-eighth and forty-ninth floors. In a mixture of relief, dejection, and guilt, Howard plopped down on the floor to wait. He held the radio in his lap, able to follow Six-A's every word and action since they'd switched their radio onto automatic speaker mode. It picked up every sound and let the man listen in. He heard the two guards who made up Squad Six-A speaking lowly of the disturbances, their voices reverberating against the cold walls of the stairwell they crouched in.

The elevator shook suddenly, nearly imperceptively, with muted rumbles coming from above. Howard shivered, unable to even imagine what was up there, what had made the guard from Squad Six-B cry out as he had. He looked down at the radio suddenly, hearing the backup arrive.

Softly, the stairwell door opened and the shuffle of twelve guards was heard: the security squads of floors 2, 3, and 5 which composed the second class backup team. Minus Howard, of course.

"It took you long enough, "Six-A snapped, his attitude about the situation grim and annoyed. His partner echoed his sentiments, then a man Howard recognized as Terry from Three-B spoke.

"What's going on?" he asked, "Are we going in?"

"We're going in. Tight formation, pistol-packers in front, Kin, Victor, Jenni, you three have shotguns, you flank us. I don't know what's in there so we proceed with the utmost caution. We go in, get Six-B, then move out. We can call the reserves once we're clear. Understand?"

Howard couldn't hear it, but the group nodded. Not one of them spoke the thoughts they all were thinking: the Six-B Squad was dead. The scream that'd sounded over the radio had been that of a dying man. Howard heard them suddenly checking their weapons and preparing themselves for a conflict. He was glad he wasn't there. He'd have passed out from

nerves by then. Just listening to them was making him sweat.

"Howard, I can hear you breathing," Six-A growled suddenly, "If you want me to keep the speaker on, shut the hell up."

"Sorry."

There were sniggers from the guards and then silence again. Howard heard them suddenly whispering, and then Six-A gave the signal for them to move out. There was the sound of the door to the Sixty-Eighth floor opening and then silence. Cloud and Reno had trained them well and they could move in total stealth. Howard strained his hearing, holding his breath. After a few minutes, he heard someone whisper, "The offices are empty. Everyone went home a while ago it seems."

Before there could be a response, Howard again felt the violent rocking of the building. The quiet elevator walls swayed slightly.

"From the old labs," the radio whispered. It was one of the men of Six-A, "Did you hear that? Voices and . . . a roar? From down the hall. Move careful now, watch yourselves."

There were more trembles, more vibrations as the guards glided down the WDD hallway. Howard thought he heard the things they'd spoken of. He definitely had heard a roar come from the radio, the horrible ear-shattering sound of an angry animal. He listened now and made out the distant sounds of human screaming too. He thought it might be the Six-B Squad, but as he listened harder, they sounded more like children. If he could hear it through the radio, then he knew the guards actually up on the sixty-eighth floor must surely hear it too. If so they made no comment on the sound.

Without warning, there was suddenly a different sound to concentrate on. Howard held the radio up to his ear, listening to his fellow guards' horrified whispers. They'd found the remains of the two men of Six-B.

If he'd been there to see, he would have gazed upon two bodies, each broken in half and slumped in a pool of still-warm blood. They sat just outside the door to Hojo's old labs and each clutched a gun in their hands, knuckles still uncannily white with the strain of their grips. The guards said little at the discovery, though half of them had to turn away. Howard listened to the few mutterings of, "Oh, my god. . ." and "Shiiit. . ." and didn't need to ask what the problem was. He knew, and was able to be glad he wasn't there to share the sight.

"Insignificant, inconsequential worms!" a voice suddenly spat. The sound was so steeped in loathing Howard nearly flung the radio away from him and into the wall, as though the thing itself was the owner of the voice. He looked down at the featureless box of wires and tubes, his heart in his throat as the wretched, female voice spoke again. "Have you come here to foil me? Have you come here to dispose of me? You humans, you humans with your fat egos and your useless weapons."

"Where the hell is that coming from?" Six-A growled. The voice hung in the air and there was the sound of weapons shifting against sweaty palms as the guards bobbed their heads about in the dark, searching out the source of it. Only the sight of the plain walls of the sixty-eighth floor and the broken bodies of their two comrades there on the tiles met their eyes. Howard watched the innocent radio in desperation, his imagination roaring.

~\*~

The first man of Squad Six-A, he who'd taken it upon himself to lead the quickly formed band of guards, searched about for the owner of the hate-filled voice that'd spoken out only seconds before. His partner looked to him questioningly and he shook his head, at a loss. The group was standing in a tight, round formation, each guard facing outward from the center, weapon at the ready. Six-A glanced to the bodies of his two friends from Six-B. They stared back at him, their eyes wide and bugging from their skulls in a frozen expression of terror and surprise. They seemed to know what was happening.

One of the circling guards, a woman with long hair done up in a convenient braid and a shotgun in her hands, without warning doubled over, blood gushing from her mouth in a thick frothy stream. Loud as a gunshot, the noise of her spine cracking in two right below her shoulder blades filled the air and broke the tense silence. The guards nearest her put out arms to help, calling her name, but whatever force was attacking her was invisible to the eye. She died without uttering a sound, slumping to the ground, her weapon dropping with a clatter.

"Worms. . ." the voice hissed again, and the Shinra guards' eyes widened in fear, "You shall be the first to fall. Feel privileged." The other two shotgun-bearing guards mimicked the first's actions all of sudden, clutching at their sides as unseen hands raked across their bodies. One managed to get a single useless shot off, but both were soon dead, spines snapped and lungs crushed.

"Show yourself!" Six-A bellowed, looking in horror at the fresh corpses and brandishing his .357 suggestively. He felt just

as useless and unimportant as the voice insisted he was. He fired a few shots off in frustration and the guards around him winced, expecting to feel those invisible claws around their chests at any second. "You cowardly sonuvabitch! Show yourself!"

"Oh, how I wish I could. . ." the voice came again, "Show myself and make your minds balk in fear at my visage. For I am terrible. I am what countless races, what countless Planets have fled from and I am terrible. But my body was stolen from me, hacked away to mere cells by creatures such as you. But now those cells have reformed and I can think again. I can plan. I can kill."

To prove her point, three more guards fell under her unseen hands, those three nearest to Six-A, including his partner. The man raced to help his friend even as bright crimson flowed up from his mouth and spilt over his lips and he began to collapse, his torso imploding under a powerful grip. Six-A grabbed at his arms, trying to hold him up, but the man fought him, screaming in agony, until there was finally that terrible snap, loud as a firecracker, and he blissfully slid into death.

"We can't fight it. . ." Terry from Three-B barked, revolving slowly on the heel of his left foot, trying to keep his eyes everywhere at once. The other six remaining guards imitated his actions, fear butting its way through their training and showing on their faces. "What's happening? Why is this happening and who the hell is this?"

Six-A shook his head, his partner's blood wet on his trembling hands.

"Humanity is a curse. Of the many races I've committed to genocide, yours is the most backward, the most confused. I feel vile shame in knowing that it was yours that cut me apart, that stole away the vessel I chose to inhabit in my stay here. I hate every one of you squirming worms. If there'd ever been a time I might have quit your Planet for good, it's passed now. Now I battle to exterminate every one of you for the sake of vengeance. Not for hunger, not because it is my purpose as a disease to bring about death, but because your race has wronged me."

Six-A had very little notion of what the strange, incensed voice spoke of, but he did have some vague idea, enough to form a cocky response. Enough to allow him to defend humanity, if even in a very small way. But that was humanity, fighting till the last, even if its final attack was a mere slap in the face.

"We wronged you?" he asked, his voice strong, "We wronged you by fighting back as you tried to destroy us? You must be Jenova. I don't know how, but you must be. Well, bitch, we did destroy you, our Planet kicked your sorry ass. So deal with it. Lay down and die." He fired off a few rounds towards where it seemed the voice had come from, but of course they only sank into the plaster walls, leaving sharp little bullet holes that mocked him. In response, Jenova took the lives of three more guards, but slowly this time. Terry from Three-B was one of them. He felt claws cutting into the flesh surrounding his ribs, then crunches in his ears as they snapped one by one like dry twigs under her power. He cried out, a shrill scream of incredible agony that lasted until Jenova's hand finally closed around his heart and squeezed. He and two others sank dead to the ground almost simultaneously.

"So fragile. . ." the voice said, very near to Six-A's ear. He licked his lips, averting his eyes from the bodies of his friends lying still on the tiles. "So fragile in body and fragile in mind. It takes only a squeeze, the proper nudge to make you drip blood or tears. Observe."

There were only four guards left at this point and all sense of defensive positioning had been forgotten in their terror. Six A turned sharply as his three comrades, two men and a woman, seemed to suddenly go intensely rigid. Their eyes glazed over and their mouths opened. They dropped their weapons in a loud clatter and then followed them to the floor, releasing their own clatterings of screams and cries. Like ants under magnifying glasses they writhed, clutching their heads, as the living nightmare showed them things.

"Leave them alone!" Six-A growled, darting from guard to guard, sweat stinging his eyes. "What have they done to you? Stop!"

He looked helplessly on as they continued to suffer but there was nothing he could do. They seemed to be going through some mental traumas, fighting battles within their own minds that he just couldn't help them with. He would have loved to throw a punch at their foes, to sink a shell into their enemy's skull. But he was denied that luxury. He could only watch as they screamed, those shouts becoming fainter and fainter as Jenova sucked their lives away. Soon, his remaining companions were still, cries ceased. He would have only thought them unconscious if not for the blood erupting from their nostrils and their wide open, unblinking eyes. What had been living, breathing, thinking individuals were now only human-shaped mounds of dead bone and tissue. The lone living man among them looked on as mortality stared him in the face, unblinking.

Alone now, Six-A shook his head slowly, backing up against the wall of the hallway and looking at the carnage spread around him. Twelve guards. Twelve co-workers. Twelve friends gone in the blink of an eye. He suddenly remembered the radio strapped to his belt and pressed the emergency button on its side. The Shinra-manufactured security radios had two red buttons on them. One summoned all available personnel in circumstances when the operator was unable to make a

specific request. The other, the one that Six-A had depressed, called for an immediate evacuation of the building.

The screamers ceased, the WDD hall was silent again. Six-A waited, engulfed in that quiet and tried to sink into the wall, knowing the worst was coming.

~\*~

Howard sat pale and still inside the elevator, denying all he heard. The world was going to hell faster than he could keep track. He saw the emergency evacuation button flashing on his radio but only regarded it numbly, despite the fact that the little glowing button hadn't been set off in thirteen years, not since Meteor had pummeled the Shinra building and killed countless. There was no where for him to go, nothing to do but sit in the elevator, alone with his failure.

"Where are ya" he heard Six-A shout suddenly from the radio, his voice thick with crackling static, "You've killed them, now come for me. I don't know why you're bothering with all of this. My boss, Cloud Strife, well, he and his pals kicked your sorry ass years ago, they did. And Cloud's in as good a shape as ever. Better even. And Reno and Rude and all of Shinra are behind him and the rest. This is all futile, you're just going to die. Again."

There was a short cry and Howard winced as he heard a heavy fist slamming into something soft.

"That all ya got? Ha!" Six-A's voice was cocky, taunting.

There was another blow, so loud Howard felt it in the back of his teeth. Torn and guilty, he looked down at the featureless radio in his hands, his knuckles white, they clutched it so hard. He should have been there, he should have known procedure and been there to help, or been there to die with the rest as was proper.

"You go ahead an' try yer takeover. . ." Six-A murmured, his words dulled by the blood he had to garble through and the static of the radio, "Cloud's been lookin' bored. Give 'im. . . give 'im somethin' t'do. Ha. Ha, ha ha. . ."

There was a loud snapping sound, the same that Howard had been hearing and wondering at. He didn't know what it was, he only knew that after he'd heard it the other times, the screaming had ceased. It was no different now. Six-A's laughs died away sharply and there was a thump as his body dropped to the floor. Afterwards, silence reigned and Howard felt utterly alone.

~\*~

The immediate human threat disposed of, Jenova surveyed her work. Killing was so easy. She was good at it, as a disease, it was what she'd been created to do. She only wished she still possessed her body so that she could physically feel her victims' bones snapping in her claws, could revel in the warm sticky red as it flowed over her arms. Jenova had made many things bleed in her existence, had sampled much of the stuff of life. But she decided she enjoyed human blood the best of all. She thought it was a beautiful color and pleasing to her fine senses. It felt good against her skin.

The creature was in the WDD hallway but then, she wasn't. The cells remaining of her body had been secreted far away where they'd be safe from those wishing her destroyed. Using those disembodied cells combined with the cells in the bodies of her "children", she was able to emit her essence and her power into a nearly tangible entity, but she could only stray so far from those last few anchoring cells. Yet that entity was strong, as she'd just proven to herself with the murders of the guards. With the combined cellular auras of Cloud, Vincent, Hojo, and Chieko, her family together at last, Jenova fancied she was nearly as strong now as she'd been thirteen years before. She'd waited a long time for her vessels to meet in such a way, for the miniature "reunion" to occur. And it was here at last. And she was giddy.

Throwing off her self-applause, Jenova's disembodied presence drifted about the hallway, hovering momentarily over each fresh corpse. All were gone. She'd taken them all and felt suddenly proud of the fact. But still, there was more to do. So much more. Satisfied that Chieko and Hojo had things under control in the labs, she began to reach her telekinesis-like powers outwards, her plan firm and solid in her mind. She came across the Shinra building's main kiosk of elevators. With barely a thought, she severed each thick cord. The cars plummeted to the ground floor and practically disintegrated with the force, breaking into oblivion upon impact. But there were employee elevators too. She stretched her awareness out towards them, dizzy with her own power, and sensed a single human cowering in one of the cars. She listened for a moment to his heart beating. Faster and faster as his terror grew. Just for kicks, just to feel his fear and be satisfied by it, Jenova severed the elevator cords slowly, making the thing rock back and forth, back and forth, until the man inside was fairly sobbing. Then, with a flick of her consciousness, the cords frayed completely and came apart.

~\*~

Howard heard them snap and knew in that instant that he'd never be stuck with the graveyard lobby shift again. As the car dropped, the radio flew from his hands and he watched it slam against the elevator ceiling, the bits of wires and the plastic that made up its body spraying everywhere. His stomach reeled. His mind went blissfully blank. The world sank away above his eyes.

~\*~

Jenova heard the elevator crash and felt satisfied. That taken care of, she prepared to spend the last bit of strength remaining to her. She had to keep her children safe inside their little home. She had to keep the rest of the world at bay. With detached interest, she heard Hojo's voice in the labs behind her and then a man's cry, one filled with every horror, every fear, every grief that'd ever flown from Pandora's Box. In response there were the piercing screams of two terrified children which quickly faded away into the night, sliding into a silence that gratified Jenova like nothing else could. Dark evil swirling in her primitive mind, she remembered Sephiroth suddenly. Her poor dead son, her own murdered child. . . how he'd hated her. Jenova smiled to herself. She'd make her new puppets hate her all the more. Hate was strong. Hate lasted.

She had high hopes for them all.

~\*~

CJ didn't know what else to do. He was falling. He'd had dreams like this, nightmares more like, but then wasn't he supposed to wake up right about here? The wind tearing at his thin clothes, stinging his face, his stomach in his throat and that tingly, terrible sensation of knowing you were in a free fall that couldn't last forever? Every sense was either assaulting him or bailing on him. He couldn't see anything, not a single thing, he only heard his own panicked screams loud in his ear and Ifalna's high pitched voice not far away. He wanted to breath but there wasn't any air, even though there was so much rushing past him. Where was the ground, where was--

After a time, he opened his eyes, noticing something strange. He wasn't falling as hard as he'd been. In fact, it was more like he was drifting now. He closed his eyes again, terrified. The cold November air encompassed his small body, and he'd unconsciously curled into a little ball, his chin in his knees. Too scared to look, not certain what was going on, he suddenly heard Ifalna's timid tone close to his ear.

"Ceej!" she hissed, a hiccup in her voice gave away she'd been crying. "Ceej, please look!"

"No, we're gonna hit the ground soon and go splat!" He shook his blonde head, hands curled into fists. He suddenly felt Ifalna's insistent little elbow hitting him in the arm.

"Look!" she hissed, whispering though she didn't know why. Steeling his courage, CJ let one eye open just a slit, enough to see the infinite night sky spreading all about them. Nearly fifty feet off, the cold gray side of the Shinra building could be seen standing tall and impassive. The boy could see right into one of the lower floor windows and stared at a little motivational office sign stuck up on one of the walls inside. "I'll sleep when I'm dead, "it read, but he didn't get it.

"Why. . ." he began, both eyes open now and staring around, "Why aren't we falling? Or actually, why aren't we street pizza?"

Ifalna was right by his side and he examined her. Normal as you please, she was bobbing there in thin air, the breeze blowing her dirty pink pajamas, and twin rows of tears winding down her grimy cheeks. She shrugged.

"It stopped us."

"It?"

She casually gestured to the writhing mass of green vapors congregated beneath her back and side. With a sickening sort of feeling, CJ saw they were around him too. Curling, snake-like tendrils of bright glowing green. LifeStream.

"It's the green thing. That took us. It's saving us now."

"Yeah. I wonder why. . ."

"Maybe it felt bad."

"I doubt it. Hey! It grabbed my butt!"

CJ looked down at the vaporous green and saw that some of it sort of resembled hands. He figured the stuff had to keep a hold of him somehow but too far was too far.

"You just watch it there, cheeky," he warned. "Now, if you don't mind, could you take us back up there to get my dad and Vincent? That dude with the freaky arms didn't look very friendly. Hey! No, we wanna go up, dumb green stuff!"

Despite his protests, the LifeStream was slowly carrying them away from the building, down closer to Midgar so that soon they were skimming just over the roofs of the city. Scowling, CJ cursed the stuff and then tried to shift to a more comfortable position upon it. It felt decidedly awkward floating along, hovering in midair with absolutely nothing supporting his body. This green mist doesn't count as something, does it? he wondered, feeling slightly unhinged, How real can it be? Ifalna sat comfortably beside him, enjoying the little flight, staring quite calmly at the dirty city scenery as they drifted by.

"Where d'ya think we're going?" she asked.

"This thing took us from home so it knows where we live. Or maybe it's only saved us so it can take us back to its cave and eat us, I dunno."

I don't think so," the little girl said sleepily, yawning and gaping wide. She'd recovered from the ordeal of being flung out of the sixty-eighth floor of a building quite well.

The mysterious green carried them miles away from the Shinra building, traveling the way at a snail's pace and after a while, even CJ began to get tired. If it wasn't for the numbing cold biting at his flesh, he probably would have fallen right asleep and tumbled to the ground below. He was beginning to think that wasn't such a bad idea. It would get him away from this crazy green stuff who was taking them who knew where. Soon with a sudden start however, he decided against bailing, realizing they were in Sector One, the upper class buildings and stores that he'd known all his life stretching away on either side. After a few more minutes, they were only a couple blocks from his house and without warning, began to rapidly descend.

"Aww. . ." sighed Ifalna when they were able to touch their toes to the cold cement of the sidewalk. She hopped down and the LifeStream slid away from under her. "That was fun."

"You're nuts," CJ said, jumping gingerly from the glow. They were in the alleyway between the drugstore and their neighbor's house. The space was dark and dripping and the children thought it smelled like wet diapers. The two of them stood gazing up at the thing that had saved their lives and CJ realized it looked like a bunch of people sort of, all grouped together. It hovered there in the air, almost like it was looking back down at them and the boy couldn't help but smile and throw it a two-fingered salute.

"Thanks," he said. One of the figures came forward suddenly, its outline growing fainter as it left the company of its other LifeStream companions. The children's eyes opened wide, watching as this woman-like spirit moved towards them, and then they squinted to make out her features. She was smiling softly. Her hair fell over her eyes, which were the brightest part of her, glowing green touched with blue. She bent down and without warning gave CJ a kiss on the forehead, like a protective older sister, then did the same to Ifalna. They touched the spot after she pulled away, melding back with the rest of the LifeStream. The gently glowing green began to move away, back up into the air and soon it was out of sight, leaving the boy and girl to gaze up after it.

"She smelled like flowers," Ifalna said, rubbing her cheek where the woman had kissed her.

"Yeah. . ." CJ hadn't blinked yet and he did so suddenly, shaking his head and turning down to the ground as though waking from a dream, "She looked like that one lady. . . from that old picture mom and dad have of them and Vincent and those others from the Meteor days. Weird. I guess it wasn't the mako monster after all."

"Nah," Ifalna said, squinting up at the sky, "I think they were dad's friends. I think they owed him a favor."

~\*~

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Nah, I swear to Shiva, it's true. Rude'll tell ya, right, big man?"

Rude looked up upon hearing his name, a fat brown beer bottle in his right hand. He took a silent swig of it then shrugged, arching his eyebrows above his shades.

"See, Berkie? I wouldn't lie to ya. I just think you should be in the know, with the facts, ya see?" Reno winked at the young Turk before taking a gulp from his own bottle of beer, belching messily after swallowing. Berk sighed, depressingly sober. He'd been with Reno and Rude for hours, hopping from bar to bar and helping them try to break their record of how

many places they could get kicked out of in one night. So far, the odds were promising. They'd gone through three different Sectors and seven different taverns, his two superiors falling deeper and deeper into drink as the wet night hours ticked by. But Berk couldn't participate, he could only watch, being a scant twenty years old and looking like he was seventeen. He had trouble even buying cigarettes without being hassled.

"I don't know, Mr. Reno, I'm just having a hard time believing it. To think that Rufus Shinra wasn't really a man but rather a hollow, remote-controlled robot commanded by rabid squirrels from the Northern Continent and only wanted to control the world in order to have the space to grow a giant mutated tree so that he could live in it with a lot of female squirrels in a harem. . . well, it's a strange truth." Berk scratched his nose. Reno nearly laughed but reigned it in, thinking he was pulling off a grand joke on the kid, that as Berk's superior the guy would believe whatever he told him. Berk figured he'd probably think that too if he'd downed as much liquor as Reno had. Grinning wide, the red-haired man nodded a little unevenly and winked.

"Most truths are stranger than fiction, Berk m'lad." Unable to stand it any longer, he burst out laughing, the chuckles pouring messily over his lips. "Aw, man! I'm just playing with you, kid! Heh heh, you shoulda seen the look on your face! Hee hee. . . squirrel, heh." Reno threw his empty beer bottle away and punched Berk roughly in the arm. The young man smiled weakly, trying to play along.

"Yeah, you had me going. . . "he said, rubbing his arm and wincing. "How 'bout buying me a beer?"

"Why you want a beer?"

"I want to drink it."

"What for?"

"'Cause I'm thirsty."

"There's a water fountain over there."

"Different kinda thirsty."

"Ah, I see." Reno smiled lazily and sat back, pulling a hip flask from his belt and proceeding to suck from it. The three of them were sitting in a small park just outside of Wall Market, the noises of the place audible in the distance. The cold night air gushed about them, making the flaps of their sports coats billow out. Reno and Berk sprawled side by side on a bench while Rude was splayed in the grass with his back to them. Empty bottles and cans littered the nearby ground.

"So what's it gonna be, Mr. Reno? You gonna buy me a drink?"

Reno shrugged and replied, "Would you buy braces for a kid with straight teeth?"

"What?"

"I said, would you buy--"

"I heard ya, "Berk said in annoyance, "No, I wouldn't buy the kid braces."

"Well there ya go. This here, "and Reno held up his hip flask which contained a very potent brand of only slightly diluted whiskey, "This here is for medicinal purposes only. Alcohol is like braces. Only people with crooked smiles need it."

"Aw, blow me. . . " Berk sat back huffily on the bench, glaring at the night sky. His breath billowed out before him, obscuring his vision. Reno watched the sky too, suddenly beginning to ramble.

"Ya see, Berkie, unless you're a kid and yer drinking to impress someone, or 'cause you think it's fun, ya drink to change yerself. Change yerself for the better, change yerself for the worse. Maybe ya drink to change your mind or your memories, but you're doing it 'cause ya wanna think different than when yer sober. It's demeaning to see people believing anythin' else about it. I hold liquor in high esteem."

Rude belched in agreement.

"Yeah, see? Rude agrees with me. Smart man. He wears sunglasses at two in the morning, but hey, he's a smart man."

"Why'd you want me to come with you guys if you weren't even gonna let me drink with you?"

Reno shrugged his narrow shoulders and brushed his red hair from his eyes.

"You're good for a laugh, Berkie the Turkey. And ya've got a baby face that keeps the assholes at bay."

"Puh. Thanks a lot."

Reno punched him again, laying the sharp end of his knuckles into the young man's shoulder.

"Ow! Would you stop doing that? Christ, you two are obnoxious."

"Mr. Berk, "said Rude speaking suddenly, "Address your superiors in the proper fashion please."

"Excuse me, sir." Berk scowled for a moment, imagining the day when he'd take Rude's place as leader of the Turks.

He'd do it too, he had the skills. And then he'd antagonize the crap outta the peons just like he'd been taught. Sighing in anticipation, Berk glared at the sky. It was a little overcast and hard to see the stars, but they were there nonetheless. It was nice to see the sky. When he'd been a young kid the only view he'd ever get to enjoy was the underside of a rust-streaked plate and the harsh burning of electric streetlights. He gave the moon a glance now, admiring the way it glowed through the thin scrim of clouds attempting to blot it out. Just off in the distance he could barely make out the Shinra tower. He admired that too. It seemed that Shinra and the moon were both two entities that would fill the skies over Midgar for all time. Berk was a company man and a Shinra compatriot. He'd have it no other way.

"Think Mr. Strife's still working?" he asked suddenly. Reno glanced up at him as though he'd said a foul word. He'd come out here and gotten toasted specifically so he wouldn't have to think about . . . him. He glared at Berk, rubbing his rough chin in one hand.

"Are you stupid or something?" he snapped, "Cloud ain't in there working. He's in there pitying himself. Open up yer eyes for once, Berkie. Anyways, don't worry about it. I don't want to talk about it. Just, just. . . let's not talk about it."

Rude raised an eyebrow towards Berk, shrugging and swigging and Berk blinked in confusion at the small outburst. He just didn't get Reno. As brave as the man was in a fight and as much as the young Turk admired him, sometimes he thought Reno might be the biggest coward he'd ever known. He watched him take another gulp from the hip flask, his long loose red hair obscuring his face, his eyes turned up to the Shinra building.

"Hey," he said after awhile, "Does anything look weird up there to you?"

Rude and Berk both looked to where he was gesturing.

"No," they said in unison. Reno scowled and pointed harder as though it would make it more obvious. His finger wavered in the air.

"There, way up around the top. There's a smudge or something."

Rude lowered his shades down onto his nose and narrowed his eyes. After a moment he raised them again and shrugged. "Broken window," he said.

"Maybe we should go check it out," Berk chimed in, sitting up a little excitedly. Reno and Rude both guffawed, settling more comfortably in their seats.

"We're off duty, Berkie," Reno said, dismissing the dark spot on the building easily, "Turks don't work unless they're getting paid for it. That's lesson number. . . what number we on anyway?"

Berk sighed and shrugged, sitting back reluctantly.

"I lost count a couple months ago." Reno and Rude turned away and continued to drown themselves as he continued to scowl, occasionally giving the looming building in the distance a critical glance. He wished the men he served under were a little more dedicated. Berk had a feeling there was something going on up in those towers. And there was nothing he hated more than to miss a fight.

~\*~

The quiet white house shimmered in the moonlight. It was a beautiful night in Sector One. The air was cold but it was tinted such a lovely shade of blue that it made everything it touched seem worth that much more. The garbage cans laying by the side of the road, the tv antennas, the stop signs, even the stupid ceramic garden mogs laying in one of the yards, all the trivialities bathed in the turquoise glow and became riches.

A sudden stray November wind blew through the neighborhood, rattling the dark bulbous shapes of trees and the leaves brushing together sounded like a thousand whispering children. The breeze made a few stray papers turn somersaults down the street, and sent the wind chime on the porch of the quiet white house to tinkling merrily, the shards of ceramic and glass it was made of dancing in the gale.

Tifa heard the faint sounds and sat up suddenly. The blue light washed over the walls of the room she was in, sneaking in through the bare window. Blinking a few times, she admired the way it softened the harshness of the day. It even made CJ's room look tolerable, bouncing off the scattered comic books and model kits and hiding the strewn bubble gum wrappers in pleasing night shadows. She was laying on his bed and guessed she'd fallen asleep. The clock on the nightstand read two-thirty. Sitting up, she heard Cait Sith's power cord buzzing downstairs. Absently, she fingered CJ's blue comforter, then picked up and put down a stuffed chocobo, looking at it without really seeing it. There was a small tooth clutched in her left hand. She'd found it on the floor and for some reason hadn't felt like throwing it away or setting it on the dresser. She just held it.

Sighing shakily, she rose from the bed and laid her bare feet on the carpet. It was colored blue with the light too. Leaving it behind, she exited the bedroom and stepped into the dimly lit yellow hallway, striding wearily but briskly to her own room. She stepped in quietly, thinking that Cloud might be sleeping inside, that maybe he'd come home while she'd been in CJ's room. But their bed was empty and the sheets were cold. His boots weren't in their customary spot by the doorway, and his holster wasn't draped over the chair. Except for Cait, she was alone in the house. Painfully alone. Overcome by the unfairness of it, she sank down onto the bed, the tears coming fast.

Before retreating into CJ's room, Barret had called her, his voice concerned and gruff over the line. He'd insisted that Jenova was back around, killing people and stirring up trouble again. Tifa had laughed in his face. Not one to like being sneered at, Barret had gone off on her, trying to get her to bleed guilt. She'd bled anger instead. Anger and frustration. And abruptly hung up on him.

Now she cried for a long time. She cried because her husband had abandoned her, because her children were gone, and because she didn't have a friend in the world that cared enough to stick around. She'd been unable to believe Barret had left so quickly that morning. That was why she hadn't let him get hardly a word in on the phone. He hadn't come to see her, he'd come instead to unload his guilt and apologize to Cloud. She knew this now. Some friend. Even though it'd been years since they'd spoken, having given up the attempt to keep in contact through letters and the phone, Tifa still thought that she deserved better from a man who'd once claimed to be her best friend. It made her feel sick inside, strangely betrayed and abandoned. Barret aside though, where was Cid? He'd called her a few days before and said he'd come with Shera, but he never had. Reeve had promised to call her too, but the Shinra president had either forgotten or thought better of it. Tifa bit her lower lip, curling her knees up to her chin and laying down on her side on the bed. No one else cared enough to call. Even the neighbors, the novelty of the kidnapping gone, had stopped coming over and began to avoid her. She shook her head silently, brows lowered at their indifference. Then she shut her eyes, trying to stop her crying and take deep breaths. She could handle all of that, she really could. The rest of the world could go get fucked and she wouldn't care as long as Cloud was there to hold her. But he wasn't. He wasn't by her side to reassure her in his strong, quiet way. He wasn't there to cut apart their enemies and throw them in the trash. He wasn't there, not even when he'd been in the house, sitting in the armory, awash in feelings that should have made them seek each other out but had instead wedged a wall between them. She was there in all her grief, but his spirit had been stolen right along with his children. The Cloud she'd been living with the past week was only a mannequin, a talking robot. And even that semi-comforting apparition had fled now and there was only her, rotting in the large, echoing house. The rooms were too empty. Her steps were too loud and reverberating as she walked the floors. Each echo jabbed her in the heart and prodded a dagger into her sanity.

As she lay there shaking, her tears dampening the sheets, the bedroom pressed close around her body. The black, thick atmosphere nudged at her skin until she opened her eyes and acknowledged it. Through cold tears, she saw the blue light of the night as it streamed from the windows, mixing with the dark shadows and obscuring reality. Numbly, she sat up, scooting back and sitting against the headboard, observing the play of night. It was comforting. She allowed the blue to seep into her eyes, the night lighting yet darkening her mind and making thoughts more bearable, obscuring the ideas in her head with its blue light just as efficiently as it did the furniture in her bedroom. As the sorrow throbbed away to a more manageable hurt, her eyes dried and her breathing slowed. She was grateful to the night, she truly was. If she had no one else, the night blue would be her confidante.

She was on the verge of warm unconsciousness when she heard the knocking. Sleepily she opened her eyes, wondering who it could be at such an ungodly hour. Maybe Cloud had lost his keys. She stood from the bed, and padded from the room and down the stairs, tucking her long, loose hair behind her ears. The house stretched about her quietly and the knocking came again, bouncing off the walls. Tifa noticed how timid it sounded and then her keen ears picked up that the fist striking the front door was doing so at about waist level. She had a sudden notion in the back of her head. A voice shouted out the possibility but she shoved it away, disgusted by the cruelty of her own mind. She'd had many dreams that week of her babies coming home. She'd awoken from one the other night and dashed to their bedrooms, convinced they'd be there sleeping softly. She'd be in the kitchen and think she saw a small blonde head in the corner of her vision, or the sparkle of a mischievous violet eye. But it always turned out to be her imagination. Even now, she thought she heard a child's voice on the other side of the door, but that was ludicrous, she scolded. Children do not wander the street at two-thirty in the morning. They should be at home tucked in bed. Even after she'd finally wrenched open the front door and confronted CJ and Ifalna, the two children staring up at their mother meekly, she had a hard time believing it wasn't just another of her mind's wicked ploys.

They ran and clutched at her, the little girl starting to cry all over again and for just the smallest part of a second, Tifa merely stood there, gaping. But then she was hugging them with all the tender ferociousness of a mother. The quiet white house behind them seemed suddenly full again as the three fell backwards into it, laughing and crying.

~\*~

It all comes down to a simple truth, Cloud. Parents are meant to give their children life, not take it away from them. But you must have missed this lesson somewhere along the line. Knowing it now, does it make all that much difference? Does it really matter? What could you have done? Nothing. It was your past that put out those two lights in your life. And you lived that past, you were the sole player in every deed you performed, every person you slaughtered in the name of the Planet and in the name of humanity. These last two deaths. . . in whose name were they killed for? Was it still the Planet? It must have been, it is for she whom you've always battled for. So, my love, if you must taste revenge, hunger for the Planet's life, for the lives of those wretches scrabbling about on the face of this rock. The blood of your children is on their hands.

"Leave me alone."

Perhaps that is wise. I'll let you talk to yourself. Perhaps then you'll see why it hurts so much. And why you just don't need to think anymore.

~\*~

The pulsing orb of the morning sun burned its way through the mist, blazing an impossible coral-colored orange that made Midgar into an even more surreal place with the light. A thin, swirling mist wafted through the city's streets, obscuring walkers' calves and smudging away the trunks of trees. The sun was doing its best to dispel the stuff, but it was tenacious and clung to the cement, though it was already nearing ten in the morning. The night didn't seem to want to die just yet.

Cid stood leaning heavily upon Venus Gospel, a thin white cigarette hanging from his lip. Sucking sharply, he then added to the lingering mist with a bit of good, clean tobacco smoke. Scratching at his hairline, he sighed, at a loss.

He didn't know whether things were going for the better or for the worse. He, Barret, Red, and Bugah had arrived a few short hours ago and gone immediately to see Tifa, hoping to find a place to bunk. What they hadn't even bothered to hope to find there had been CJ and Ifalna. The boy had opened the door on them suspiciously, dark circles around his eyes, bruises on his neck, and bandages on his hands, but looking otherwise freshly scrubbed and very aggravated. Ifalna had been off playing with Cait Sith, looking worlds better than her brother, without a scratch on her. There was only something pensive in her soft violet eyes, something sober and older that hadn't been there before. Cid had then noticed the look in CJ too. It appeared when asked about his parents.

"Mum's in the shower," he'd said, eyeing the ground. The group had looked at him curiously, waiting for him to finish. He hadn't though. He'd turned away and switched the tv on, flipping channels randomly.

"What about yer dad?"

The boy had mumbled something about the Shinra building then plopped on the couch, absorbed in Saturday morning cartoons. He'd probably missed the tv more than anything else during his week in the cage. Cid had assumed he'd meant Cloud was at work with his answer. When questioned further he only shrugged, not comfortable talking about it. But then Tifa had emerged from the bathroom eventually, scraping a towel at her long, dripping hair. She'd looked to her friends coolly, mirth and release in her features, but strain too. And she'd told them where her children had been. Where Vincent had been. Where he and Cloud still were.

There'd been a lot of gaps in the tale, all she'd known was what her children had told her, but she knew enough to make Cid and Barret's hearts sink in their chests. Bugah and Nanaki had only nodded, their suspicions confirmed. Jenova was back and out for blood.

Is she ever out for blood, Cid thought now, shaking his head as he gazed upon the sixteen black-bagged bodies lining the sidewalk outside the looming Shinra building. The scene was chaos. On a Saturday morning, the streets around the headquarters were usually dead. Only the occasional straggling businessman or soldier. Today they buzzed. A row of ambulances sat parked to Cid's right. They were dealing with the corpses they'd found thrown from the gaping hole in the sixty-eighth floor wall, their spines snapped in two, their lungs pierced by claws that had left no mark on the skin. Two had been stripped nearly clean of flesh by animal jaws. Probably that "Cheeko" thing that Ifalna had gone on about, Cid said to himself, puffing away and gazing apathetically at the body bags.

There was a crowd gathered about them. Passer-bys and curiosity-seekers. Shinra MP too, trying to reign in some of the insanity and keep the press away. The airship pilot saw the Midgar media milling around, snapping pictures, talking to EMS. A few had recognized him and come over, asking what his part was. He'd shooed them off with a jab of his pike. He

despised the damned press.

"Cid, can I have another piece of licorice?"

"Sure." He reached into the pocket of his flight jacket and pulled a long red stick of candy out for Ifalna. The girl and her brother were seated on the curb, watching their mom and the others trying to glean information from the MP across the street. Tifa had insisted on coming with them but had insisted even more forcefully that the kids come too. She didn't trust Cait to keep them safe. She didn't seem to be trusting anyone anymore.

Which was fine with Cid. He certainly didn't mind leaning casually against the brick wall across from the Shinra building and babysitting, letting the others do the snoop work. He knew the secret to dealing with kids. Candy. Lots of it.

"So, Ceej," he said affably, addressing the spiky-headed kid on the curb. The boy didn't look up. "What happened to yer paws there? Why are they wrapped up?"

"Got burned. Chieko was covered in acid when she was holding me. I had to try to hang on, ya know?"

"Yup. You said yer dad killed her?"

"I thought he said he did. But she came back. Or something. She looked real weird when she did. Before she'd just looked kinda like Nanaki. Then she looked real big, like, like, like what, Eef?"

Ifalna shrugged, sucking her licorice. "Snakey," she said, looking across the street at the confused massing of people. Cid and CJ followed her gaze and saw Tifa approaching, flanked by the others. She didn't look happy, though she flashed a grin at her kids.

"The stiffs are, er. . . were security guards," she explained, looking at Cid strangely. The pilot was confused at the expression in her eyes until he suddenly remembered who Cloud worked for. She'd probably known a few of those Shinra corpses on the ground. He shook his head as she continued, voice tight with control, "One of the MPs is a pal of Cloud's. He told me that the twelve men composed something called second-class backup. The other four were guards on level six. The medics examined 'em earlier, said they'd all been killed upstairs and were already dead when tossed from the window. I suppose that's somewhat of a comfort."

"A sick, sad sorta comfort," snapped Barret, his thick arms crossed huffily. Tifa shot him a look and continued with her report. She said it all aloud more to set things straight in her own mind than to fill Cid in.

"The MPs did a quick sweep of the debris that fell when that hole up there was made. The steel walls that were broken through are an impossibility, they said. They'd stood through Meteor yet something attacked them last night as though they were rice paper. Pleasant, eh?"

"Hey, it'll be a challenge," Cid said cheerily, "Have they heard from Cloud or Vinny?"

"No. No one has. MP haven't ventured above the fiftieth floor. They went through this morning, not long after the first reports came through of the disturbances, looked about for casualties. They found a few cowering employees, the rest of the guards, that's all. Reeve's supposed to be here any minute. They're waiting on him to move. No one can seem to get a hold of Reno. Security's in an uproar with both its leaders gone."

"I can tell." The MPs were running around chattering like squirrels, snapping orders at each other and getting into arguments. Cid was surprised they'd managed to discover anything on their own. "So what do you want to do?"

"Why are you asking me?" Tifa questioned, eyes narrowing slightly, "Am I in charge?"

"Someone has to be."

"We haven't done this in a while," Nanaki said suddenly, speaking for the first time, "Worked in this team situation I mean. Perhaps we should go with what we knew then. The last time Cloud was out of commission, Cid led and did an excellent job to it. . ."

"Aw, shucks."

". . . so why don't we put him in charge now. If you don't feel comfortable leading that is, Tifa."

"I honestly don't care."

"Well then there you go."

Nanaki shrugged in a cattish way. He'd been nervous when they'd first arrived that morning, Bugah's critical gaze on his every word and action. But they'd since left the Elder at Marlene's apartment and the beast felt he could relax a bit more now, chip in advice when he felt it was valid. Cid took a last puff from his cigarette, then stamped it cold beneath his shoe.

"I'll lead, fine. But you all know my orders are simple. You want plans? You think of them yourself. What I'm proposing now is we haul ourselves upstairs there, find Cloud and Vinny, bust heads, smash Jenova and that other fellow CJ was talking about, then scam. Then we all go to Gold Saucer for a victory party. Ooh, then all those of legal age get shit-faced.

Damn, that's a good plan. No wonder you want me to lead." Cid looked to Tifa, expecting a laugh, but the woman had turned away to gaze behind at the looming towers. The swirling mist, remnants of the night before, concealed some of the structure's outline, giving it a soft, macabre look. The speck of a gap in the wall far overhead glared down on the people at its base. Tifa imagined some bitch of a monster flinging her kids from such a height and her gloved fists clenched involuntarily.

"Earth to Tifa!" Barret said suddenly and she snapped her attention around, "Stop glarin' at that building. We're gonna get Cloud. Just be patient. Kids said botha them were up there last they saw and that's where we'll find em."

The woman didn't answer. There was more to all this, she knew. Somehow, pieced together from the tale CJ had told her and from the unease bubbling in her breast, Tifa knew there was more. Nanaki had said that Jenova had resurfaced, but still, there was more than that. More than the reappearance of a disease, more than the disappearance of two men, more than a few monsters. Cloud was up there, Vincent was up there and from what she'd heard, hell was up there. How in the world could she and her companions free them from hell? She supposed they'd have to wrestle the devil.

"I want this to end. . . "she said to no one in particular, her eyes ripping into the building. "Why? Why do people have to be hounded like this? All our lives, over and over we run this god damned tread mill, mile after mile, either fleeing from one thing or chasing another. It's a circle that never ends, but loops back on itself infinitely. Who's forcing us onward, huh? I wish I knew why we have to keep running. Why we, and Cloud, and Vincent, and every other miserable bastard who's ever breathed a breath, why we all must keep fighting foes that never seem to die. . . " She dropped a tear unconsciously, but then caught it in her fist, squeezing it away to nothing.

"You're tired, Tifa, "Nanaki said, looking at her with a mixture of pity and respect from his one eye, "You have to be careful when you're tired and you try to reason. Especially when you try to make sense of things like this."

"Yeah. . . I guess I am tired." Her voice sounded far-away.

"To hell with this, "she spat without warning and began stalking off towards the Shinra building's shattered glass doors, "I'm gonna go up there. Cloud and Vincent deserve better than this."

"Hey, I thought I was leading. . . "Cid protested. He would have chased after her but was saved the trouble. The woman's weary attention was grabbed by the imperialistic honking of a jet black caddy suddenly pulling onto the scene. The honking of its horn cleared a path through the rabble of spectators and media, plowing through them like parted blades of grass and coming to a smooth halt just besides Barret, who glared darkly towards the vehicle's black-tinted, bullet-proof windows.

"Someone likes ta make an entrance, "he muttered. And President Reeve enjoyed doing just that. Especially with so many paparazzi out. The caddy door swung open silently and he stepped out into the morning sun, surveying the bodies and wreckage around him with sober eyes. For a few moments, he only stood silently staring, until some young, skinny assistant approached him and whispered something in his ear. Reeve nodded absently and the man shot off.

"How ya doing, cat man?" Cid asked, approaching the president suddenly and slapping him on the back, "Looks like you've had a bit of a ruckus here. Hope you're insured."

Reeve woke up from his momentary shock and stared at the old gang gathered around him, his eyes coming to rest on Tifa's shaking form a few feet off. He sighed, then cleared his throat.

"They only just called me. God forbid the president of the damned corporation should be anyone but the last to know when headquarters is breached and sixteen men killed. How are you guys doing?"

"We been better, "Barret scowled, hating the entire situation. It seemed that Shinra was screwing everything up again. He glared darkly towards Reeve who avoided his gaze.

"Do you know the details, Reeve?" Nanaki asked, stepping forward. The president began to nod but stopped.

"I thought I did, but from the look in your eye, Red, I probably don't."

"Jenova, "spat Tifa, not looking their way, "She's back. Or she never left. She's got Cloud and Vincent up there. And she tried to kill my kids."

Reeve paled, glancing towards CJ and Ifalna, seeing them for the first time. "Hey!" he hollered, walking up to them, "Hey! Guys! I'll be damned. . . where'd you come from?"

CJ grinned at his dad's boss, a man who gave very large amounts of cash for birthday presents. "Up there, "he said and pointed towards the tower, "We didn't know it but we were up there. With Vincent and a lotta creeps."

Reeve gave them both a big bear hug, taking in the sight of their faces joyously. But then that joy faded as Tifa's words sunk in. "Hojo's old experiment is back, eh? Well, this is a crappy way to start off the weekend."

"Don't take it so light!" Barret growled, quickly losing his patience and his temper. "I bet her being back is somehow

y'all's fault, ain't it? That WDD thing's been screwing with Hojo's old labs. Marlene told me about it."

Reeve turned from the kids to face the group. Shaking his head and trying to keep his composure, he replied, "You know that's not true. Every tech is carefully screened and all projects monitored by the mako board. Besides, I thought Jenova was dead. Science is a wonderful thing, but can it resurrect an alien that's been dead for thirteen years? Think before you speak, Barret. If speaking's what you call that thing you do."

"'Lright, bitch, lessee you defend yer blessed company with a pound of lead in yer gut--!"

Barret stepped forward to follow up the threat with a punch to the president's jaw but Cid stepped between them, teeth flashing in anger.

"Let's break this up before it starts!" he roared, "I'll shiskybob both your asses if you don't cool down! There ain't nothing to argue about. Shinra couldn't of done this, Barret, think about it! This is just a busload of bad karma and that's that. We need to stop moping around and get inta action."

"Only action I want is to introduce my fist to his pretty jaw, "Barret growled, brandishing his bulging knuckles. "You forget what he is, Cid? A spy. A traitor and a thief. Now he heads the biggest passel of traitors and thieves on the Planet. They're just repeating what they did years ago and dragging us all into their shi--"

"Shut up, Barret."

Everyone's head snapped around to Tifa as she spat these words. Barret was too shocked to say anything, especially after she followed them up. "Shut up and stop talking about things you don't know anything about. You haven't been here to see all that Reeve and Shinra's done. You want to live in the past then fine. But don't expect the rest of us to stay behind with you and listen when you preach your sermons against progress. Don't judge Reeve. You don't know him or the man he always was behind that robot."

Reeve was just as surprised as Barret. He'd never thought Tifa cared enough for him to ever defend him. Wow. He wasn't sure whether to blush or run away.

"God, Tifa, I--"

"You just hush up too, Reeve. Don't insult Barret, he can't help the way he talks anymore than you can help that pussy-footed attitude of yours."

"Woah! low blow, Tifa, "whistled Cid appreciatively. "Why don't you tell him what you really think?"

Tifa spun towards the pilot, brows lowered over her dark, teary eyes. "Don't make me start on you, Cid Highwind. If you try to lighten the mood anymore I swear I'll tear you down."

"Why don't you go ahead?" Cid asked, the smile on his face never breaking for an instant, "May as well go whole hog. Take your anger out on every one of your friends. Go ahead, put me down if it makes the aching in your heart a little easier. Why don't you tell me I'm an asshole? Tell Red his dad's headdress is too big on him and flopping his ears over like a li'l bunny rabbit--"

"Hey!"

"Or why don't you start acting like an adult and handle your emotions maturely? That's hardest, ain't it?" The pilot looked towards his friend with a strange expression in his eyes, though the smile never left his lips. Tifa met the gaze for a moment defiantly, then broke under it, staring at the pavement.

"Sorry, "she grumbled, then waltzed off and sat on the curb beside Ifalna.

"'Pology accepted, "Cid said easily, "Now Reeve, what are we gonna do about all this?"

The Shinra president snapped out of the stupor the conversation had put him in, looking towards Cid in befuddlement. "What? Oh. Dammit, I don't know. Wait here, alright?"

Shaking his head, Reeve tramped off across the street towards the MP, who immediately saluted at his approach. He waved a hands towards them and they returned to work, their commander stepping forward. Cid watched from afar as the two conversed. He wanted to know what was going on direct from the source. He didn't want to have to hear the details filtered back to him through Reeve's well-meaning yap. He turned to the team and said, "C'mon, let's go over there and see what's . . . "

But Tifa was already on her feet and halfway across the street.

"Damn. . . I thought I was leadin'?" He sighed and looked to Barret. "Babysit, "he ordered, then he and Nanaki sprang after her before Barret could protest. The hulking man frowned, watching them leave helplessly. He turned slowly around to see CJ and Ifalna staring up at him in suspicion.

"Who are you?" the little girl asked.

"I seen you in pictures my dad has, "CJ began, resting his chin on one bandaged hand, "But I ain't ever met you before. Your name's Mr. Wallace, right?"

"You can call me Barret, kid."

"You mean like girls put in their hair? Eww. . . "

"No! That's barrette! My name's Barret, say it right!"

"Sounds the same, "Ifalna remarked, staring at him lazily.

"Well, it ain't. There's three thousand times difference between 'em. Huh. Ifalna. Don't make me get started on you."

The little girl juttred her chin out and squinted her eyes huffily. "Ifalna's a pretty name, "she insisted. "Better than Barrette."

Barret was about to snap back some reply when he realized that he hadn't sunk so low as to argue with a five year old. "Cocky and stubborn, jus' like yer dad, "he remarked, looking the kids over. He'd never seen them before, not really. Tifa had sent him pictures years ago but that was all. He saw them now and distractedly thought they were likely looking enough in a Cloud Strife kind of way. He turned his head away and glared at the back of Cid's head as he stood and listened while Reeve and the MP commander conversed. He swore the pilot had done this to him on purpose. He couldn't stand Cloud, much less his kids. Cocky kids at that.

"You guys gonna go up there with my mom?" CJ asked suddenly.

"What makes you think she's gonna go up there?"

"My dad and Vincent need help, "he replied simply. Barret snorted.

"Help in the head, "he said. "Yeah, she'll go up there. And Cid and Red too."

"You?"

"I dunno. Probably. Maybe."

"Are you a wussy?"

"What?!" Barret snapped around and glared the little kid down, "You better watch your mouth, blondie, or I'll throw ya out another window."

"No, you won't!" Ifalna snapped, her small fists balled up. CJ shoved her shoulder.

"Don't worry about him, Eef. He's a wussy. What d'ya expect from a guy with the girly name of a hair clip? Puh."

"You a little punk, ya know that? You like this when Cid was watchin' ya?"

Ifalna stuck her tongue out at him, the worst insult a five year old could give. "No, "she replied , "He had licorice. And he's nice. We know him."

"Yeah, "CJ chimed in, "He's got a cool airship and planes and stuff. And his kids are nice. And he gives really good Christmas presents. And he likes guns! Boom!"

Barret stared down at the kid, unimpressed. He reached a hand into the pocket of his jacket and pulled a few small orange capsules out.

"I got tic tacs, "he said, "And lint. How far does that get me in you punks' "cool book"?" The kids grabbed at them, nearly knocking him over.

Crunching the candies contentedly, CJ piped, "We'll take you under consideration. Chocolate would help your chances though, Barrette."

Barret leaned back, crossing his arms and curling his hands into fists to warm his fingers against the cold. "I'm thrilled, "he admitted sarcastically. Blinking slowly, he yawned and gazed towards the Shinra towers, the upper levels still obscured by the seemingly immortal mists. The night just didn't seem to want to die.

The voice was penetrating, and its arguments undeniable. So he listened.

What's it feel like? To be a murderer. Again. I'm just curious, you see.

Yoo hoo, Cloud. . . what's it feel like? Huh?

Yeah, well. . . I guess I wouldn't talk to me either, if I were you. But hey, that's right. I am you. Heh heh.

Still seeing 'em, eh? Yeah, they were good looking kids. Good looking kids in a Cloud Strife kinda way. Looked a lot like

you. Less like Tifa, but it was still there. So now, with 'em gone, it's like losing yourself and losing a little bit of her too. Think she's still alive? Tifa, that is. Maybe you went and killed her too while you weren't looking.

Laugh already, damn you, it was a joke. Geez, you have no sense of humor.

Sigh.

What d'you think Hojo's up to? That was a shock, eh? Yeah, who'd a thunk it, the old psychopath up here all that time. Then you stumble your way to the old labs after thirteen years. . . almost makes ya believe in predestination, doesn't it? Fated to kill ole Seph in that reactor after he toasted your town, fated to be found by those scientists and tinkered with like a guinea pig. . . but ya fought fate, and that was your mistake, boyo. Ya thought ya could kill Hojo, Sephiroth, Shinra, all that mess and not have to be controlled anymore. Huh. But fate always wins out in the end. Fate's a little bitch, and she's got you cornered now. Holed up. Killed your kids. Fate didn't like you finding happiness. Who told you that? Wasn't it Sephiroth, the samn man who. . . cut your face like that? Oh, I don't remember. Someone said that sometime and it's true. Well, I spose it's a moot point now. Fate's disposed of any happiness you had. Out the window. Bye bye.

Hmm. What now? Wait it out, I suppose. They musta died quick, dontcha think? Sixty-Eight stories, long way down. Screaming. Screaming all the way. Small little screams dying away, snatched by the chilly air. Cold out last night. Damned cold for November. Maybe we'll get snow soon, you never know. Snow would be nice. Midgar looks good under a blanket of white. Hide the grime, ya know? Think Tifa's found 'em yet? The kids, I mean. If she's not dead herself, I mean. Heh heh. Yeah.

Man, are you crying again? Geez, I swear you're a baby. I'll bet ya Vince isn't over there crying. He saw 'em fall too. Think he hates you? I mean, it's your fault he's in here, trapped again in the clutches of the worst enemy he's ever had. I mean, c'mon, he's gotta be ready to rip your head off. He could be dead too, ya know. Wouldn't that be something? Don't care, eh? Well, you do both deserve it, you murderers.

Think CJ's bitter about never being able to grow up? Dead before his eleventh birthday. How much longer did he have? About four months and he would have been eleven. Ifalna though, she only just turned five. A shame. Shame, shame, shame, that's what the papers'll say. Unless they're dead too. The media, I mean. Heh. It would be the funniest thing in the world if everyone were dead now, if you were the only one left living. You maybe, and Hojo and Chieko and Jenova. Wouldn't be all bad for you though, boyo. They are your "family", right? So they say. So she says. You could all live together on this unoccupied rock, stepping over the corpses of your friends, living it up on your own personal planet, with the annoying insects wiped out. Woo, wouldn't that be grand?

Sixty-eight stories is a high ways up. Musta looked damn scary to those dangling kids. Scarier as it ran up to meet 'em. Them. Them screaming. Screaming all the way down.

Hearing it still? Seeing them still? Yeah, I would too if I were you. Heh. Wait, I am. . . nevermind. You know.

~\*~

"Every elevator is out of order. Cords were severed beyond immediate repair from what the crew saw. There's always the stairs of course but I wouldn't send any men past the fiftieth floor. Not without consulting you first, sir. I do have to warn that the weather service came through on the wire not long ago. There's a hell of a storm system moving this way, so whatever you decide upon needs to be done soon, sir."

Reeve nodded, rubbing his fingers through his black goatee thoughtfully. The young MP commander, the highest ranking of the security personnel at Shinra besides Reno and Cloud, watched him thinking, hoping he'd decide to let the commander and a few of his best charge into the towers and kick some ass. It was all he could do to hold back his anger and a few sad, frustrated tears. He was remembering the faces of those sixteen guards, each one a friend, each one cut down like an animal.

"Were there any casualties besides the guards?" Reeve asked, his eyes anxious. The commander shook his head.

"No, sir. A few shaken employees but that's all."

"Find anything suspicious? Besides the hole in the building, the bodies, all that. Anything that could help us?" The commander responded in the negative and Reeve sighed, turning and pacing about.

"This is my fault, "he snapped, wringing his hands together, "I was the last one to talk to Cloud last night. I should have insisted he leave with me. I should have made him go with Reno and Rude. Damn it! Alright, Commander Ikari, we're going to retake the building. Our building. But we're not going to take any chances. I want you to contact Sector Nine in Kalm, then Sector Ten in Junon. Tell Yannig and Nevilleson I want them and their men here asap. That'll give us what, two hundred and fifty soldiers? In addition to the two hundred here in the Midgar camp? That should be sufficient."

"Four hundred'n fifty men?" Cid asked, breaking into the conversation rudely, "Cloud, Vincent and I are the ones that took Jenova down last time. Just the three of us. You don't need so many soldiers, that's just ludicrous."

"No!" Reeve snapped, whipping around with a beet-red face, "What's ludicrous is having sixteen guards die because we were totally unprepared for attack!"

"Reeve, "Nanaki said calmly, "From the wounds on the deceased, there was nothing they could do to fight back. They were literally snapped in half from the inside. It sounds like power beyond that which can be attacked."

"We can't attack it?" Reeve snarled, "Then how the hell do we stop it? And what makes you think it can't be fought against?"

"I don't know. It's only my theory."

"You have a theory?" Cid asked, puffing on a fresh cigarette. He raised one eyebrow questioningly towards the creature. Nanaki would have blushed if he'd been able to.

"Though most of the party was still on the floor of the Northern Crater battling the monsters Jenova had sent after us and thusly unable to participate in the final battle with her, from what Cloud has told me, you, he and Vincent managed to truly tear her apart down there. If she wasn't killed, her body was surely destroyed, correct?"

The pilot nodded vigorously. "You should have seen what was left of her. Nothing. It was great, Cloud and I hacked her into horse meat and Vincent shot spells at her that sent the chunks flying apart. We practically dissected her. Messy."

"So she was destroyed?"

"If anyone but you had told me she was alive, I would have called 'em a liar. We slaughtered that bitch. Cloud especially. He fought like he was possessed. Or rather like for once he wasn't possessed, could think clear and easy. Huh."

"Mm. We don't know a lot about Jenova. We only really know that she was found by Gast and dated at 2000 years old. A "calamity from the sky." A creature from another world."

"An alien?" Tifa asked.

"Supposedly. But then, maybe something else too. She seems almost like the antithesis of life. A creature who knows only of bringing death and chaos to those worlds it chooses to inhabit."

"Yeah, it's evil." Cid shrugged as Nanaki looked at him curiously.

"Evil is a very convenient word. At least, I've noticed it is such for humans. You label things as evil when you don't understand. Perhaps Jenova is necessary. She is a counterbalance to the Planet. Marlene thinks that everything has an opposite in nature and in life. Perhaps Jenova is the Planet's counter."

"I thought people were the Planet's counter," Tifa asked.

"I don't believe so. Humanity and the Planet are too closely related to be opposites. We come from and return to the Planet. If you choose to think so, we are the Planet."

"Fine, fine, fine, "Cid said, leaning heavily on his pike, "Geez, are you a scientist or a philosopher, Red?"

"Neither," contradicted Nanaki, grinning briefly, "I am the guardian of Cosmo Canyon, nothing more."

"Well, you seem to be taking up some hobbies. What's your point to all this?"

"Not a particularly pleasant point, I'm afraid. I'm thinking that if Jenova is actually a natural force and not simply some alien bent on devouring Planets. . . well, if she's a natural force, she cannot be destroyed."

"A natural force?"

"Yes. Like, like a storm or fire or quake. Forces that are simply part of life and which we cannot truly control."

"That can't be true, "said Reeve, shaking his head slowly, "Storms, Fire and Quake are mindless powers. Jenova is sentient with free will."

"So are the Planet and LifeStream. They are Jenova's counters. It really makes quite a bit of sense if you allow yourself to believe it. Everything has an opposite in our world. Everything. But what keeps humanity and the Planet in check? For 2000 years Jenova lay sealed, sealed and trapped by the Cetra who gave their lives to do so. And in those two millennia humanity flourished, uncountered by her, its advance and multiplication unimpeded. This was why, perhaps, only perhaps mind you, the creature felt such a desire to destroy as many as possible upon awakening. As the opposite of life, she thrives upon death, upon the destruction of LifeStream. She wants only to fight against her counter, that's all the creature knows, all it was created for. Blind death. The Planet retaliates in the few ways it can; with the Weapons, with the creatures on her surface, us namely, and at last, when everything else fails, it calls upon the LifeStream to cancel death. It worked thirteen years ago, worked quite well, luckily for us. But of course our loyalties lie with the Planet. We don't want to die, so we fight with her. We are her. And that's why we fight Jenova. To do anything else, to do as Sephiroth or Hojo did and fight

with her, you'd have to be insane. Either that, or have lost your love for life and humanity."

"Damn, Red, some theory. Jenova is a natural force. . . is this what you stay up thinking about at night?" Cid asked, cocking his blonde head and looking upon the fiery beast with curiosity. "Morbid," he decided, releasing a stream of smoke through his nostrils.

"If your little theory is correct, we can't actually kill her?" Tifa asked, her gaze cold.

"It's just an idea that Marlene and I had," Nanaki replied a little sheepishly, "It came to mind now, is all. The way that she can be alive now without a body. Why she wants Cloud and Vincent. How she can control Cloud. . ."

"How 'bout filling us in on that, O wise one," Cid said, frowning. Nanaki looked around him at his friends, wishing Marlene was there to back him up. He sighed cattishly, the flame at the end of his tail flickering through the morning mist and looking like a lantern.

"At first the Elder and I thought she only wanted Cloud for revenge's sake, to avenge herself and Sephiroth. But I don't believe that anymore. She still wants revenge I think, but. . . she wants it on the entire Planet. On all of us. Jenova needs Cloud and Vincent because they contain her cells. These cells must be indestructible if she's still in existence, yet for her to manifest, they must be unified in some way. She must have some sort of physical presence to inhabit. You all managed to separate those cells and destroy her body years ago, but--"

"Hold on, hold on," Tifa said, grinning a little crazily and holding her two gloved hands up before her. There was something sad and strained in her brown eyes, "You're wrong, Red. My Cloud's a walking puddle of mako, but he doesn't have Jenova in him."

Nanaki eyed the dirty cement sadly, not wanting to look up and meet the woman's heartbroken expression. Cloud had always denied the facts, been disgusted by the possibility. He'd been controlled years ago because of the Jenova cells in his bloodstream. Sephiroth's control over him hadn't been psychological, hadn't been telekinetic, hadn't been magic. It'd been granted to him by Jenova, whose cells coursed like fire in Cloud's veins. It was a disease he'd been given, a virus contracted over the course of five long years in a lab. And despite his arguments to Tifa since then, she'd known. She realized now she'd known all along. Hugging her arms around herself, the woman nearly sobbed, sure that now, whatever was happening to him, Cloud knew too. And the day was here again when the fact was hurting him.

With a single glance, Nanaki could see in Tifa's eyes that words were unnecessary. She wouldn't argue the fact that her love was infected with Jenova, the odds were stacked against anything else. Though it hurt her to hear it, she listened to Nanaki continue his lecture.

"Her every cell, I think, is a link to her essence. The same way that every form of life in existence at this moment is a link to the Planet. Jenova cannot die because these cells cannot die. I believe though, that the weaker the concentration of cells, the weaker is the manifestation of her essence. That just seems like common sense. So perhaps she wants Cloud and Vincent because with the two of them together, the cells infecting their bodies allow her to manifest into an even more powerful form. Or at least, into some form at all. Those years without hearing of her, when we thought she was destroyed, perhaps she was simply too weak to appear. She needed them together."

"Doesn't make sense," Tifa said, coming out of her funk, "Cloud and Vincent are together a lot. He comes over almost every winter. Why now?"

"You've got me there," Nanaki said, unable to explain, "Perhaps there is another element we just don't know about. Perhaps one of the creatures that CJ told us about is also a vessel of Jenova and its presence along with our friends' creates the cell concentration that she needs."

"Or perhaps this is just a waste of breath. It's only speculation, Red. And if we believe it, we may as well give ourselves up for dead. Of course Jenova can be killed. She's not some "natural force", she's just some conceited broad from outer space with too much power for her own good."

"Conceited BROADS from Outer Space," repeated Cid wistfully, "Sounds like that'd make a good movie."

"You're not helping, Cid."

"Screw you, Reeve. I'll set Barret on ya."

Nanaki sighed at the two men, watching them glare at each other mildly. "Well, what the hell are we gonna do, huh?" Cid asked suddenly, "Do we assume she can't be killed and bug out on Cloud and Vince? Or do we file inside that concrete box and do our damndest to repeat what we did thirteen years ago in the Northern Crater? Clock's ticking, boys and girls, and I'm too damned old to be standing around, tapping my foot, wasting my time."

"Just forget what I said," Nanaki sighed, not meeting the glances of Reeve or his companions, "Like I said, it's just a theory. An obtuse, depressing theory."

"Well whatever. Sorry, Red, but there's no time for pondering the meaning of Jenova. We know the thing's in there, we know it's dangerous. I'm going to send a bloody army up there to deal with her. That is my headquarters, and she's holding my employee."

"Save your precious soldiers, Reeve. AVALANCE is here. This is our problem and Cloud and Vincent are our men. We'll take care of it," Tifa snapped, banging her right fist into her left hand menacingly. Reeve looked at her like she were nuts.

"I can't let you do that," he stated, shaking his head slowly, "Not by yourselves. This building and anyone who enters it are my responsibilities, got that? No one else is going to die today. Are you blind, Tifa? Do you see those sixteen body bags over there? Do you see the people milling around them, crying their friggin' eyes out? You see that little black-haired kid, with the red jacket? That's Terry Baligg's son. Terry from the Three-B Squad, second shift. Terry who's laying there cold and stiff with a heart that was crushed to jelly while still in his chest. He ain't ever going to see his kid again. And that kid's gonna grow up without a dad. You see your own two kids sitting over there? Their father's gone. You want them to lose their mom too?"

"So what are you saying, Reeve?" Tifa asked, her posture stiff and unyielding, "You want me to forget my husband? I could never forgive myself. And CJ and Ifalna could never respect me. Red, you thought Seto was a coward, running away and leaving your mom. And you despised him for it. But when Bugenhagen told you the truth, that he was a hero, saving the entire canyon. . . well, you were proud, weren't you? Though he was killed in the act, he at least possessed the bravery and will to do what he knew needed to be done. And now you respect him. Right?"

Nanaki didn't want to agree, but her words were true. He nodded his shaggy head. Tifa smiled grimly. "You see? Don't try to talk me out of it again. We're going in."

Reeve tried to stare the woman down, but found his own meek gaze blasted to shreds beneath her rusty brown eyes, snapping fire and ire in electric sparks. He backed down, about to admit defeat, when he heard an MP run up to the group, shouting his name.

"What is it?" he barked, whipping around to face the young man who now stood panting besides him. The fellow looked nervous for a moment, thrown off by the president's attitude, which was usually pretty friendly and easy-going.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir," he began, wiping sweat from his eyes, "But we've found a survivor. The missing member of second class backup that we were wondering over."

"Where at?"

"At the bottom of the secondary employee elevator shaft, sir. He was buried under a few fallen ceiling boards and we missed him in the first sweep. We heard him moaning though, and . . ."

The young MP's voice trailed off as he found himself talking to thin air. President Reeve and his friends had run off where he'd indicated. They shoved their way through the throngs of onlookers, pushing the press from their path unceremoniously. Entering the building through the shattered front doors, Reeve saw the extent of the damage inside and paled. There were ugly, vertical cracks running up and down the lobby walls, up through the ceiling and down into the floor. The force of the tremors had cracked the entire building.

"Oh, shit. . ." he moaned, nearly collapsing as Tifa, Cid, and Nanaki shot him questioning looks, "The foundation's been cracked. Don't you see? This entire building could come crashing down at any second. What am I going to do?"

"You're just going to deal with it, catman. Don't let it phase you. C'mon." Cid patted his friend on the shoulder, then pushed him back into the lobby where there was a small group of MP and EMS workers huddled inside one of the elevators. Reeve stumbled forward, in a daze. Even Meteor hadn't managed to destroy the majestic Shinra towers. How could they be cracked now? Cracked and broken and split right down the seams. He walked slowly, his feet kicking up the plaster dust and ceiling chunks scattered on the lobby tiles. Absently, he stooped over and righted a potted plant that'd fallen, adjusting the leaves forlornly. Cid looked at him for a moment then sighed and went to check out the guy in the elevator.

He was a mess. The old pilot looked over the shoulders of the medical staff working on him and saw a face shattered and covered in dried, sticky red. His body was still, though his one arm twitched spasmodically while his eyelids opened and closed in pain. Squinting, Cid saw the name Howard printed on the guard's name tag, and then for some reason, radio tubes and plastic sprinkled on his uniform.

Tifa tapped him on the shoulder and he turned to see her shake her head. This man just wasn't going to live much longer. They needed to question him now.

"Reeve," she said when the president finally approached, "This guard probably knows what happened."

"Yeah, probably," the man admitted, not looking at Howard.

"Well, maybe you should ask him about it before he kicks off?" Cid suggested impatiently. Reeve frowned, a terrible

aching beginning in his chest and behind his eyes. He just wasn't ready to deal with this. He knew he was president of the company and all. He knew the fate of the entire Shinra corporation rested on his shoulders but he never thought he'd have to protect his beloved Shinra by having his hands drenched in blood. That's what it felt like; as though he himself had beaten the broken man laying in the elevator. He just couldn't understand why all of those guards, and now this man before him, why they should have to die just because he was a bad president.

"Howard," Reeve called, stepping forward and shooing one of the MPs aside so he could kneel down to the bloodied figure. "Tell us what happened."

Howard looked up at him for a second, eyes unfocused, one side of his face smashed in. Reeve swallowed hard but kept his stare fixed on him. But the guard didn't answer. He turned his gaze away and closed his eyes.

"It's no use, sir," one of the EMS workers said, "His neck's broken. Most of the bones in his body smashed from the impact. I don't think he can talk."

"Like hell he can't."

The entire group turned around at the sound of the new voice. Reno was approaching, Rude and Berk at his heels. The man's red hair was more frazzled than usual, customary ponytail gone and long strands hanging in his face and down his back. His bloodshot eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses, his suit jacket missing and his shirt untucked and wrinkled as though he'd slept in it. He shoved his way through the group and stood tall over Howard's broken body, his posture wavering slightly.

"Soldier!" he snapped in a loud, commanding tone. Howard's eyes flicked open fearfully, the pupils hazed in delirium. They searched about for Reno and a tear dropped from one of them when he found him.

"Sir . . ."

The single word was garbled and unsure when it rolled from his dry tongue. Reno flinched at the sound but refused to let up.

"Report, soldier," he said authoritatively. Howard shut his eyes again but began to speak, the words flowing from his mouth like beer bottles tossed out a truck window; spent and shattering upon impact.

"Six-B dead. . . Jenova killed em. Then we came, but I fucked up, so it was just them. They was up, Six-A leadin', sir. Jenova ain't nothin' but voice. Voice 'n power. She snapped em in two. Couldn't fight, they couldn't see nothin' to fight. So they died. I fucked up, sir, shoulda been up to die with em. They go with honor, up there in the clouds. . . she sent me here, crashing here to rot in hell. No honor, never had honor enough to die like a hero, or at least a martyr. Down here with the plaster and dead radio on me. Get it off! Goddamned dead radio, dead men all over, get it off!"

Reno's eyes opened wide as the guard began twitching his features about, eyeing the random bits of plastic scattered on his blood-soaked chest as though they were bits of flesh. The red-haired man knelt down and brushed them off his uniform gently but quickly, somehow understanding. He flung the radio tubes and circuit board away, out of the elevator, then looked back at Howard, the guard's eyes open again, focused and clear suddenly.

"Thank you, sir," he said in a soft voice. With a small shudder, his features suddenly relaxed and his slow rattling breathing ceased. Reno checked for a pulse on his neck with two fingers, coming away with flecks of blood on their tips. Solemnly he closed the man's two eyes then knelt for a second with his head bowed, hair cascading and covering his features like a drawn curtain.

"So someone fill me the fuck in," he said suddenly, his voice slightly gruff but still loud and pissed, "We heard about all this on the radio but it seems the MP have managed to keep some of the details out of the media's grasp. All I know is that half my security staff is dead and there's a ten foot hole in the side of the building. Did you all throw some huge kegger last night that got outta hand or what? Where the hell's Cloud?"

Reeve sighed deeply, his arms crossed over his chest with one hand up and rubbing at his brow. "Reno, Cloud and Vincent Valentine are, as far as we know, being held up on the sixty-eighth floor. I'm assuming Cloud somehow figured out the kids were up there last night, went to save them, and then all hell broke loose. What do you think, Tifa?"

"CJ and Ifalna didn't know anything about it, thusly I don't know anything about it. I haven't seen Cloud since early yesterday morning, myself."

"I saw him last night, he was cheered up, I thought," Reno said, rising finally from Howard's still form. He was glad he was wearing his shades and didn't have to look Tifa in the eye. "He said he had some stuff to do, so I didn't bug him too much about coming with us. Besides, he looked tired and I think he'd gotten in a scuffle with someone. He was cut up."

"Cut up?" Tifa asked, concern in her tone, "Who would he get in a fight with? What idiot would fight Cloud after seeing Ultima Weapon?"

"An idiot that's probably dead now, I dunno," Reno said shrugging, "But whoever did it was a nutball. Who'd cut a J into the side of a guy's face?"

At these words, everyone but Reno and the two Turks froze, faces drained and drawn.

"A what?" Nanaki asked, tail flickering. Reno eyed the fiery creature with one eyebrow raised. He'd forgotten what a freaky thing it was. It felt weird talking to him like a regular person.

"A J," he replied, "Why? What's the buzz, people? You're all looking like there's some real great joke circulating 'round among you. How about filling in poor in-the-dark Reno, eh? What does it mean?"

Surprisingly, Rude answered, his voice crisp despite his slight hangover.

"It means Jenova I believe." He looked to Tifa for confirmation and the woman nodded. Rude frowned grimly but continued, "I kept thinking about it last night. Why would anyone cut a J in spike's face? It was like a tag, ya know? Like graffiti. Like punks'll spray paint on alley walls, so I ran through names that start with the letter. That "thing's" stuck most prominently in my mind."

"Well damn, why didn't you say anything last night?" Reno asked irritably.

"Didn't seem like a good topic of conversation for a barroom. Besides you were drunk."

"Screw off. . ."

"Mm."

"We have to get Cloud and Vincent now," Nanaki said forcefully, "We have to get them away from her. If we don't, I fear they'll be little of them left to save. Jenova has. . . that thing has marked Cloud you say? I don't know what her intentions are, but she's marked him. Like a possession. I'm beginning to see why Bugah feels so horribly about all of this. All of this evil. Perhaps evil is a good word after all."

"First sensible thing I've heard you say," Cid said cheerily, "Let's move. Reeve, what's it going to be?"

The Shinra President looked at the group, still shaken by Howard's death. He knew Reno was grieving behind his sunglasses, he'd been close with many of those murdered guards, had even dated Jenni from Squad Four-A until the woman had wanted something more serious and Reno, in his customary fashion, had dropped her like a bad habit. He glanced to Rude and young Berk, the two of them wearing the cool Turk masks they adopted in public. Reeve had a feeling the three had been up all night but he couldn't tell from their appearance. Their suits were crisp, their faces calm and their eyes unreadable behind their sunglasses. Hands shaking slightly, he turned to look again towards the elevator, where the EMS were beginning to peel Howard out of the ground and scrape him into a body bag. The sight left him nauseous, but the thought of any one of his friends laying dead on the ground left him nearly sobbing. Could he really let Tifa and the others go? If one or all never came back, he didn't think he'd be able to handle it. Still, he was confronting some of the best warriors on the Planet. These people had saved them all years ago, Reeve had watched them do it through Cait Sith's eyes, fighting beside them in his own meager way. He remembered their strength and their loyalty to each other, something he'd never been able to imitate in the pathetic stuffed body he'd hidden behind. They were all so unyielding, they intimidated him. He glanced towards Tifa who glared at him expectantly.

"It will take a few days for our men from Kalm and Junon to mobilize and arrive," he began hesitantly, "But I will still send for them. Midgar needs protection. It's been pummeled once already, it doesn't need it again. From looking at the damage done to this building, I don't think the city could handle another assault. It cracked the foundations right down the center. We'll. . . we'll probably have to bulldoze and rebuild from scratch. Dammit. We can't do the same to an entire city though. I don't think anyone would have the heart to anyway, if anything happened. Not after we all worked so hard to raise it up from the ground."

"Don't talk like that, Reeve," Reno said, pulling his tangled hair back into a tight ponytail, "Nothing's going to happen."

"Tifa, you, Cid, Red, and Barret do what you will. I'd like to send thirty men up with you, thirty of my best."

"Alright, if that'll make you feel better, we'd be glad to have the help," Tifa said diplomatically, eyeing Reeve and making him squirm for some reason. The Shinra president nodded, relieved she'd agreed, somehow sure she'd reject his help.

"I'll inform Ikari and have him select some troops from Midgar's garrisons. It should take an hour or so, alright?"

The small group nodded, including Reno which made Cid look to the man in surprise.

"You going too, red?" the pilot asked, looking him over.

"Do you have a problem with that, Highwind? Bitch killed my men and has my partner. I wanna introduce her to Mr. Voltage." Reno tapped his nightstick against his shoulder, looking decidedly aggravated. "How 'bout you, Rude? You feel up to it?"

"President Reeve, will I be paid for this? It's overtime," Rude asked expressionless. Reeve grinned slightly and nodded.

"Time-and-a-half?" the Turk questioned.

"Time-and-a-half."

"I'm in then. Berk too."

"Excuse me? This is a Saturday, I have a date tonight!" the young man protested, stepping back and losing his cool for just a minute. "I don't work overtime, Mr. Rude!"

"You work overtime when I say you work overtime. Besides, you need the experience. Live with it." Berk continued to argue but Rude only stood with folded arms, face blank. The young Turk finally surrendered, borrowed Reeve's cell phone and huffed off to call his girlfriend.

"Tseng would have murdered me if I'd ever argued with him like that," Reno said watching him go. He turned to Tifa suddenly and asked, "An hour then? I need to go clean up. Do we meet back here?"

"Why you askin' her?" Cid yelled, "I'm leadin'! Or ain't I?"

"I don't care who the fuck's leading, I don't take orders from anyone anyway, do we meet back in an hour or not?"

"Yes, yes, fine," Tifa said, waving him off with one gloved hand. "Go take a shower and change your clothes, Reno, you smell like Seventh Heaven used to on a Friday night."

Reno flipped her the bird and turned brusquely about, heading for the shattered exit doors. He didn't get very far before falling flat on his face. They all fell flat on their faces actually, as without warning the Shinra building began to lurch and shake like an old man with arthritis. The already cracked white walls swayed and bent sickeningly and blocks of white stucco broke from the ceiling, smashing to dust and smaller chunks on the marble lobby tiles. A deep rumbling, like boulders sliding down the side of a mountain, filled the air and shook the ground.

"What's happening?" Tifa demanded, pushing herself to her feet, then standing unsurely on the sliding tiles like a drunken sailor on a storm-wracked ship. The men on the floor around her shot her clueless glances as the building rocked and they struggled not to panic. The atmosphere shook, all solidity crumbled, and it seemed the entire world was going to hell.

~\*~

Even after he'd shouted his last breath at it, the voice wouldn't stop.

Hard to care about much of anything anymore, isn't it? Hard to hear anything but those screams. Heh. Ever get that feeling of déjà vu? Yeah? Me too. That whole schtick with Aeris and your hometown. Those were your fault too, but bastard that you are, you shoved all that guilt away and lost yourself in that thing you call a family for thirteen years. You hid. And fate found ya, huh? Yeah, fate's pretty good at hide and seek, kinda its specialty. Wanna play again? Wanna play tag? Yeah, let's play tag. You run and Hojo'll be it. You lose when he taps you out, okay? Heh heh. What's the matter, too tired to run? Okay then, you just sit here and take it. You have, after all, been playing tag with Jenova all week, maybe I can understand your exhaustion. You're "it", you know. She tagged you good.

What do you think's going to happen now? Oh, that's right. You don't care anymore. You got hurt and like a little kid on the ball field, you've decided you don't wanna play no more. Spoil sport. CJ had more stamina than that. I remember when he got busted up by that kid last year and even when you said he could stay home the next day, he decided to go to school anyways. Kid had guts. A lot more'n you. Now those guts are splattered all over the pavement.

Damn it, tough if you don't like that image. It's what you did to 'em. Face up to it, coward. You don't want to though. You don't want to play no more. But what game do you mean? You don't want to play life anymore, is that it? Maybe the Planet doesn't want you to play. Maybe it's pissed you killed that mako monster. Maybe it's going to make sure you suffer for it. That's a scary thought, huh? Having the great big bloody Planet mad at you. Be a change though, you're usually the one that's pissed at it.

What's the matter? Head hurt? It won't for too much longer probably. Just a feeling I have. Seems to me there won't be anything for you to worry about at all soon. Just a hunch. You've rather royally screwed your chances at winning the game. The game you're not playing anymore. Heh. Congratulations, loser. Something makes me doubt you'll like the consolation prize.

~\*~

When she didn't get an answer the first time, Tifa felt she should ask again. Maybe God would come down and fill her in if she asked loud enough.

"What the hell's going on??"

"Nothing good. . . "Cid assured her. Not exactly God's voice, but at least it was something. The pilot got to his feet, reeling drunkenly and using his pike as a cane. "I'm supposed to be on vacation, you know."

Reeve swore as a chunk of ceiling smacked him in the brow, drawing a bit of blood. He could see the EMS workers scuttering about near the elevator, their equipment skidding on the tiles as they tried to fight the quake and get to their feet. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the walls beginning to buckle and felt sick. "We need to haul ass out of here," he said as calmly as he was able, "This entire building's going to go." Reeve felt himself suddenly pulled to his feet by Rude's strong arms and then shoved towards the doors. Rude worked for Shinra and would protect the company's president above any other duty. As long as he was getting paid for it. Standing now, though shakily, the group made for the exit, Cid and Reno calling to the medical staff to hurry. There was a sudden snap, sounding like a single compressed roll of thunder, from far above their heads. A strange burning smell followed it and at first Cid thought it was merely the electricity short-circuiting with the strain of the quakes. But he found he was dead wrong.

"Son of a bitch. . . " he muttered, "That's not good at all."

Cid stood staring, shocked and frozen, as the medical staff, still struggling to flee, began to be knocked to the floor, one by one. Those people nearest the rear wall of the lobby convulsed violently then fell, crackling blackish-blue energy ripping through their bodies mercilessly. What seemed to be a wall of the energy began to expand outwards from the elevator, indiscriminately cutting down any people in its path, blackening the floor and crumbling ceiling, cremating Howard's remains as it moved forward.

Reno jabbed Cid in the shoulder, snapping him out of his stupor.

"Don't stand there gawking. Whatever that is is moving this way. Run. Now!"

The rest of the group was already out of the building and Cid saw the last of the EMS electrocuted as the wave of energy passed over them, each of the staff dying without ever really knowing their murderer. There was nothing he could do for them now. He took off after Reno, cursing blue fire. Behind him, the electrical energy crackled, moving so close he could feel it affecting the hairs on the back of his neck, making them stand on end. But then he was out of the building, diving headfirst through the broken frame that'd once been the entrance to the towers. He landed on the concrete messily, then rolled a few feet, smacking his head.

The energy followed the two men out, a sheet of shimmering, beautiful blue, with swirlings of ebony and silver flowing through it. It pulsed from the Shinra building lethally, engulfing the entire structure with its power. Tifa took an involuntary step back away from it, then she and everyone else outside the building stared at the force field in awe. It made a snapping, popping noise as it sizzled over the walls. The trembling that had rocked the entire block subsided and things grew suddenly, terribly still. Then a few of the people in the crowd began to whisper, pointing towards Tifa, Cid, and the others, gossip ensuing.

"It's like the field that was around the northern crater," Reeve said in her ear suddenly, whispering for some reason. She nodded, cheeks pale. They couldn't get past the barrier. They hadn't been able to years before, and they wouldn't be able to now.

"I don't suppose you have a Sister Ray laying around anywhere, huh?" she asked, smiling weakly. He sighed, turning away to Commander Ikari who'd run up suddenly, brows drawn over his beady black eyes.

"President Reeve, are you alright, sir?"

"Yes," he answered, rubbing away the bit of blood on his brow, "I want all these civilians gone. Press too. The entire complex cleared off now. This place is a god damned hazard area."

"Yes, sir." Ikari turned to carry out the orders, gathering his MP about him like school children, and beginning to forcefully clear away the onlookers and curious citizens. Most were only too willing to go after the display.

Still swearing like a sailor, Cid got to his feet, a hand to his head. Reno was at his side, features drawn, his scars sticking out stark against his pale skin. That'd been a little too close. "Terrific," the red-haired man snapped, eyeing the building distastefully, "Another variable tossed into the mix. I need to hurt someone soon, I'm losing my patience."

"What's holding that building up?"

Reno glanced to his right, where Rude stood tall and impassive. He shrugged and said, "Probably the same thing that's just made that energy barrier. Gods, I need a drink. . . " Reno hauled out his ever-present hip flask but found it depressingly empty. Rude handed him a stick of gum. "Thanks."

"Well, it looks like we won't be taking the stairs up there, we can't even get inside now. Safe to say we need a plan," Cid said, craving his own addiction and lighting a much-needed cigarette. The pilot looked towards Tifa who he'd generously decided was "co-leading" the group along with him, but the woman was only staring up at the barrier with crossed arms. The MP and fleeing civilians jostled her but she stood firm, watching the building with daggers for eyes. Cid decided it best not to bother her. "Okay, then, those of us still in the land of the living, anyone got any ideas?"

"We should go consult Elder Bugah," Nanaki said, flicking his head to the left and right to rid his mane of the plaster dust in it. "But then, I hate the idea of leaving them up there. By the gods, something terrible's going to happen, I just feel it. Jenova's sealed herself, Cloud and Vincent up safe and tight. She can do whatever she's planning in safety now. We buzzing gnats can't flutter in her face anymore. When she sealed herself and Sephiroth into the crater, it was so he could summon Meteor. I doubt what she's planning now is any less horrible. Hades have mercy. . ."

"A chopper maybe. . ." Reeve suddenly breathed, neck craned and eyes piercing the upper stories of his towers. The others looked to him curiously. "I mean, there's that hole in the wall. Couldn't we simply fly up there in a helicopter and you guys could break in commando style?"

"Yo Rude, give me your binoculars," Reno commanded. Rude snorted and whipped them out, ignoring his friend and putting them to his own eyes. He scanned the region of the sixty-eighth floor, a frown on his lips.

"This barrier extends around the entire building," he said, "Up and over. I can barely see the chasm in the wall through the energy around it. In fact, it seems thickest up there. "Seems" being the operative word, this mist's thick as hell."

Cid stepped forward, brandishing Venus Gospel and looking quite cocky. "Maybe we're overestimating this thing," he suggested, eyeing the shimmering wall of energy before him, "Just 'cause it looks like that wall that was around the crater, doesn't mean it's the same, or as strong."

"Are you screwed in the head, Highwind?" Reno asked irritably, "Did you see what it just did to those medical people inside? Fried 'em like churros."

"Nice simile," remarked Rude.

"Thanks."

Cid rolled his eyes, scratching at his hairline beneath his pushed-up flight goggles. "Yeah, well the electricity in a god damned desk lamp can do the same. I'm just saying maybe we won't need something as strong as the Sister Ray to punch a hole in this thing. Jenova ain't as tough now as she was thirteen years ago. Do you think?"

"Actually, Cid, it sort of crossed my mind that she seems even stronger now, strange as that sounds." Reeve shrugged helplessly as the other glared at him.

"No, he's right," Nanaki said suddenly, "Jenova seems stronger and seems to be taking more of the initiative. Judging from the wounds on the guards, she killed them herself. When did Jenova ever personally kill anyone during the Meteor affair? She seemed so disconnected from Sephiroth's murders years ago, that for a long time, I was under the impression that she was not a sentient creature, merely the mindless virus or disease that many claimed. Now though. . ." He shook his head, eyeing his paws.

"Well, let's not bog ourselves down in more speculation, eh, Red?" Cid asked, a hand on his hip, "Let's head back to Marlene's and see what Bugah has to say."

"I'm staying here," Tifa said suddenly, not turning her gaze from the building.

"Tifa, what can you possibly--?"

"I'm staying here," she repeated, giving Cid a quick glare before turning back to her staring contest. The pilot sighed, chomping on the filter of his cigarette.

"Whatever. I swear this is friggin' Mideel all over again. What do you wanna do about the kids?"

The woman was silent a moment, but then said, "It's not safe here. Ask Marlene to take care of them for me. She'll do it, she obviously can't go to work."

Apparently pissed with the answer, Cid whipped about and began to take off across the street towards Barret and the kids. Reno stood for a moment, contemplating something, then followed, gesturing Rude to do the same with a flick of his head. Nanaki shadowed them, then Berk, who'd appeared suddenly with fifty questions on his face upon seeing the shimmering, energy-coated building before him. Reeve dashed off to speak with Commander Ikari and to begin the process of calling the vast network of headquarters, outposts, and department heads that made up the Planet-spanning Shinra corporation. He was going to end up telling the story fifty times over. And it would be just as frustrating with each repetition.

"Hey there!" a nasally voice called out suddenly before the small group could cross the street. Cid turned about to its

source, brows lowered, "Hey there, you! You're that airship pilot, eh? Over here, guys!"

A crowd of reporters rushed Cid and the others, moving like a chocobo stampede. Cid suddenly found twenty or so microphones and tape recorders shoved in his face, with twice that many men and women shoving each other to get a piece of him and his companions.

"Why has AVALANCE suddenly regrouped?"

"Can you explain what's been going on the past twenty-four hours? Does it have anything to do with the dead vegetation and animal life surrounding the Shinra complex?"

"Is your hair really blonde, or do you dye it?"

"Mr. Reno, do you have a statement you'd like to make to Midgar?"

"Mr. Rude, are the allegations that you're really Telly Sevalis true?"

"Nanaki, if that's your real name, will you be writing your own book or starring in a tv movie of your life any time soon?"

"Are you guys going to save the world again? If so, will you ask to be paid for it this time?"

"SHUT THE HELL UP!!"

Cid twirled the butt of his pike in a 360 degree circle around his head, braining quite a few reporters in the process. The leaches backed away for a minute, scribbling intensely on their notepads. "I swear to Shiva if her flight crew wasn't on vacation, I'd radio my airship and have it drop a load of missiles up your asses!" One of the braver reporters came up to the fuming pilot timidly, a small tape recorder held out before him.

"If I could just get one quote--"

Without a word, Cid punched the man in the jaw, with that one blow letting out all of the frustration the evil events had been laying on his mind. The small man went down in a heap, and his colleagues stood apathetically staring on. Apathetic for only a minute though. Before you could blink, they'd tossed their pencils and notepads away, forgotten their press passes and microphones, and suddenly threw themselves at Cid and the small group. Reno saw them coming and grinned.

"Well, I did want to hurt someone. If not Jenova, these creeps'll do." With a loud cry, he launched himself onto a small dweeb in a plaid trench coat, laying out kicks and punches with joy. Rude watched his friend calmly, preferring not to muss his hands. He only stood stoic and pistol-whipped anyone that came within range. Berk lashed out with his fists, enjoying the conflict. Nanaki, claws sheathed of course, was glad that Bugah wasn't there to see him beating the crap out of a lot of annoying, mousey little humans.

After a few minutes, there was a heap of battered reporters on the concrete and another crowd gathered around the victors. The MPs sighed, beginning again to hustle the civilians away from the fray. Panting slightly, Cid wiped a gloved hand across his brow, then grinned viciously. "I feel a lot better."

"This is wrong!" one of the fallen reporters said, leaning on his elbows painfully. The man glared at Reno, then glared equally as fiercely at Cid who only laughed. "Don't laugh, this is just wrong! We're only doing our job! There should be some kind of law in Midgar, granting some sort of, of freedom to us reporters. Protect us from attack, you know?"

"Are you kidding? Beating on the media is one of the best parts of my job. Freedom to the press?" Reno asked, straightening his hair, "Puh, that'll be the day. The day I move to Wutai."

All he knew was that it was dark. Not an unsettling dark, but a comforting one. That sort of blackness is hard to find, you usually never know what's hiding beyond the limits of your vision. Alone in bed, god only knew what kind of creatures lurked in the places your feeble human eyes couldn't penetrate. But here, he knew, there was nothing that would harm him. Just rich, velvety, warm blackness that caressed his skin and stroked his hair with a lover's touch. Barely perceptible, it pressed down on his body like a shroud, pressed even against his half-open eyes but not stinging them or causing discomfort, merely pushing them back gently in his head, making him tired.

He was tired. Comfortable weariness weighed upon his limbs. He was flat on his back, his arms at his sides, exerting no pressure whatsoever. Only lying there, at peace in the way they position those who are dead. He shut his eyes, lazy under the influence of the darkness, mind blank with the knowledge that he'd never have to leave such a comfortably confining existence. Sounds came to his sensitive ears, sounds he was so accustomed to he hardly heard them anymore. Things scratching at wooden floorboards, creaking eaves, the delicate flapping wings of bats. Winds whistled through all the sounds, the sky's cold breath blowing through the world. It was a mountain wind, the coldest kind, and it blew all the year,

changing only to shift directions during the different seasons. By listening very very closely, he was able to discern the directions it blew. This was how he was able to tell what time of year it was, though the temperature inside his space never changed, nor did the perfect pitch darkness before his eyes. He listened now, and absently noted it was winter, probably some time in mid January. He imagined the perfect whiteness that the world outside must surely be engulfed in, a perfect virginal snowfall, innocent, vibrant, untouched. The exact opposite of the inky blackness he was concealed in. He pictured the sun hitting the snow blindingly, indescribable heat against indescribable cold creating the light of infinity with their junction. The beautiful image, one of his favourites, filled his mind, so real, so perfect that he nearly panicked, accustomed only to the dark, not the photo-realistic scene of snow in Nibelheim that sprang suddenly from his imagination. He fought to rid himself of the picture until there was only blank blackness and he could relax again.

He laid for a long time, half-asleep, half-dreaming. The empty air stretched for an indeterminate distance all around him. He began to dream of a gorgeous woman. It was a dream without a plot, a collection of unmoving images really. Just this woman. Different views of her lips, her pleading eyes, the lines of her perfect body. Then her laugh, the sparkle of her intelligence; not tangible things, but things more precious, rarer than the physical beauty. Good god, he ached to wrap his arms around her. His eyes and chest stung with his desire. Breathless he reached his hands out to clutch the folds of her dress, feel the soft skin of her neck and arms and brow, run his fingers through her hair. But there was a jarring through his left arm as the metallic claw there clunked against the wooden lid of his coffin and both his arms dropped into the velvet lining with a soft whump. Then there was no more dreaming, no more release, and he was awake again. Vincent Valentine sighed.

Still, there was the blackness. Nothing could take that away, because that was real. The black darkness of time and space. He possessed that. No wicked man could steal, or warp it. He began to drift off yet again, secure in his delusions once more.

But then there was a noise he wasn't a familiar with. There was a splinter. The small sound of breaking wood and minute vibrations rocked his coffin, his sanctuary. The rocking and noises increased and before he could release a protesting cry, white, evil, horrible light stabbed into his eyes and his darkness withered away to dust beneath it, never to be resurrected. In seconds, the lid was torn from the coffin and Vincent cried out, as though physically hurt.

"Peek-a-boo."

Jenova's glowing visage met his gaze. She shimmered and veritably throbbed with light. Vincent found the illumination repulsive. He craved darkness. Blackness. The void. He bled dark to oppose her light.

"I knew I'd find you here, Vincent. You're quite predictable, I'm sorry to say. You hide from everything done to you. Not always in such a blatant way, not always in a coffin, but you find a hiding place somewhere. Tsk, tsk."

Sighing shakily, he sat up, bending his knees to his chin and resting there. He knew none of this was real, yet he felt ashamed. Was he really hiding? Hiding in his mind. Sleeping. That's all sleeping was, right? Retreating to the mind. He should have stayed awake and watched over Cloud. Cloud. What was going to happen to the both of them? Heh. Did it even really matter anymore? CJ and Ifalna. . . he couldn't even bring himself to complete the thought.

Jenova stood still beside the coffin, looking like a mourner at an open-casket funeral the way she gazed at Vincent. She shook her head slowly, piteously.

"How often do you allow yourself to think about all that you hide from, my son? You humans. . . so self-delusional. It's pitiful. Let's review, shall we? You hid for thirty years inside this wooden box. Mentally and physically hidden away. You would have remained here if not for Cloud and his friends. They came and so you left. But you didn't come out of hiding. No. You then secreted yourself away in the hunt for Sephiroth and in your vengeance towards Hojo. You hid your emotions in the battles you fought. Coward. Coward. Afterwards, even then, even with your enemies dead, you refused to come out of hiding. You found Icicle Inn and buried your face in the snow. No one knew you there, you'd have to talk to no one. The birds you raised to make the money to keep you alive, they'd ask no questions, they wouldn't judge you. Still hiding. Now I've dragged you out. Fate has dragged you out, won the little game of hide and seek. Fate's pretty good at hide and seek. Rather its specialty. But still, you recreate your true sanctuary now in your dreams. This coffin. This box for dead men. How I know you'd like to rot here for an eternity. You're almost too cowardly to bear, too cowardly to live."

"If you think so bloody little of me, kill me then."

Jenova smirked, her features ugly with the expression.

"You're always saying things like that, Vincent. You told Hojo you'd prefer death. You told him you weren't afraid of it because you believe your perfect little wench is waiting in the beyond for you. Let me tell you a secret: There is no beyond. There's only oblivion and the end of your soul as you drown and disappear alongside the other little worms in the LifeStream. There's no one waiting there for you. Your precious Lucrecia exists only in your memory, she doesn't have a consciousness anymore. There is nothing after death. Nothing. The Planet will use you as does all of your race. It'll recycle

the mako that made you live like an aluminum can, dumping it into the next pile of flesh to be born, right alongside the life energy of some other poor bastards who also believed in Promised Lands and after lifes. Are you still so sure you want me to end your existence? Hmm. Well, my child, I have an alternate proposition. How about this instead? How about I send you to hell, but keep you alive? Yes, that, I think, is what you deserve. You should appreciate your life a bit more, it's the only one you'll ever have."

The man shivered as she laughed, laying a hand on his unkempt hair. With her touch, his surroundings changed, shimmered and faded. And as promised, they turned to hell.

A small voice in the back of his mind told him he was dreaming, that as real as all the sudden influx of memories seemed, they were only figments of his imagination. But that voice of reason was drowned out by screams. Long, loud, familiar screams. A mish-mash of memories, similar to the scenes the specter of Sephiroth had shown him a week earlier in Lucrecia's cave. They'd made him weep. These tore his heart in half.

Somehow, he hadn't thought Lucrecia had been quite so bloody after her baby's birth, but what he thought didn't matter, she was now. The blood drained from her body, abandoning the shell of a woman whom he'd loved, and still loved, loved and adored and desired so deeply that the man he'd been had died with her. He didn't recall the bullet from Hojo's pistol burning with such fiery intensity when it had entered his shoulder, but how could he trust his memories? The pain now was so intense he couldn't breath, only scream out so loud it hurt his own head. Hojo laughed at him, laughed as he lay on the cold floor of the Shinra mansion, helplessly bleeding to death. Those memories weren't as terrible as what followed though. Those had been his own fault and, in his mind, he deserved to be haunted by them. But not by what followed, not by the image of Cloud's torture in that alley, not by Aeris's death, not by the screams of the crewmen on that ship in Junon, not by the blood-red burning of Meteor, not by the flames of Nibelheim, not by the shouts of the citizens of Midgar as their homes, their lives, their existences were burned away, not by other people's actions and other people's pain! Image after image, grief after grief pounded him and he screamed out to know the reasons.

"Why, damn you? Why can't you let me forget? Oh, gods, have I done such evil. . . ?"

In response, he watched again as the boy and girl dropped from the beast's grasp, screaming shrilly, whipped by the night air. Screaming. Their screams and Cloud's screams.

And then laughter. Bitter, shaking, trembling mirth.

It was his own and he was glad.

"I see," he said, laughing because to cry couldn't even begin to express the pain and rage inside. Crying was just so. . . ineffective. "I see, oh yes. Heh heh heh. Aahhhh. . . like Cloud. Like Cloud, you're trying to break me. Make me mad. Take my head away. Sadistic, heartless mother fucker. I haven't said that word in all of my life. I know why now. I was saving it for you."

"Shut up. Just take it."

Vincent could barely believe the words. "Just take it? Aah, Jenova, seems you're nothing but a bully after all. You won't break me. I was broken already and there's no way a man can be hurt worse than I already was. But I healed. And you won't reopen the scar. Aitsu yo. . . baka kaibutsu. Heh."

Vincent found the images suddenly gone and there was only that blackness once more. It was different now though. It was that inky, lurking blackness of a room right after the lights are shut off, the blackness of the unknown where anything can hide. Jenova's voice came at him, disembodied and deadly.

Break you? If I so desired it, Vincent Valentine, I'd have you crawling about on the floor, a raving lunatic, gibbering about Chaos and Lucrecia, muttering my name like a madman. But I needn't waste the effort. I don't need you broken, my son. No, I don't need you broken.

Though it should have, this admission didn't relieve Vincent in the least.

~\*~

Both his pets were sleeping. Hojo looked on them like a doting father. He refused, however, to call them his "sons", as Jenova did. That was ludicrous. They were his experiments, his toys, his playthings. And they would, very shortly, be his weapons. But they would never be his sons. He hated each of the men too deeply for such false sentiments.

Absently he looked upon Cloud. It had been sheer exhaustion that had stolen consciousness from the man, he hadn't slept in days and even now he did so fitfully. Hojo knew why Cloud's eyes darted beneath his eyelids, why he tossed and turned on the hard metal bottom of the mako radiation chamber he was closed into, and why the muscles of his jaw

trembled as he clenched and unclenched them spasmodically. Jenova was doing her work inside, stealing his sanity and his will away. Hojo had done his part in the manipulation of the man's mind by killing his children before his eyes, now it was her turn to spread the icing and finish him off. The murder of his mother, his town, of the woman he'd loved hadn't been enough to push him over the edge. But this. . . oh, he knew now the makings of madness. Grinning smugly, he turned from the small window and walked casually towards the chamber directly besides the one containing Cloud. Standing on tiptoe he peered inside. Vincent was in the same position he'd been in last night, knees curled up to his chin, back to the wall, hair fallen about his face in wild strands of blood-caked black. Hojo had to fight the urge to wrench open the chamber door and strangle the life right out of him. This violent craving shocked him slightly. He thought he hated his wife's lover out of the mere principle of what they'd done. Not because Hojo'd actually loved Lucrecia. Had he loved her? he wondered now. No. The answer was that simple. But why then did he so deeply despise the man she'd chosen over him? Honor, he decided, pride. I'm only human, after all. Or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof, the scientist thought, gazing down calmly at the tentacles that sprang from his mutated body.

Hojo looked up suddenly as Vincent emitted a small cry, his head turning slowly over, sweat beading down his face. His teeth clenched and he gasped a sharp intake of air. Something was hurting him. Hojo grinned. How he loved Jenova. He'd never realized all those years ago when Gast had first discovered her, that she'd have such a pleasingly primitive yet remarkably pleasant personality. She sought for what she wanted and she got it at all costs, understanding how meaningless the lives of those around her really were in comparison with her own aims. A girl after the scientist's own heart. She'd come to him as he'd lain nearly dead on the platform of the Sister Ray, his body reverted back to his pathetic human form, his blood draining away in puddled pools all about him. How much it had hurt. The mortal wounds had burned, wounds that should have left him mercifully dead if not for her cells pumping dark life into his limbs. Still though, he'd been knocking on death's door, nothing could stop that. The scientist shuddered now at the memories, the sensation of that tunnel through his brain, blood running down his face, horrible pressure and pain behind his eyes and wet chunks hanging behind him, where the back of his head had once been. He remembered his severed limbs, the wounds that Cloud had inflicted with Ultima Weapon, and the pike gashes from Cid Highwind. By Shiva, it'd been something he'd never forget.

Absently, Hojo fingered the thick scar tissue covering most of his face. Jenova had healed him, but she hadn't been very aesthetic with the job. And she'd done so on purpose, to keep him under her thumb. He couldn't leave the lab looking as he did. He was a freak, a monster in every sense of the word. Inside and out. He'd given himself willingly to her. He'd had no other option at the time. It was either sell his soul to the devil herself, or die. And Hojo had had too much bad karma to want to have to face the ever after just then. Better to prolong his life, suck every last bit of power he could from the world and stuff it in his pocket. He belonged to Jenova now, he didn't dispute this, but he shared in her power, it was a partnership and he could deal with that. As long as he went down in the history books as the man who helped conquer the world, he didn't mind if his name was printed in small text. Just so long as it was there. Just so long as he was granted some bit of immortality before his essence was sucked forever into the cruel oblivion of the LifeStream. Hojo thought now distractedly that maybe it was the Planet's fault he was fighting alongside Jenova. If the Planet wasn't such a heartless creature, if it didn't insist upon swallowing up people's souls after they'd died, perhaps then Hojo wouldn't have been so afraid to let death take him thirteen years before. Perhaps he would have welcomed it. But no. Who would want to be assimilated into the mindless pool of mako that was the LifeStream? That would be emptiness, the end of Hojo and he just couldn't accept it.

"Per-per-per-professor Hojo. . . "

The sniveling sound of Neto's voice snapped Hojo back to reality, leaving his miserable ponderings to sit in his mind and be picked up on again later.

"S-s-sir, I fetched those materia you asked for from the, the drawer. They're set on the t-t-table whenever you er, need them, sir."

"Yes, yes, Neto. Go sit down, you're making me nervous."

"Cer-certainly, sir."

His tail between his shaking legs, Neto turned from the creature and retreated to the place in the room farthest from it. He would have liked to go in the back, in the hidden menagerie where the cages were, it was dark and seemed safer, but Chieko was asleep there and scared Neto nearly as much as the scientist. Hojo had told Neto in no uncertain terms the night before that if he didn't cooperate entirely and do everything that was commanded of him, he'd be given to Chieko who would gnaw his bones. Neto had watched the creature pick apart the bodies of two guards, stripping them clean of flesh before chucking them out the window after fourteen others she'd pulled from outside the laboratory door. The sight had been enough to cower poor Neto into submission. Now he jumped at every order, knowing that his life depended on his actions. He only wished he'd gone straight home the night before, and not tried to impress Marlene Wallace. Impress her, he thought bitterly, she hadn't even been in here. I'm a damn fool. . . and I'll bet my poor goldfish are just starving.

Neto watched fearfully as Hojo continued looking into the chamber containing Vincent. The professor was a strange sight, the way he supported himself with the whip-like purple tentacles that grew from him, his two bare feet dangling inches off the ground. Those not keeping him up flickered restlessly like the tails of a lot of cats. A very strange, very terrifying sight.

Sighing quietly, Hojo suddenly withdrew a small object from the pocket of his ripped pants. He rolled it about in one hand and gazed at it wistfully then, with a cocky smile spanning his face, he pushed open the window to Vincent's chamber and tossed the object inside, smacking the man soundly in his chest.

Vincent awoke with a start, the images of Jenova and his dream dissipating quickly. It made no difference though, he was simply waking to another nightmare. He hurt everywhere, a combination of aches and all out throbbing, stinging pain. Broken ribs made it hard to breath. His throat burned from thirst, but he forced himself to cough into one hand to be sure they hadn't punctured his lungs, relieved not to see any blood. He had other wounds too numerous to count but they weren't so serious as the broken bones. Putting a hand to his head, he blinked hard, trying to adjust his vision which for some reason was rather blurred. Something shone out of the corner of his eye. A shiny metal capsule on the floor by his foot. Delicately, he picked it up with his claw and held it closer to his face, examining it carefully. A .338 Lapua Magnum. A bullet, in other words; one that'd been fired off long ago from his .338 caliber Long Barrel R, a rifle he dearly wished he had with him right then though it was really rather difficult to make useful in close range situations.

"Recognize that, Vincent?"

He looked up, sickened by the voice and how it used his first name so freely. Hojo had his hideous face pressed up against the glass of the radiation chamber.

"You left that at my place last time you visited." He tapped his forehead, right between his eyes, "You left it right here. Thought it would be the neighborly thing to return it to you. You're welcome."

Deciding the sight of the scientist wasn't worth his time, Vincent turned away, resting his forehead on his knees again, letting his hair shield his face from view. Hojo stared at him intensely, examining him with a doctor's eyes.

"How badly were you injured?" he asked suddenly, tone changing entirely, "You have a sizable gash in your forehead, assorted superficial cuts, though I can hardly be certain of their seriousness from here. You seem to be sitting rather awkwardly as though your chest hurt. What's wrong?"

Vincent, of course, didn't grace him with an answer and Hojo frowned.

"You can't go dying on Jenova, my friend. She won't let you. She's holding you by your lifeline now, and death isn't even an option. She needs you too badly. Why do you think she's gone to all the trouble of getting you here? No, when m'lady decides she wants something, she'll hold on damned tenaciously. You may as well tell me where you're hurt. No use suffering needlessly. No? Stubborn bastard. Full Cure."

Vincent didn't even look up as the healing magic engulfed his body. The power of the Planet cured his ribs, the broken bones melting back together whole and perfect. Where his skin had been severed, it suddenly wove together again. Hojo cast the spell once more and Vincent was entirely healed. He found he missed the pain of the injuries, it had taken his mind off the pain in his memory.

Hojo tossed the green materia back into its foam slot in the drawer, then selected two different orbs, also green. He slithered towards Cloud's chamber, the two materia tight in his grasp.

Cloud. . . hey, Cloud, are you awake?

Vincent tested out the mental link and figured for some reason it must no longer be working. He didn't even feel his friend's mind out there anymore.

Shut up, Vincent. Do you think you and Cloud were the only ones with this link? All we "Jenova freaks" can send our thoughts to each other through the channel created by her cells. Fool.

Vincent's teeth clenched hatefully as Hojo's voice roared in his mind, mocking him. He got to his feet, suddenly realizing how small his prison was. The ceiling of it was a mere two inches above the top of his head and he couldn't stretch his arms out without hitting the walls. He leaned over and peered out the small round window in the chamber's side. He couldn't sit sulking in his own misery. He needed to help Cloud.

Squinting through the grimy window, he examined the mako room outside. The place was a mess, Chieko's acid having blackened much of the floor and walls. Debris from the giant hole ripped in the side of the building were scattered everywhere and the hole itself glared like a single eye upon him. For some reason though, he couldn't see the morning sky outside, only some strange, rippling bluish energy. It was a rather beautiful wall of electricity, the way it slithered over itself, pulsating with a pleasingly dark illumination. But still, it wasn't the sun. Vincent missed the outside world, he hadn't seen it in over a week and still he was being denied it. He supposed it was some sick irony.

"Time is rather short," Hojo commented suddenly and Vincent brought his gaze around to rest uncomfortably upon the man's twisted form. He was hovering over a control panel in the side of the other chamber, going at it with a soldering iron and a pair of wire clippers. He talked as he worked to sooth his frazzled nerves. "Rather strange to wait here for thirteen years and now have to rush so dreadfully. Science shouldn't be rushed."

"Science. . ." Vincent found himself growling. He'd decided he wouldn't condescend to speak to the living pile of insanity but his anger got the better of him as it usually did, "Is that what you call it?"

Chuckling, Hojo replied, "Vincent, do I tell you how to point and shoot your little guns? No. So don't try to tell me about my job, alright? Science is the systematic knowledge of the physical or material world gained through observation and experimentation. A broad definition, I know, but one I hold in my heart. Now, knowing the means of achieving that science, that "systematic knowledge" is one thing, but knowing why to ever go about achieving it in the first place is another, is the reason so many ignorant people have problems with science. And there is no one answer, the answer changes with each man who ever studies the sun, or mixes two chemicals together to discover the reaction. Neto, my friend, why are you a scientist? What made you want to spend your life in a lonely lab?"

The WDD Head hadn't expected to be so suddenly addressed. He'd been listening to Hojo and Vincent's conversation in uneasy interest, back pressed against the mako room's rear wall, trying to make himself inconspicuous. "Why?" he echoed nervously. His fear made him surprisingly honest. "Power," he answered, "Yes, power, I suppose."

Hojo turned his deformed face to Vincent and smiled broadly. "My oh my, do you hear that? Seems I'm not such a freak after all. My reasons for everything I've ever done in my chosen profession are no different from that sniveling little man's over there. I just desire my aims a bit more deeply. Perhaps I'm even the better man. I believe so." Giggling softly, he bent his head down closer to the mass of wires composing the control panel before him, adjusting the odd circuit, tweaking things that needed to be tweaked so that the mako chamber would act as he needed it to. Vincent watched him working, deeply wishing to know just what the hell he was planning but not wanting to show his curiosity like a fool. To feed his own ego however, Hojo began to babble again.

"I love these little chambers. We used to use them on SOLDIER recruits, for the mako treatments that Gast came up with. Add a little mako into the mix and you increase a man's healing ability, speed, and senses. Only by a marginal amount, but enough to be worth it. It also acted as a convenient brand. Mako eyes are rather hard to cover up, thus a SOLDIER was a SOLDIER for life, or at least until killed in battle. They could not desert, they'd be hunted down, unable to hide their identity. That's how Zack was so easy to recognize, why the commandos shot him without a second thought. A wondrous thing, the stuff of life. Not so wondrous as Jenova, but it does have advantages. Look at Cloud, he looks like a teenager for God's sake. I look at him, I look at you, I could almost believe those thirteen years never happened, as though nothing has truly changed. Hmph. Mako's probably tripled his lifespan. Or at least I'm assuming such, it's never been tested. He could reach the age of fifty and suddenly be struck with all the aging he's avoided all at once and keel over dead. If only there was time to see. Ah, well." Hojo did a last few adjustments to the chamber's circuitry, then slammed the control panel down with a metallic bang. He'd snapped the two green materia he'd pulled from the cache into the two linked slots on the chamber's side. He turned and eyed Vincent with a hooded, evil glance, his clumped black hair hanging in his face, his tentacles slashing at the empty air around him. "Neto!" he called suddenly and the young tech scrambled to his side, "I need you to record all of the procedures. There should be some paper and writing tools in one of the drawers against the wall."

Hojo never took his eyes off Vincent. The two men stared at each other, hatred and even fear in Vincent's red eyes, insanity and anger in Hojo's black gaze. Vincent saw there plain as day that Hojo wanted to kill him. He wanted to end his life and spit on his corpse. Vincent half expected him to pull out the same pistol he'd used years ago only this time, put a bullet in his head, not his shoulder. But it wouldn't happen. It wouldn't happen for the same reason it hadn't happened before: the scientist needed him alive.

Hojo broke the staring bout suddenly, whipping his head about to eye Neto dangerously. The WDD Head squirmed, a clipboard and pencil clutched in his hands.

"Did you ever wonder, Vincent, why my son was able to use all those spells years ago? I don't mean the spells granted to him by the use of his impressive materia collection, rather the spells he was able to cast using his own internal magic abilities. That was my doing." Hojo beamed, almost expecting a compliment. None came. "Let me explain. Those deformed men we were storing in the Nibelheim reactor years ago were the ah. . . unfortunate results of mako testing. That reactor was rather our trash heap, where we would stash failed attempts at materia fusion. You see, I had to test the process on less precious specimens before attempting it on my Sephiroth. Materia fusion? you ask. What's materia fusion? Good question. It is what it sounds like. I was never one for a lot of technical jargon. If a specimen is mako-inundated enough, it can be infused with the powers of materia. The materia's attributes and abilities will meld into the specimen's body like water droplets into a pond, allowing the materia's powers to fester there, and be called upon at will, without having to

have the blasted orb in the specimen's possession. Interesting, is it not? It wasn't exactly a revolutionary discovery. Once it was revealed that mako could be used to enhance a person's genetics, it was only a matter of time before we carried it one step further and used materia, nothing more than concentrated mako, to enhance a warrior's abilities. It was time consuming though. It took four years of Sephiroth's childhood for us to pump him full of enough mako for his body to successfully accept its first materia shard. The first successful transplant of a materia orb. That was a red letter day in the Shinra Science Department, let me tell you. I took the entire staff out for drinks, wound up throwing up for three hours the next morning, but it was worth it. My eleven year old son was not so happy, his little body burned like a sonuvabitch, but I digress. We fused him with eight different materia. But that's unimpressive, you say. So he can cast spells, what's the point? So can you, so can Neto over there, so can anyone who's holding a materia shard. Ah, but Vincent, we discovered that with so many different elements swimming around in Sephiroth's body, many merged and in the process became stronger. Shadow Flare, for instance, a personal favorite of mine and what Sephiroth in his insanity used to burn Nibelheim, Shadow Flare is a deadly combination of Contain's Flare, Demi 3, and Comet 2. The spell formed itself. It was amazing, unheard of. And god damned effective. Sephiroth's body was one giant petri dish, containing numerous materia elements that swirled and interreacted, altered by mako and by Jenova cells. Who knew that the human body could be the vehicle of so much power? Who knew that it would gnaw so horribly at the mind? Aah, my poor son. Tragic."

It was all Vincent could do not to at least attempt to ram his claw through the double-paned leaded glass window of his chamber and rip off Hojo's head. Gods, he wanted to see him bleed, wanted to gouge out his eyes and knee him in his ribs. Hojo smirked at him sickeningly, seeing his anger, reveling in it almost.

"We created a killing machine, the perfect warrior," Hojo continued, the smile not leaving his face, "With unsurpassed physical and magical skills. Who knew he was a loose cannon? When we thought him dead, we needed to make up for the lost time, money, and materia. Cloud had thrown twenty-five years of labor down the proverbial pot. However the spikey-headed young man was laying conveniently unconscious in the reactor, practically volunteering himself. So we took him up on the offer. He'd take my son's place. He'd killed him, so he'd replace him. It was poetic justice. You know how big I am on poetic justice. I'm a scientist at heart, but I've always had a flare for the dramatic, the ironic, the appropriate. I'm sure you can infer the rest, Vincent. Cloud underwent extensive mako conditioning for the next five years of his life. We were nearly ready to repeat the process we'd performed with Sephiroth when he and Zack broke free. I'll never understand specimens, why they feel their own petty needs outweigh the necessities of science. I was ready to make Cloud a god among men, superior to every other human on the Planet. But he didn't want it. He left. But he took Jenova with him. She'd had me inject him with her cells, though their power was nulled by the superior amount of mako in his blood. Still, it left him with an enemy he could never escape. And after Sephiroth reappeared, it proved unendingly useful to have a piece of Cloud Strife, leader of the resistance, belonging to my son. Aah, the fates like me, they really do."

"Do you listen to yourself when you talk, Professor?" Vincent asked the question with a growl in his voice, though he sincerely meant what he said, "Do you hear what you say? Why? Answer me why?"

Hojo frowned in slight distaste, gazing at Vincent like an ignorant pupil.

"I thought we already went over this. Power, Vincent, the only thing that lasts. You have to make a name for yourself while you're alive so that people will remember you once you're gone."

"But if you're going to do what I assume you are, you'll wipe out everyone on the Planet! Who will there be to remember your name?"

Hojo looked away, tentacles flicking thoughtfully. Vincent hoped for a moment that maybe he was beginning to see the error of his ways but the scientist whipped about suddenly, eyes calm, and dashed the naive hope from his mind. "It was for power with Sephiroth and then for the clones I attempted after his supposed death. Every action I performed then was for power. I wanted a warrior to lead me to the Promised Land so I would be the excavator to bring it to light, have my name in the books as the man who'd discovered Paradise. But with his death, my son's death in the crater, I knew that there was no Promised Land. It was a myth after all, a lie by the Ancients. So now I fight with Jenova. I don't really have a choice. She's keeping me alive so I repay her by acting as her humbled servant. I don't mind, I really don't. There are worse things I could be."

"Worse than a mass murderer? Worse than a conscienceless megalomaniac? Nothing worse comes immediately to mind. . . "

"Ah, Vincent, there is worse. I could be you or Cloud. You must be the two most unfortunate bastards on the Planet right now. Heh. But I shouldn't rub that in your face, it's impolite and I apologize." Hojo blinked a few times, his mouth hanging half open as thoughts crossed his mind. Absently, he swept a few strands of hair behind his ear, moving closer to Cloud's chamber. During his lecture he'd advanced upon Vincent without realizing it. He tended to forget himself when he got hot and heavy into a rant. With expert eyes, he glanced upon the chamber's control panel, making sure the

adjustments he'd made to it were reacting with the materia as was desired. Everything seemed alright. The two materia, mastered Lightning and mastered Poison, glinted innocently in the room's sterile fluorescent light. He adjusted a few knobs, depressed a certain sequence of buttons and suddenly the lead-lined chamber began to emit a soft humming noise. Cloud was still unconscious inside. Hojo peered in on him, a smile again on his features. He'd been waiting eighteen years to finish what he'd begun. Cloud was such a vast well of potentiality now. He was a blank canvas, expertly primed, ready to receive the brush strokes of a master. Hojo would be that artist. Hojo would create for Jenova the ultimate warrior, the ultimate host for her wicked desires. She would mold his mind, he would mold his body. It would be perfect.

Vincent watched in horror as the materia in the chamber's sides began to glow intensely, far brighter than materia were supposed to, even when casting mastered spells. What were they going to do to his friend? Why couldn't Hojo, Jenova, and every other foul son of a bitch on the Planet just leave them alone? What was going to happen? Would Cloud become the killer Hojo had always wanted him to be? With his children dead, was there anything to stop it? Gritting his teeth in rage, Vincent shook his head, thick hair falling into his eyes. No. No, he had to believe that Cloud had the will to keep fighting, that he wouldn't surrender to Jenova so easily. So easily? Vincent asked himself with half a bitter laugh. He's held out for so long, against death and destruction, who'd really blame him if he gave in now? Oh, gods above if you're anything but figments of a philosopher's brain, you'll do something about this. You won't let this happen.

If anyone had lent an ear to the man's brief prayer, they didn't show it. The materia glowed brighter as Vincent looked on, the entire chamber beginning to shake with some tremendous energy. Sparks flew at the control panel and Hojo eyed them warily for a moment, backing away and crossing his arms, but confidence still written plain on his face. Without warning, there was a single incredible quake, the sound of a man screaming, and the lights overhead flickered briefly. When they came back on, the chamber had ceased its shaking and humming. It sat still and silent, the materia no longer glowing, no longer green, no longer anything. The only thing breaking the silence was the sound of one man breathing, huffing air in and out of his lungs desperately, his voice accompanying his respirations in short, sharp gasps of pain. The voice groaned horribly, cursing in delirium, spitting like a cat.

Cloud, Vincent called, knowing the walls of the chambers were too thick for his friend to hear him with his ears, Cloud, can you hear me? Are you alright?

". . . Ain't doin' this anymore. Ain't playin'. Go to hell and rot. . . "

Cloud spoke aloud and Vincent could make it out clearly with his enhanced hearing, yet he didn't believe he'd heard correctly. That sounded nothing like Cloud Strife.

No, Cloud, he tried again, desperation in his voice, It's me. We have to get out of here. They're--

"I said I'm not fucking playing anymore!!"

Vincent stepped involuntarily backwards away from the chamber window as Cloud's face suddenly came into view. Movements spasmodic with rage, the man had catapulted to his feet and now stood at his own window, glaring out with undisguised madness at anything that moved. The brand had healed and now was a bright crimson scar stretching across his features, made brighter because those features glowed a slight green. The hue moved across his face like a fog. It had taken everything. Even the very blue from Cloud's eyes. They glowed only green now. Like Sephiroth's had. The color glinted off the tears there, turning the precious water into liquefied emerald. Despite the tears, Cloud glanced at Vincent with genuine hatred, genuine consciencelessness. He wasn't a man that he knew anymore. Vincent looked to Hojo for an answer but the scientist was only laughing his ass off, his tentacles swirling around his face. He stuck one forefinger up against his temple and twirled it around, pointing to Cloud with his other hand. The universal sign for "that guy is totally screwed in the head".

~\*~

"This is good. . . I mean, damn, this is really, really good! You're sure it's from a microwave, because I mean, damn, we're talking gourmet."

Reno scarfed the frozen waffles down by the dozen, drowning each fresh stack with enough syrup to kill a small animal. He sat at Marlene's kitchen table, Rude to his left, Berk to his right, his elbows constantly jabbing both men in the chests as he ate.

"All I did was reheat them, Reno. They're from your grocer's frozen food section, I assure you," Marlene said, leaning casually with crossed elbows against the wall of her kitchen. She had a mug of tea in one hand and she sipped at it occasionally, eyeing the Turks with interest.

"Ya know what it is," Reno asked with a full mouth, "Food always tastes better when a lady makes it. Doesn't matter

what it is. If Rude here had heated these waffles up himself, they'd be tasting like cardboard, even if he used the same microwave, the same exact settings, everything. Food just needs a woman's touch."

"Why, you're such a charmer," Marlene said, rolling her eyes. Berk laughed, seeing her expression and Rude shot him a glare, even though he was grinning too. Berk had to show respect for his superior, whether that superior was making an ass of himself or not. Rude had had to stifle a few laughs of his own whenever Palmer or Heidegger would walk into a room in the old days. Working for Shinra, self control was a skill a Turk needed to have mastered.

"CJ, Ifalna! You guys hungry at all?" Marlene called to the kids. They were seated in front of the radio in the living room, listening to a car commercial, lulled by even that limited technology. Marlene didn't have a tv in her apartment just yet but they were trying their damndest to scrape by.

"No, thanks," CJ said and Ifalna echoed him.

"Are you sure? I've got meatloaf and salisbury steak tv dinners!"

They continued to refuse and Marlene sighed, hearing the misery in their voices. They wanted their mom and they wanted their dad and they couldn't have either.

"Those kids need ice cream," Barret said, suddenly entering the kitchen with heavy steps. Marlene frowned at her father, sipping her tea.

"Well I don't have any."

"Why not?"

"I don't know! I haven't been to the grocery to buy anything much less ice cream. Why don't you take 'em out?"

Barret shrugged, grabbing his jacket off the kitchen counter. "Alright," he said and before he could blink there were two blonde-haired kids at his side, looking up at him with eager eyes. "C'mon, ya little punks."

Reno and Rude watched him stomp out of the apartment, the kids hot on his heels, the door slamming deafeningly behind them. Scarfing down another dripping waffle, Reno asked, "I thought he didn't like 'em? The kids I mean?"

"He didn't. But now he knows them and he does. Dad's never been a big fan of that whole "innocent till proven guilty" thing. He prefers to think of people the other way around, mistrusting everyone and everything until they prove themselves to him." The young woman shrugged, used to her father's behavior. She'd figured him out years ago and knew him better than he knew himself. Berk looked up at her, quickly looking away when she returned the glance, even though he was wearing sunglasses. He felt really weird. Sitting around the kitchen table, a bright yellow, linoleum kitchen table with floral place mats, was giving him these loopy flashbacks to his childhood. The rest of Marlene Wallace's tiny apartment wasn't helping the feeling. It was small, but she'd already managed to cram it full of all kinds of antique junk she'd bought for a song from Wall Market, having ventured to the sleaziest part of town a few afternoons earlier, going when the sun was highest in the sky and prevented shadows from forming. High noon was considered the only "safe time" for the unfamiliar to visit Wall Market without being assaulted by every pimp, dealer, and mugger the city had to offer. The casual shopper could actually find some pretty good deals during the day.

Berk shifted in his seat, unsure how to act. He could deal with stakeouts, shootouts, investigations, getting his arm broken while testing weapons, sure that stuff was a breeze. But sitting here in front of Ms. Wallace, the woman watching him squirm like a little kid at a rich aunt's house, well, it threw him off. The worst part was, she was frigging beautiful. Pretty girls always had him feeling self-conscious as hell. He wished she and the rest would hurry and come up with a damn plan so he could get the hell outta there. He was anxious to find Cloud. He was rather worried about his boss, though from what he could tell, Berk was probably the most clueless person in the group. He'd only been seven years old when Meteor had struck. Everything he knew about the events of thirteen years earlier he'd learned from a short-lived anime series called "Planetary Avengers" that used to be on channel seven on Saturday mornings. It'd been a cool show, but they'd drawn Cloud's hair way too big. He could have impaled somebody on his spikes. And as for Tifa's character design, well, Berk figured he knew why the show'd been popular in the thirteen to thirty year old male demographic. Of course, the plots to that old anime had all been simplified and glitized up. Berk saw now that being involved in Planetary struggles wasn't quite so glamorous. In fact, it kind of sucked.

There was the shuffling sound of two pairs of shoes suddenly, then the soft whispers of four paws and Berk looked up abruptly as Cid, Nanaki, and Bugah entered the kitchen, emerging from the rooms in the back of the apartment where they'd been bringing the Elder up to date. No one looked very happy and the Elder looked far from enlightened.

"So what's the verdict?" Marlene asked as Nanaki padded forward, moving his forehead under one of her dangling hands so she could scratch behind his ear for him.

"We must find a way past that barrier," Bugah said insistently, seating himself wearily at the kitchen table beside Rude. Reno eyed the old man irritably.

"We come all the way here so you can tell us that. Brilliant. It's no wonder Cosmo Canyon is such a mecca of knowledge with you at the helm. Bravisimo."

"Cut the sarcasm, copper-top," Cid said, stepping forward and leaning on the wall opposite Marlene, hands stuck in the pockets of his flight jacket. There were no more chairs at the table. "Hey, where'd Barret go?"

"He took the kids out," Marlene answered.

"Damn, does he just not wanna have anything to do with this at all? You shoulda heard him back there Marlene, Red and I were telling Bugah about what went down at the Shinra towers and he just sits there like a frigging picture on the wall, not saying a word. He's starting to piss me off."

She shrugged, having heard about the way Cloud had attacked her father the previous morning. Marlene knew exactly why Barret was ignoring the whole situation. But she only shrugged towards the pilot, feeling it was none of her business to pick apart her father's emotions for Cid Highwind.

"We have to analyze the situation," Bugah said, eyeing the men around him impatiently, then tossing a scholarly glance towards Marlene, "We need to come up with options. First of all, what do we know about the barrier surrounding the Shinra building?"

"It killed a buncha medics," Cid offered, shrugging.

"Okay, so we know its power is lethal. What else?"

"It looks a lot like the barrier that surrounded the Northern Crater," Rude chipped in.

"Right. Observing that and coupling it with the knowledge that Jenova is almost certainly behind it, we can infer that perhaps it carries the same properties that the previous barrier did. It was the Sister Ray, was it not, that was able to destroy that energy field last time?"

There were nods around the table and the Elder drummed his fingers against his brow, resting his chin in his hands. "What powered that cannon?"

"Mako," said Reno quickly, "There was a frigging blackout in Midgar when they siphoned all the energy from the reactors. I remember I was in the john at the time and caught myself in my zipper when the lights went out."

"That's why you were so pissed when we confronted you two and Elena in the subway tunnels then, huh?" Cid asked grinning. Reno scowled.

"The city and the company I worked for were on their way into oblivion. My boss and one of my best friends had died barely a week beforehand. Your little Planet saving club kept kicking my ass and butting your heads into Shinra business. Getting caught in my zipper was only one of many reasons I was pissed off that night."

"Stop going off topic!" Bugah demanded, pounding a wrinkled fist on the table's hard linoleum, "Can't you lot concentrate for five minutes? Mako powered the Sister Ray, the Sister Ray destroyed the barrier. So what we need now is a mako powered weapon strong enough to punch a hole in the energy field around the Shinra towers!"

There was sudden silence as the people looked curiously upon the small man. Raising a red eyebrow mockingly, Reno asked, "They don't pay you for this, do they? I mean, cause if so, Cosmo Canyon's getting royally ripped."

"Please don't disrespect the Elder," Nanaki pleaded, the flame at the end of his tail flickering dangerously. Reno shrugged, his eyes a little glazed and a crooked smug smile on his face as he fed it another waffle.

"So sorry, kitty-cat."

Rude suddenly stared at Reno through narrowed, suspicious eyes, conveniently hidden by his shades. The cocky fellow was hunched over his styrofoam plate, bony elbows jutting into the sternums of the men on either side of him as he maneuvered his silverware. Without warning, Rude darted one of his hands into the loose flap of Reno's jacket and pulled out two clinking, empty bottles of Chocobo Billy's moonshine. Reno only drank the potent stuff on special occasions.

"I knew you were wasted," Rude said accusingly as he threw the bottles onto the tabletop, "You only eat like such a frigging pig when you're drunk off your ass. If you can't contribute to this discussion like an adult, go in the back and sleep it off."

Reno fixed his aqua gaze on Rude's stern face, glaring openly. He felt the eyes of everyone in the room upon him. But he didn't care. Grabbing his plate of waffles, he roughly kicked the chair away from him and stomped off to the guest room to sulk. Rude watched him go with a strange expression on his usually apathetic face.

"Looks like our team just keeps gettin' smaller and smaller," Cid commented, wishing desperately that Marlene would let him smoke inside.

"He'll be alright," Rude said briskly and the pilot shrugged.

"As I was saying before that little scene," Bugah snarled, "We need a powerful mako cannon to blast through the barrier. In theory, such a weapon should nullify the field. In theory. That's all we have to go on. Anyone know where we can acquire such a weapon?"

"The Sister Ray no longer exists. What wasn't destroyed by Meteor was disassembled by the mako board and then the parts shipped off to be used for other things," Rude explained helpfully, "That was a long time ago."

"Shinra doesn't have anything we can use?" Cid asked.

"The rumors I've heard floating about the WDD say that while for the past couple years they've been researching mako and materia-based weaponry, they've yet to come up with any designs that really function correctly."

"That's a nice way to put it," Marlene scoffed, eyeing Rude through the rising steam of her tea, "They don't know what they're doing there. Neto can barely spell the word materia much less hope to bend it to his technology's will."

"Well, that's just not very nice," Rude said, smirking. He knew it was true though. Neto was quite incompetent with anything that didn't have a power cord.

"Elder Bugah, you would have been shocked to see how ignorant Shinra has grown," Marlene continued, beginning to rant, glad to have someone to talk to who understood her frustration, "They've lost all knowledge of materia, of its purposes. Technology now is all that interests them, that controlling hand of man, preferring to alter that which already exists instead of simply marveling at, studying, and appreciating it."

"Good," Bugah said, shocking the woman into almost dropping her tea. "Science and the Planet do not mix. Science is the art of perversion and the Planet does not need to be perverted. Let them forget the knowledge of the Planet, Marlene, it's safer for everyone and everything that way."

The woman didn't argue with her teacher, she knew better than that, but she and Nanaki exchanged glances, the latter rolling his one eye in the Elder's direction. She giggled, pulling at his mane in a friendly way. They'd used such tactics to survive years of Bugah's opinionated instruction. To argue a point with the Elder was a lesson in futility.

"Excuse me here, but are you forgetting who we are? Why can't we just make a cannon?" Cid asked, sitting and taking Reno's vacated chair.

"Make a cannon?"

"Yeah, I mean, you've got me, technician extraordinaire, hold your applause please, we've got you, Bugah, and we've got Marlene and Red over there. We're talking dream team. We get together, I build you a laser, you all tinker with the green stuff and bam! instant cannon! I say we give it a try."

"But we don't have time to build a laser from scratch," Marlene said, "Every second Cloud and that Vincent guy are in there is one more second Jenova has to fu-- er, screw with them. While we're twiddling our thumbs, Shiva only knows what's happening to them."

Rude was looking down at his thick, calloused hands, picking his cuticles in thought. "We may not have to build the weapon from scratch," he said suddenly, causing all eyes to turn to his nonchalant face. He smiled slightly at the attention but didn't look up from his fingernails. "The WDD just finished a weapon for Wutai that packs one hell of a punch. It's there now, belongs to Mayor Kisaragi, but if we could reacquire it, it might serve our purpose well. With some mako additions by Miss Marlene of course."

"What sort of weapon is it?"

"It's a missile launcher," Berk butted in excitedly, "A huge tank of a thing constructed solely to obliterate Da-Chao dragons. The thing is wicked." Rude looked at Berk with disapproval and the young Turk withered under his gaze, silencing sheepishly.

"It was Neto's pet project right before you arrived, Miss Marlene. I think it would be worth our time."

The young woman set her empty teacup down on the kitchen counter, crossing her arms contemplatively. A missile launcher, a far cry from a cannon but if it was the only weapon available to them that was strong enough. . . she sighed, wishing they had more time.

"Well, are there any other options?" she asked, looking around the room. The men shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders. There really weren't. "Alright then. I guess we'll go with that. Cid, how long will it take you to fly to Wutai?"

"I can be there and back before you can say bob's yer uncle or some cockney slang like that. It's only across the Eastern ocean. I think the real problem is calling Yuffie and asking her if we can borrow it."

"Yuffie. . ." Marlene said thoughtfully, "Yuffie, wasn't she one of the people who helped you guys out? Isn't she a friend?"

"Well, she is. . ." Cid relented, "But she's rather temperamental and a damned bit selfish. She'll probably charge us for

use of her weapon. What do you think, Red?"

Nanaki shook his heavy head, rattling his earrings and beads. He looked to Cid through a squinted eye and asked, "Do you really think she'd charge? That's seems rather low, even for her. Of course, I understand why she is the way she is. If not for her. . . what's a nice word. . . if not for her tenacity, Wutai wouldn't have risen to the power it's at right now. It's the second largest city in the world outside of Midgar thanks to her."

"You could find the bright side of a heart attack, you know that, Red?" the blue-eyed pilot asked grinning, "So you can call and ask her."

"Wait, no. I mean-- !"

"Oh, yeah, you're calling. Here, I'll dial and hold it up to yer ear for ya."

Nanaki watched in misery as Cid took his PHS from his jacket pocket, flipped it open, thought for a minute, then punched a series of numbers into the device. As though the phone might bite him, he stuck it at arms length, towards Nanaki's pointed right ear. The beast flicked his tail, irritably eyeing Rude who was sniggering insanely at the kitchen table. Berk looked on at the events in total incomprehension. The weird buzzing that passed for ringing on the PHS halted with a sharp click and Nanaki cleared his voice.

"Moshi moshi."

"Er, yeah, hullo, is Mayor Kisaragi there?"

"Maybe, who's this?"

"Nanaki of Cosmo Canyon."

"Nanaki? Why does that sound familiar?"

"Aka Red XIII."

"Red. Oh! Hey, what do ya know? What's new, pussy cat? You must want something if you're condescending to call me, huh?"

Nanaki grinned sheepishly, glad Yuffie couldn't see him. "Well, Yuffie, yeah that's true. Have you heard about what's been going on in Midgar?"

"Came through on the wire this morning. Then I saw it on the news. You guys really did a number on those reporters, poor bastards. They sent seven of them to the hospital and now there's a "Save the Press" coalition forming. I think it has, like, all of three members. Oh, tell Cid he looks ten pounds heavier on tv, heh heh."

"No, you can tell him that yourself later. I value my life somewhat. But no, listen Yuffie, did you see that energy barrier that's formed around the Shinra building? Cloud and Vincent are trapped inside there and we need to get at them--"

"Seeing shots of that thing on tv this morning totally gave me Meteor flashbacks, "Yuffie said, laughing nervously, "What's going on? Why's Cloud and Vince in there?"

"I'd rather not go into it over the phone. We were thinking that since this barrier looks so similar to what surrounded the Northern Crater though, that we could use a mako based weapon like the Sister Ray was, to punch through it. Rude told us about that weapon you commissioned from Shinra--"

"Dragon Weapon?"

"If that's what it's called, sure. He said it was a massive missile launcher."

"Yeah, that's Dragon Weapon. Heh, my new favourite toy. We've been stuffing ourselves on roast dragon all week here in Wutai. They'd spent the last few months toasting pagodas and generally aggravating the bejeezus out of everyone, then flying back to the fire caves where we couldn't get at them. We used Dragon Weapon to seal the caves up for good and ah. . . shut the dragons up too, heh heh. They do cook up rather yummy."

"Uh-huh, well, we need to borrow it."

"It's not mako based, or whatever you said. It just blows stuff up. I mean, really blows stuff up."

"We were going to er, modify it a bit."

"Got any materia?"

"What?"

"Any materia! You know, those pretty little round things?"

"Well I suppose so." Nanaki sighed, knowing what was coming.

It'll be one materia shard per day you want to use Dragon Weapon. No cheap materia. Has to be mastered and don't try to get off easy by giving me HP-MP switch or Luck Plus or something lame like that. I know how cheap you guys are."

"Alright, Yuffie, I'll see what I can do. Cid's going to fly over right now to pick it up. He'll explain what's going on to you too, you probably deserve to hear about it. I for one-- "

"Hold up, Red. Sore wa ikura desu ka? Are. . . chotto takai. Motto yasui mono wa arimasen ka? Hai. Hai, ikura ni narimasu ka? Reshiito itadakemasu ka? Arigatou. . . hey, Red, you caught me right in the middle of a shopping trip. Wutai's recruits are getting new uniforms this year."

"I don't see why you feel you have to build up an army for your city, Yuffie. It's only asking for trouble."

"We're not going to be overshadowed by Shinra and Midgar again!"

"But Reeve would never. . ."

"Red, I don't want to get into this right now. You said Cid's coming, ne?"

"Yes."

"Okay, tell him I'll be at my place with the weapon. And have him bring a down payment of materia. No tricks. Sneaky little Planet saver you. Ja."

"Wait, Yuffie, I . . ."

The line clicked dead and Cid pulled the PHS from Nanaki's ear, clicking it shut. The fiery-furred creature looked up at the pilot with weary eyes.

"Talking to Yuffie can take years off your life, eh, Red?" Cid asked with a grin.

"Don't even smile about it. You owe me, Highwind."

~\*~

The Shinra block of Sector Three was a pleasant enough neighborhood; middle-class, not too swanky. Base enough that a guy could feel comfortable, but not so shabby that Barret had to hold CJ and Ifalna's hands as they walked down the sidewalk. The massively muscled man ambled easily along, neck craned up as he watched Midgar's skies, taking the advice that Marlene had given him aboard the ship as they'd traveled from Costa Del Sol. It was a rather glorious afternoon. The mist of the morning had finally died away, leaving behind a sky so blue it hurt the eyes to look upon. Not a single puffy cloud marred the surface, there was only a brightly burning white sun, a single fierce eye watching the goings on below with a tired sort of look. Barret glared back at it, eyes squinted into black slits. He took a deep breath of the November air. November was probably his favorite month of all the year. It was a gateway sort of time, in Cosmo Canyon anyway, where summer still lingered but winter still loomed, the two meeting with a clash. The trees shed their clothes, standing knock-kneed and naked in the breeze, while their limbs and trunks trembled and shivered with the chill. The days grew shorter, and the nights longer, which was the way Barret liked it. He preferred to bask in the glow of the moon than the glare of the sun, preferred the tint of blue-black to that of harsh white-yellow. Yeah, he definitely liked November, because November wasn't classifiable. It shifted and defied labels. Of all the months, it was most alive. Or so it seemed to him.

"Ya know, it's kinda cold for ice cream," CJ said. He continued to lick at his chocolate waffle cone anyways.

"You wanted it."

"I didn't know the wind was going to decide to be all stupid and start blowing so much."

"Well, walk in the sunlight and get outta the shadow a that building, genius," Barret suggested, walking faster to catch up with the kid, then shoving him into the warmer glow. CJ stumbled to the side, sideswiping Ifalna and nearly making her drop her blue snow cone. Barret chuckled lowly as the little girl stuck her foot out and CJ got caught up on it, sending both the kids to the ground. Miraculously, neither dropped their ice cream.

"You guys shouldn't fight so much," Barret suggested, grabbing each kid by the collar and setting them on their feet neatly. CJ brushed himself off, glaring at his sister who stuck her blue tongue out at him, then resumed demolishing her snow cone.

"Little sisters are only good for fighting with," the boy said, one hand stuck in his pocket. "They're walking, talking punching bags." To demonstrate his point, CJ smacked Ifalna in the shoulder. The girl didn't just take it though, she kicked her brother so hard in his shin that tears popped out of his violet eyes. Barret watched them and sighed.

"If ya both were like this all week in th' cage, I bet Vincent was about ready ta shoot ya."

"Nah, Vincent is awesome," CJ said, licking his ice cream cone ferociously, "You shoulda seen the way he stood up to Chieko with his claw. Wham! I wish I had a cool claw like that. Or a gun as big as Death Penalty. It's easy to be tough with cool weapons."

Barret was inclined to agree, although it didn't sound quite right.

"It takes more'n guns or swords to be tough," he said, not sure what else it took but deciding that some sort of moral should be attempted, "It takes guts and. . . determination, yeah." Sure, that sounded good.

"Can't buy guts in a gun shop though," CJ sighed, "Heck, I can't even buy a gun. I can't wait till I'm old enough to be a warrior."

"I wanna be a warrior too," Ifalna said, the words coming out garbled from a frozen tongue.

"You can be my sidekick, Eef. Or you can take care of my mighty chocobo war beast. Ya know, Barrette, Vincent said he'd give me a chocobo when I'm sixteen."

"He probably just said that to shut you up."

"No way, he meant it. I wish I'd had time to ask dad about it before. . . ya know, before."

CJ kicked at a stray rock on the sidewalk, watching as it skidded away before him with a rattling noise. He popped the tail end of his waffle cone into his mouth and crunched thoughtfully, gazing down at his bandaged hands. He imagined the bandages turning into gauntlets and his t-shirt and jeans turning into armor. He got an image of a mighty blue chocobo named "Killer" or "Mauler" and wearing all sorts of spiky, dangerous looking plating with a cool leather saddle that the boy could swing right onto easy. CJ Strife, adventurer. Yeah. What sort of weapon though? Heh, what else? It would have to be Ultima Weapon. He imagined it blazing brightly in his hands. He swung it over his head in a terrific arc like his dad did, then sheathed it on his back, riding off into the sunset on his mighty blue steed. It couldn't get any cooler.

"Yo Ceej, get outta the road."

CJ looked up towards Barret's voice, noticing that he had indeed strayed off the sidewalk and into the road. Sighing, he hopped the curb and paced at his sister's side. He wasn't an adventurer. His dad and Vincent needed the help of a warrior and CJ couldn't cut it. He was only a stupid kid with burned up hands and a screwed up life.

"What's the matter, Ceej? You look like someone just punched ya in the gut."

Barret looked down at the top of CJ's blonde head, sensing the radiating melancholy. It was pretty dumb to ask him what his problem was, it was rather obvious after all, but the man couldn't think of anything to say. These sorts of situations made him squeamish.

Of course CJ responded with, "Nothin'."

"I guess yer thinkin' about yer dad, huh?"

"No."

"Dad's up there," said Ifalna helpfully, pointing towards the looming Shinra towers in the distance. It was hard to go anywhere in Midgar without being able to see the seventy-story building. It was even more prominent now with a brightly blazing blue electric field around it.

"Yeah, I know he is," Barret answered, "He won't be for long though, no way. We're gonna bust 'im out. Bugah and Red and Marlene got their heads together. That's a scary thing when three such smart people start thinking bout the same thing all at once. I think that's how black holes form or somethin'."

CJ chuckled and Barret felt glad that he was able to get the kid to laugh.

"Did you decide if you're gonna go up with 'em?" the boy asked, scratching his nose.

"I dunno," Barret sighed, "There's some stuff that went on 'tween yer dad and me. We ain't exactly best buds."

"What stuff?"

"Adult stuff that you wouldn't understand."

"Adults are stupid," CJ said irritated, "I mean, they fight more'n kids do. You 'n dad, dad 'n that freaky snake dude, mom 'n dad, dad 'n everyone. Grown ups do nothin' but fight and when kids fight we get yelled at. At least kids fight over things that mean something. I hit Ash and I got in trouble but who grounds the grown ups when they punch each other, huh? It ain't fair."

"Grown ups suck," Barret said, surprising CJ by agreeing.

"You just said you suck." Ifalna found this immensely funny and started giggling like crazy. CJ eyed Barret as though he were nuts.

"You can't say you suck," the boy protested.

"Hey, I call it like I see it. Why should you be able to say that we adults are total hypocrites and me not be allowed ta agree with ya? Be fair, kid."

"What's a hippo. . . hippocourt . . .?"

"Don't worry about it." Barret clomped along the cracked cement, scowling so hard CJ figured he was mad at him. The kid shrugged helplessly and eyed the Shinra towers in the distance. He tried to imagine what was going on in there but couldn't seem to get a clear picture of it in his head.

"Let's go see my mom," the boy suggested suddenly, elbowing Ifalna in the side to get her to back him up.

"Yeah, I wanna see mom."

Barret eyed the distant building and shook his head. "I don't think that'd be a very good idea." The November winds blew suddenly into the open front of his jacket, chilling him through the thin folds of his t-shirt. He wrapped the black leather closer about his chest. "Yer mom, she's. . . she's helpin' yer dad." He didn't know what to tell them. He certainly couldn't say that at that particular point in time it appeared her husband was more important to the woman than her children. He wasn't even sure if that was the truth. He thought perhaps that Tifa was in shock or something. First her children reappear out of nowhere after a week long absence, bearing a strange story, then Cloud disappears, seemingly in their place. Perhaps she was having trouble believing any of it was really happening. Perhaps being married to Cloud was a bad influence and now she was turning as wonky as he ever was. Barret just didn't have any answers.

"Is stuff ever going to go back t'the way it was?" CJ asked suddenly. He'd seen the look in Barret's eyes and been worried by it. A little sadly, the man scrutinized Cloud's son. He sounded so innocent and unsure with those words. But he was innocent and unsure. He was just a kid. Barret could try to explain the complexities of the situation to him. He could try to get him to understand how messed up his dad was in the head, how evil the Shinra corporation really was, and how hopelessly powerful Jenova seemed to be. Yeah, he could do that. He'd probably get some of his point across too, CJ was a bright kid. He could attempt to convince him that Cloud shouldn't be working for Shinra, and that his family shouldn't be living in Midgar. Yeah, he had the opportunity now to veritably push the boy into his viewpoints. But one look in his wide violet eyes made every such selfish, thoughtless urge pass straight outta Barret's head. He only wanted to comfort him, the way he had Marlene when she'd come home with a scraped knee or a tear in her eye years ago.

"Yeah, kid. Everything'll be fine."

CJ looked unsure for a minute, looked nearly suspicious of the words though they sounded genuine enough. He stuck his hands in his pockets and walked along with a bit more life in his step. "I guess you're pretty cool, Barret," he said suddenly, not looking up at the man.

"Hey, ya said my name right. I didn't think you were physically able to, or somethin'."

"Nah, I was just messing with you." CJ blinked hard as Barret picked him up by the excess of his PowerMog t-shirt, stretching it out hopelessly, and lifted him up over his head, tossing him around like a bag of sugar.

"Argh! By Odin's beard!" the boy swore, "If'n ye don't release me, I'll set me carnivorous little sister upon ye, rapscallion!" Ifalna fell onto the ground in a fit of laughter, dropping the rest of her soggy snow cone into the gutter.

"A threat??" Barret roared, throwing CJ up in the air then catching him again with one massive hand, "Ya dare threaten me wit' yer lousy English accent, mortal? Argh 'n all that." People passing them on the sidewalk gave them strange looks but Barret, for once in his life, didn't care. The kids laughed and he threw CJ into the air a couple more times, snarling stupid threats and exchanging stupid banter.

"Uh, down. . . ugh. . . please."

"Can't take it, eh, Strife? You think the speedway at Gold Saucer's bad? I'll spin ya 'round till your head--"

There was a cough, a gurgle and a splat. Barret plopped CJ gingerly on the sidewalk, staring at his brand new, formerly spotless army boots. The kid stumbled off into an alleyway and Ifalna looked up at the man sheepishly.

"Well," Barret said, scraping his shoes against the curb, "He definitely inherited his dad's motion sickness."

~\*~

The fiery hot energy parted before his face like running water, cascading away in either side in sparks of power. He closed his eyes for a moment against it, the light and heat quite painful, but then felt the blissful coolness of the outside air and opened them again, confronted with the blue of the natural sky as opposed to the blue of Jenova's barrier.

It was quite a beautiful day out. Or at least, it had been a beautiful day, evening was fast approaching, the afternoon spent. Hojo wondered what it had been like in the streets of Midgar that day. He'd caused quite a ruckus the night before and the creatures he ran with now had killed a fair share of humans. Surely the city's citizens were fearful. He hoped they were, they needed to be.

It felt strange to be out on the old balcony again, the seventieth floor where he'd spent hours talking with President Shinra in the old days. The conversations had seldom been pleasant, both men had loathed each other, but still, such memories were a large part of Hojo's past and it disturbed him to be here again. Yet no where else in the Shinra building offered such an unparalleled view unto the city below. The view had changed much in thirteen years he saw now. Those perfect plates were gone, he noticed with a sad twist of his lips. They'd been the only thing separating the Shinra deity from the rabble in the slums. They'd made Hojo and the other employees feel superior. To be living on the plate meant you were better than everyone else. It meant you could see the sky and breath real air, not the stale recycled crap the filters below had spewed. What boundary lines were there now? All was anarchy, it seemed, the elite mingled with the disposable. It was wrong, in the scientist's mind. He made a note to fix it in the near future.

He too, was much changed. And in his mind, like the city, he'd changed for the worse. He could hardly recall so much of the knowledge he'd possessed before, the knowledge that had made him the genius he'd been. He didn't know why, perhaps the bullet in his brain, or the trauma of the events of long ago had hurt his memory. He could barely rattle off the periodic table, the elements became muddled in his mind. He was tired, was all. He'd spent that entire day carrying out his "improvements" on Cloud Strife and having to listen to Vincent mutter maledictions in his ears. It got old after a while. He was just glad the procedures were done. It was all monkey work anyway, things he'd discovered and done with Sephiroth. But it was what Jenova had wanted and he hadn't questioned it. He never questioned her demands of him. He figured she'd started all of this years ago. Now she'd finish it too, however she pleased. He was just along for the ride.

He ran a hand through his thinning hair and crossed his arms, turning his twisted face to the skies. It was beautiful out. Hojo could appreciate beauty. He'd thought Lucrecia had been beautiful. He'd thought for a little while that maybe the love of a woman could ease him through his obsession and the mental problems that had hounded him since he'd been a child. He'd been wrong. She'd only become another one of his victims. But not victims, he corrected himself delusionally, Specimens, experiments, casualties. Yes, it was all in the terminology. Words were important.

Squinting his yellowed eyes through the atmosphere, Hojo made out distant clouds. It almost looked like approaching night and at a glance he dismissed it as such. But further inspection revealed a line of storms, no, a wall of storms moving in to consume the sky. The beautiful day would die in bloody throes, he thought absently. The wind was picking up and blew his black hair into his eyes, whipped his long ponytail so it slapped at his back. Gods, this wind. . . so much like what had buffeted his bleeding body as he'd awaited death on the Sister Ray's platform. He remembered the cold rain on his face, chilling him through the feverish heat of the pain. Vincent had told him to rest in peace. He remembered watching the ex-turk's feet as he and his two friends had stood over his decimated body, thinking him dead. He'd looked dead, his eyes fixed into a wide open stare that he hadn't been able to control. Maybe he had been dead. But Jenova'd brought him back. She wouldn't let him die. And it was just as well, even after all his struggle, Hojo still wanted to live.

Jenova had promised him that she and his son would prevail. But they hadn't, to the scientist's utter amazement, they'd failed. Would things go differently this second time around? He supposed it was all up to him again. He'd tried to aid Sephiroth with the Sister Ray's power but he'd been insane with grief, with disappointment. Shinra was being torn apart and despite his best efforts, Cloud and his little band had begun to gain the upper hand. He hadn't been thinking clearly. In a fit of rage, rage towards Jenova for her lack of aid and her seeming indifference to he and his son, he'd tried to merge with her and steal her power in the only way he'd known how: putting part of her inside him. The injection had stung a bit, that was all. He'd thought it hadn't worked at first. But then her voice had began screaming in his brain and he'd known, truly known, that they would succeed. He'd battled Cloud and Vincent with the arrogant notion that no one could harm a man who'd merged his soul with Jenova.

And he'd lost. So had his son.

But it would be different now, right? After thirteen years of telling himself it would be, he wasn't going to stop believing it now. He had the men who'd murdered him holed up in his lab. They were powerless, and soon enough would themselves become the keys to Jenova's plan. Her plan wasn't a complex one. Hojo wasn't exactly impressed by it but it would do. His opinions didn't matter anyway. After thirteen years, after nearly fifty years, he didn't question her anymore.

He felt her tugging suddenly, tugging at his leashed mind and he began to make his way from the balcony, from the cool evening air that had nearly made him feel human again. It was just as well, he thought, it was beginning to be damned dangerous to be a human in Midgar.

Seventy stories below, Tifa vaguely realized that the cold gray curb got harder with every hour that passed. She sat across the street from the Shinra building, knees pulled under her chin, rusty-colored eyes plastered on the mass of architecture and energy before her. Her every urge was to say to hell with that blazing blue barrier, and just charge through the front of it as though it wasn't there. Yeah, through the front door, up the stairs and to Cloud. Cloud. The name put a lump in her throat that she quickly pushed away. It seemed everything had caught up with them. Thirteen years of peace and now the past had returned baring fangs and there wasn't a god damned thing the woman could do about it. That hurt

worse. The helplessness.

Tifa wondered if Vincent was taking care of Cloud the way he'd taken care of her children. CJ had told her that morning about how he'd refused to leave without them, about how he'd foregone sleep just to keep that Chieko monster away. If she ever saw him again, she didn't know if she'd be able to express her gratefulness in words. But was he doing the same now? It was rather a ridiculous thought, Cloud was a grown man, a master swordsman, and didn't need anyone's help, yet the idea nagged at her until she nearly had to laugh at herself. Perhaps it was because Cloud still looked so young. She'd always had a protective, almost motherly feeling towards him in addition to the passion of their love. She wanted to keep the hurting world away from him, wanted to cradle his blonde head in her strong arms and fight off the things that tortured him. Those years ago, watching him suffer, it'd torn her in two. No one deserved such torments, especially not a man as sweet, as brave, as strong as Cloud Strife. But that was just her love talking, did her prejudiced opinions really count? Apparently not in the Planet's eyes. Or in Jenova's.

Tifa nearly had to stifle a sob when that thing's name sprang unheeded into her thoughts. Was it true then? All those years. All those years as she'd loved her husband, all those passionate nights they'd spent together, through the birth of their children, through the pleasurable struggles of a young family, through everything. Every time Cloud had kissed her, or held her in his arms. Every time he'd held his babies or rocked them to sleep in his lap. As he'd comforted CJ after he'd broken his collarbone falling off his bike, as he'd taught Ifalna how to make paper airplanes and fling them at Cait Sith's mog. All those times, for . . . for every day. . . she'd been there. Jenova had festered inside him like a disease, her cells blazing in his blood, present in his every action. Tifa'd suspected it. After Sephiroth's claims who wouldn't? The way he'd controlled him, nearly made him kill Aeris, made him betray the team, afterwards who wouldn't doubt there was something foreign in the man, a touch of evil? But Cloud had vehemently denied it. To him, the thought was too terrible a thing to contemplate, so he'd ignored the evidence and decided to let time dull the hurt of the possibility. Jenova'd been dead to them and so it hadn't really mattered anyway. It hadn't. . .

But now it did.

The skies overhead were darkening. In the east, a storm appeared to be rolling in. Tifa thought it was a shame, the sky had been so clear and beautiful that day, as though mourning the events of the night before and trying to distract the scabbling humans from their petty arguments and struggles. Now there were thick thunderheads, black and curling in on themselves, approaching and promising rain.

The woman moved around a little on the curb, the cement hard and uncomfortable. It was the best vantage point though. From here she'd watched all day as the Shinra staff had scuttled around their commandeered headquarters, trying to pry their way inside like it were an especially appealing cookie jar. Techs from the science department had come and analyzed the barrier but wound up shaking their heads and going home. It burned defiantly, projecting its hue on Tifa's drawn face just to mock her. But the woman hadn't will enough left to curse it anymore. She just wanted those two men freed from behind it's power.

Most of the MP and Shinra staff were gone now. The current plan of action seemed to be to wait it out until tomorrow, maybe it would clear up on its own like a rash. A scattering of Midgar's citizens stood at its base and gazed upon the beautiful blue in curiosity, in fear. Some were awed by it though. Some thought maybe it was a publicity stunt to commemorate the thirteenth anniversary of Meteor so they ran to check their calendars and found themselves about seven months off. No, there was no ulterior motive behind it. Only power. Defiance. A barrier to the world and to Tifa. Fate was cruel.

The woman turned away from the sight suddenly, her eyes weary from attempting to pierce its surface. She looked down at her ungloved hands and played with her fingernails, half-shutting her eyes against the spreading grayness of the storm and approaching night. Absently, she twirled the wedding ring on her finger, watching the blue light play off the gold. She remembered when Cloud had proposed to her twelve years before. The memory was fresh in her mind.

It hadn't exactly been a "happily ever after" scenario once the LifeStream had devoured Meteor in its brilliant green depths. Midgar was left in ruins as was most of the world. People who'd been sure they were going to die suddenly found they would have to put up with the difficulties of living for just a while longer. The world had been saved and life would go on.

The team had gone their separate ways then, everyone returning to the lives they'd left behind but knowing things now that would never let them live those lives quite the same way again. Vincent had gone north, Yuffie'd taken her materia and returned to Wutai to grapple with her father, Cid went back to Rocket Town with his airship to grapple with Shera and a love he should have realized years before. Barret had hung around with Tifa and Cloud for a while until Nanaki invited him to Cosmo Canyon to learn more about the Planet he seemed to love to fight for so much. Reeve took up the corporate struggles of Shinra, a task no one else wanted anymore, and Cloud and Tifa had gone to Midgar. For a while there'd been

the idea that maybe they could return to Nibelheim and carve a town out of it again, but that had been foolishness and quickly realized as thus. The Shinra-produced Nibelheim was nothing but a cheap xerox copy of what it'd once been. Besides, there were too many nightmares lurking in the shadow of Mt. Nibel for Cloud to have ever been comfortable there. Perhaps Midgar had been burnt free of such nightmares by Meteor's fires. The two had hoped so anyways and set into the task of rebuilding the city eagerly, rebuilding it for the better. But like vengeful hawks picking at what was already dead, the nightmares had followed Cloud. Tifa wondered now if those frightfully realistic horrors of the mind which he'd told her about had been somehow caused by Jenova. A sort of small revenge that visited him in the night hours. He'd go days without sleep, doing nothing more than sitting up and staring out a window onto the ravaged city below. Sleep was too horrible, too painful, and never lasted anyway. Green eyes on his mind, he'd come awake every time, it never failed. The mind could be crueler than anything else and Cloud's was no exception. The more he'd tried to ignore, to forget the events of his past, the fiercer they became in his head at night until he was about ready to snap from the strain. Tifa hadn't known how to comfort him during this. All she'd known was that he needed arms around him, something solid to cling to. And she'd been more than willing to oblige.

It was nearly a year and half after they'd cut Sephiroth apart in the Northern Crater when Cloud had approached her with a velvet box in one hand and a stupid grin on his face. He hadn't had the chance to get a single word out before Tifa was in his arms with a kiss and the word "Yes" on her lips. She'd hoped against all hopes that he'd get the guts to ask, to swallow his pride long enough to realize he needed her and then to learn to like himself enough to realize that she actually needed him. God, she needed him. She needed a piece of her past, and all that mattered in her future. She needed him, wanted him for more reasons than she could count. She needed his soft, beautiful eyes, his warm lips, his muscled arms around her waist. She needed that voice of his, more enchanting than any music, she craved the feel of her cheek against his, her fingers through his hair. She needed a friend. A lover. A protector. And then someone to protect.

She took her ring off for a moment, holding it in two fingers delicately. It was rather dented with the years, high carat gold was so soft. The inscription on the inside had almost worn away. "To the only woman who can kick my ass-- Cloud". Not exactly the most romantic inscription, but even now it still made the woman smile. Her Cloud was many things, but no one could call him mushy. That was why they went together so well, they knew how to love one another without sickening each other with the effort. Theirs was a quiet love, a passion born in patience. It'd taken them years to figure that out.

"Doesn't matter now though, does it?" she asked herself, slipping the ring back onto her finger, "Nothing matters if I can't get CJ and Ifalna their dad back. If I can't get him back for myself. . . if I could just get one solid punch into Jenova's ass-ugly face, one direct hit. . . well then, god dammit I'd make Master Zangan proud." But Tifa had the feeling that there was nothing solid of Jenova to hit. What had that guard said, that broken man in the elevator? "Power and voice. Jenova's nothing but power and voice." How could you fight that? How could Cloud?

Tifa didn't know how, but she hoped he was trying.

"Tifa! Hey, I thought you'd be out here still!"

The woman looked up, squinting through the waning light. Reeve was approaching having just stepped out of a small cafe a few blocks down. He'd been in there all afternoon playing phone tag with the Shinra chain of command. His suit jacket was off, tie discarded, sleeves rolled up past his elbows and a dozen coffee stains on the front of his shirt. Whoever claimed he had a cushy job would have changed their opinion right there. He stepped to her side with weary eyes and handed her his cell phone.

"Cid, "he explained, "Connection's bad though, he's calling from the Highwind."

A little dazedly, Tifa took the phone from him.

"Hul--"

She stopped her greeting the minute she heard the conversation going on at the other end.

"Yo Cid, what's this do?"

"Don't touch it."

"How 'bout this one? Cool! It blinks!"

"Don't touch it."

"Ooh, red button. Red buttons always blow stuff up. Can I push it?"

"Don't touch it."

"What if I only--?"

"CJ, don't make me throw you out the door." Cid nearly growled the last words, "My kids know better than to ever touch anything on my airship and you and your sister need to be learnin' the same lesson. This is all delicate machinery."

"Well how come you were pounding on the control thingie when the engines wouldn't start?" CJ asked innocently. Tifa could just imagine the expression probably on the kid's face. And then she could picture the glare the pilot was probably throwing at her son when he answered.

"That was mechanical pounding. I was fixin' it. Worked, didn't it? Dammit, where's Tifa, what's taking her so--?"

"Hullo, "she finally said, a grin breaking out on her face.

"Oh, hey. Ya know, I'm going to kill your kids."

"I don't remember you asking me if they could get on your airship, Mr. Highwind." Tifa's tone was half-playful, half-serious. "Where are you going?"

"Wu-chkskskkkssshh. . . "

"Say that again, the line was fuzzy." Tifa took the phone from her ear and smacked the mouth piece soundly. Reeve had taken a seat beside her on the curb, deciding he needed a bit of a break, and stared skyward at the approaching storm with interest. He winced as the woman beat her fist on his two thousand gil cell phone. That phone was one of his best friends. Satisfied, Tifa stuck the thing to her ear again.

"Wutai, "Cid repeated in a staticy voice, "Off to get a weapon that'll get us through that energy field."

"You know, it seems like we're always trying to break into this bloody building. Why did you feel you had to bring the kids?"

"Barret brought them back with a sugar high and they were driving the Turks nuts. CJ kept asking to see copper-top's nightstick and Ifalna kept trying to rub Rude's head for luck. You gotta teach your kids not to annoy men with guns."

"Let me talk to 'em, Cid."

"Which one? Monster A or Monster B?"

"Don't be like that. You'd think you'd have childproofed the Highwind by now. Don't your kids make you paranoid when they're in there?"

Cid shook his head vehemently, remembered he was on the phone, and said, "Not hardly! They know better. And Terra and Amelia already know how to fly. They're more a help than a hindrance which is more than I can say for the little blonde demons. Hey. . . Hey! Ifalna! Cut that out!"

The pilot realized suddenly he'd been watching the little girl attempt to pry the locks off of the emergency missile system. CJ was at her side now, going at the padlocks with his pocketknife. Persistent kids.

"You little hell spawns! Ifalna, talk to your mother! CJ, gimme that knife!"

Tifa heard a brief scuffle, Cid swearing, CJ laughing, and suddenly Ifalna's soft little voice was piping in her ear. "Hullo mama."

"Hullo sweets. What are you and Ceej doing to Cid's ship?"

"Trying to take it apart. I wanna see how it works."

Tifa grimaced. Poor guy.

"Maybe you guys better not do that. Did you know you're going to go see Yuffie?"

"Yeah, in Wutai. I don't like Wutai, it's got too many cats. And everyone talks funny. Mama, how come we can't be with you?"

Those few words nearly made Tifa's heart break. Choking back the catch in her voice, she answered, "I'm doing stuff to help dad right now, sweets. I'll see you really soon. Tomorrow probably, okay? Right now, it's like you're on a vacation with Uncle Cid. Have fun."

"I was already on vacation, "the little girl answered huffily, "In the cage with Vincent and CJ. I don't like vacations. I wanna go home."

"You will soon, love. We'll all be together at home really soon. You and Ceej and me and dad, alright?"

"And Cait Sith too?" Ifalna asked suspiciously.

"Cait Sith too. Let me talk to CJ, okay? Love ya."

"Love ya--"

"It's my knife, Cid! You can't take it away! My dad said to have it with me wherever I go, so nyah!"

"Well stop trying to pick my ship apart with it, ya little vandal! You wanna go swimming, you keep it up! I'll throw yer ass into the Eastern Ocean down there and you can dog paddle to Wutai!"

Tifa moved the phone about three inches from her ear, wincing at the shouts. She tossed Reeve a look and the Shinra President chuckled, easily able to hear the argument.

"I get the feeling Cid means it," he said. Tifa rolled her eyes and shrugged.

"Hey mom!" There was a bit of a pant in CJ's voice and the woman could hear Cid growling in the background.

"Ceej, how many times have dad and I told you that pocketknife's not a toy?"

"I know it ain't," the kid said defensively, "I was using it like a knife, not a toy. Hey, Barret took us out for ice cream today."

"That was nice of him," Tifa said, letting her son change the topic, "Didja say thanks?"

"I threw up on his shoes. He was tossing me around and you know that makes me hurl."

Tifa stifled a laugh and Reeve eyed her funny. She figured she'd repaid Barret for his selfishness with that one. She was half tempted to tell CJ "way to go" but held it back with motherly restraint. "Are you feeling better?" was all she asked.

"Yeah, but he wouldn't buy me anymore ice cream. What a jerk. Hey, when are we gonna get to go home? Cid said after we get back from Wutai Eef and me are gonna stay at Marlene's. What's up? Marlene's cool and everything, but she doesn't have a tv and can only cook stuff in the microwave."

"Well, I don't know. I need someone to watch you guys and Marlene's the best person."

"What's wrong with Cait? He's always been fine before."

Tifa tried to think of how to put it delicately. "There's a lot of. . . weird stuff going on in Midgar, CJ. Cait's a good sitter most of the time, but I want you guys with a real person for a while. Okay?"

"Okay," the boy grumbled. Then, in a slightly cheerier voice, he asked, "Are we gonna see you tomorrow?"

"Definitely. I think I know what Cid and Marlene are planning. Are you guys going to get Dragon Weapon?"

"Yeah, I think that's what it's called. I just know it's big."

"Well, you guys'll probably bring that here tomorrow morning. I'll be waitin'. Then we'll bust in there and get dad and Vincent, alright?"

"Cool. Here's Cid. Tell 'im not to steal my knife. Bye."

The pilot grabbed the phone from the boy with a snarl, chomping on his cigarette irritably.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Yeah," Tifa lied, "Listen, Cid, there's a storm front rolling in, I'm looking at it right now. You be careful, no hot dogging with my kids in your ship. And keep an eye on them in Wutai, alright?"

"Are you kidding? The way they're darting around I'll have to keep both my eyes on 'em. I'll see ya tomorrow, alright? Heh heh, expect us to show up bearing a couple of really big "Booms!", Highwind style. If this were a comic book, we're talking full panel sound effects, girl. We're gonna peel that barrier away like that building were a banana and we'll have Jenova slipping on the peel."

"You missed your calling, Cid. You should of been a poet."

The pilot chuckled, taking a long drag off his cigarette. "A shame, yeah. Que sera sera. Over and out."

The line broke and Tifa snapped the cell phone closed, handing it back to Reeve. He took it, stuck it in his jacket pocket and sighed, the woman's melancholy catching on. He'd spent most of his day in that little cafe down the street. It was a favorite of his, he usually ate lunch there as opposed to the sterile Shinra commissary. Today though, he hadn't enjoyed a single thing he'd ordered, nor truly savored one drop of coffee. The constant sight of Tifa sitting on the curb, staring up at his building as though it had snatched her favorite doll away and was holding it just above her head teasingly, that sight haunted him. She wasn't taking all of the tragedy in stride like the rest of the team was, or even taking it as she had the events of years ago. This sudden interruption into her life was truly screwing with her emotions in a way it hadn't before. Reeve wasn't sure, but he thought perhaps the woman was simply too exhausted to deal with the twisted hands of misfortune anymore. There were only so many tears you could cry before the supply ran out and you had to begin weeping blood.

"So," Reeve began, leaning back heavily on his hands against the cool grittiness of the sidewalk, "What's the deal?"

"Dragon Weapon, you remember it?"

"Oh yeah, how could I forget? They're thinking of using it, eh?"

"That's what I'm assuming."

Reeve cocked his weary head to one side, eyeing Tifa through suspicious eyes. "You don't sound very enthused about

it." Tifa again had her gaze targeted on the building. She turned to momentarily meet Reeve's then moved into the distance again, shrugging.

"It's not going to work," she said simply.

"Not too optimistic either, I see. Why don't you think so?"

She shook her head, frowning. "Because nothing'll work. I think I knew that the minute CJ told me what happened. Maybe even the minute the kids were taken from me. Reeve. . . nothing can go back to how it was. Nothing."

"How can you say that?" the Shinra President asked, brows beginning to lower. He and everyone else were doing their best to help Cloud and Vincent and here, the very woman who should be cheering on the efforts, was dooming it all to failure! "Tifa, how can you so quickly lose hope? You were never like this before, what's gotten into you?"

"It's just something my heart keeps yelling at me. This is all futile."

Reeve didn't know how to convince her otherwise. He wasn't sure if he even cared enough to try with the attitude she was throwing at him. He could understand if she was disheartened by the whole deal, but she needed to have faith that they'd save their friends, if only for her kids' sakes.

"Why don't you go home?" he said suddenly, almost bitterly, "There's not a god damned thing you can do just sitting and staring at the tower like someone planted you here. And it's obvious that it's screwing with your mind. Tifa Lockhart would never be such a downer."

"Yeah?" the woman said, looking up with teary eyes, "Well Tifa Strife would! Don't you see, Reeve? Jenova can't die! If she can't die than Cloud can never be free. She's inside of him, always was, and there's no way to get her out! Cloud and Vincent belong to her now. . . maybe that's just the way it has to be. Whatever's going on up there is inevitable."

Reeve watched as she spoke the words, his mouth hanging half-open. It seemed she'd sat there today convincing herself of all this, the feelings sparked by the little "theory" Red had explained to the group earlier. He tried to think of a way to talk her out of the idea, to wipe the thoughts from her mind. But who was to say she wasn't right?

"You need some sleep, honey," he said softly. He looked down the block as the streetlights began to snap on all around them. The storm was overhead now and brought the dark of night earlier than normal. A few fat raindrops fell on his head and he blinked in surprise. Yeah, he told himself, it does rain occasionally, despite all the shit we people do, the sky will continue to rain. Listen to me, I'm turning morbid. "Look, there's an inn right there. If you won't go home, let me check you in here. It's right across the street and if anything happens, you'll be able to see it through the window. It's much better than sitting in the rain, don't you think?"

"Stop talking to me like I'm a child," Tifa snapped, brushing the rain droplets from her slick hair with one hand. Reeve fought back the urge to tell her to stop acting like one and stood quickly, gesturing to the inn. The rain was beginning to turn into a downpour. A sheet of lightning flickered in the distance. Tifa eyed him for a second, then rose and followed him into the building. It hurt so much, the sudden split of her soul. Half of her wanted to sit out on that curb and get drenched to the skin, doing so if only for the chance that maybe Cloud was up there looking out a window and might see her forlorn form in the street below and find comfort. But the other half wanted to run home and wait for her children, wanted to call them and comfort them through the storm that might be scaring Ifalna. She just couldn't choose between them and her husband. So she ended up going with neither, with herself instead. It would be warm inside the inn. It would be dry. She wanted these simple things so she followed Reeve, disgusted at her own selfishness.

All color left Midgar as the clouds poured their fury upon it. It was as though the acidic rain was turpentine, running down the oil-streaked canvas of the city, smearing the neon lights of Sector Seven, ruining the green of the newly planted, thirteen year old trees, destroying the bright signs and vividly painted kanji of Wall Market, colors running down, disappearing, draining into the sewers. The people still out on the street ran for shelter as thunder blared in their ears. This was a real storm, not a passing shower. It would be settled over Midgar for a while, they knew, no use defying it or daring to deflect the drops with a pathetic umbrella.

Vincent heard the pattering of the rain and let the sound run over his ears soothingly. The drops spattered, hissed, and evaporated against the blue of the energy shield, sending hot steam into the already sweltering room. The barrier gave off a heat that the November winds couldn't penetrate or even hope to subdue.

His eyes hurt. They pushed back heavy into his skull, screaming out protests, desiring to be shut. But he couldn't. He couldn't surrender to darkness, not yet. Maybe he'd never be able to again. There'd always be those screams keeping him awake. Those screams and Jenova's voice. It wasn't like before when he'd been able to sleep and leave his every misery on the outside of a wooden box. Now there was Jenova to assault him when his eyes were shut. He had no sanctuary anymore. No peace.

It was dark out, a combination of night and the blackness of the storm. Through the scratched window of the mako

chamber, the view clogged by his warm, wet breath on the glass, Vincent could see Hojo's bizarre silhouette against the sizzling blue wall of the energy barrier. His back was to him, his eyes gazing out into the crackles of electricity. Vincent doubted he bothered to strain to see beyond it and into the night sky, into the beauty of the rain. He believed the scientist had eyes only for the power.

Cloud, are you there?

Nothing. No answer. Not even a threat, or an insult. Just. . . nothing.

Eighteen different materia. That day Hojo'd stuck eighteen separate materia into Cloud's body, one for every year since he'd first began his experimentation on the man, two at a time, one pair after another. Vincent had tried to keep track but couldn't even recall what powers Cloud possessed now. He'd passed out after around the third pair and Hojo had stopped giving Vincent play by plays of the procedure, becoming concerned over Cloud's reaction to it all. He wouldn't die, Jenova would see to that, but the phenomenal influx of mako could very well burn out his brain and his magic abilities, leaving a very powerful, but useless shell. Still, Hojo'd continued with the infusion, insisting that spells would form best if all materia essences were "fresh" in Cloud's system. It all made Vincent sick to his stomach.

With weary, red eyes, he looked towards his friend's trembling form. Hojo had him laid out on a rusted examination table, for some reason not bothering to strap his ankles and wrists to the restraining bars on the table's sides. Maybe it was because Cloud looked nearly dead. What harm could he be? And how could he possibly escape? His form was pale and convulsing there in the room's dimmed lights. He muttered in delirium, or at least Vincent hoped it was simple delirium and not Jenova chipping away at him like an ice pick. He seemed to have some fever, so much sweat ran down his face it was as though someone had poured a bucket of water over him.

What had Hojo done?

Vincent leaned his forehead against the window in exhaustion, in dejection. He tried to picture Cloud as he'd always been, a man who smiled when life was worth smiling at, a friend always there when you needed him, really needed him. A man who'd give his life in a heartbeat for anyone else. Where had he gone? Where was he in this trembling, pale, corpse-like thing on the table? Was he dead? Had he gone to join his children? Vincent almost liked this thought. If Jenova and Hojo had killed the true Cloud, then all they had now was a pawn with Cloud's face and not his soul. The man would be off somewhere, Vincent didn't know where, but gone away with those two violet-eyed imps he'd spent a week in the cage with, those two wasted lives so quickly flown away. It was something he prayed was true. Somehow he knew that the Cloud Strife who'd entered the labs the night before didn't exist anymore, he knew this from the bottom of his heart.

Well then, where did that leave Vincent? Stranded, he supposed. But he could deal with that, he'd always been a loner and would resume the role once again. He'd been foolish to think he could maintain a friendship anyway, without the other person getting killed. It just wasn't a good idea to get to know Vincent Valentine too well. It was dangerous.

Befriend me and you'll wind up stabbed through the heart, dead by a madman, thrown out of a building, or poisoned and maddened. At least I have variety on my side.

Vincent lifted his gaze, staring out the window again. What he felt was self-pity and this disgusted him. It was something he thought had been purged from his soul years before. But Hojo'd resurrected it. Hojo. God, how Vincent hated that name, hated it so bad he could taste it in the back of his throat. Every friend he'd ever lost had somehow been taken by Hojo. Someone somewhere had once said that every man had a devil. Vincent didn't have to think very hard to figure out who his was. And devils didn't die, did they? Perhaps it made sense that he and Cloud couldn't kill theirs. And this hell they were imprisoned in was their punishment for trying. Well screw that, Vincent thought rebelliously, If there was ever a man alive who could kill a devil it was Vincent Valentine. That punk in Wall Market, that man whose hand he'd swiped off with one clean blow, hadn't he called Vincent Satan? He hadn't really thought about the delirious mugger's rambles, but they came back to him now. And, strangely enough, they comforted him. If he was some heartless devil, that meant his life was so much easier than normal people's, didn't it? Didn't that mean he didn't have a conscience, didn't have emotions? Yeah, sure, in theory. But Vincent couldn't delude himself. He felt his emotions and conscience bouncing around in his empty soul like leaden spurs. He wasn't a devil, he was a man haunted by a devil with too much humanity left in him to become what hounded him and thusly be rid of it. In other words, a misanthropist who was still so human it shamed him. Still so human despite the demon that paced around in his soul. So human despite his inhuman genetics, his bestial claw and consuming, fiery eyes. Still so weak, defying every enviable offense granted to him. Good gods above, Jenova didn't need to hound Vincent with her insults, he could do a perfectly decent job of that himself.

The man swiped at the hair in his face, tugging it impatiently behind his ears. Maybe he was a devil and just hadn't realized it yet. He thought of all the evil things he'd done and thought this must surely be true. He'd sworn an oath to himself and to Cloud's children that he wouldn't let any harm come to them. He had sworn it! And where were they now? Images came to Vincent's mind, cruelly and graphically answering the question but he shoved them away bitterly. Their

lives had been worth so much more than his. For years he'd thought so. He'd come to Midgar and to the Strifes because he saw the future in CJ and Ifalna's faces. To hell with the past, to what he'd done, life went on and it could go on for the better. He'd let his friend's children be the physical embodiments of this thought. All those times in battle years ago, when Vincent had carelessly put his life on the line to help Cloud out, or to block a blow aimed for Tifa, he'd done it simply because he hadn't cared whether he'd lived or died. But after Sephiroth had been killed and CJ was born years later, Vincent had realized that more had come out of his selfish actions than prolonging the lives of his friends. No, by saving them so many times he'd wound up adding to the world in his own small, abstract way. Helped add two new lives, lives with potential, without any sins to blacken their existences. What did his wasted life mean when compared with such potentiality? His was dirt, spit on the ground against that kind of purity. That was why he went to Midgar for Christmas, that was why he'd blindly chased after the mako monster when he'd seen him in the streets of Sector Eight. That was why he felt he'd effortlessly give his life for CJ or Ifalna, desiring more than anything else to preserve those two unwasted chances. It was like he'd told Jenova as she'd assaulted him in his nightmare: That baby's life is precious. It could add good to the world. And if Vincent had saved them, the children could have grown older and wiped away some of the pain he'd laid on the Planet, on humanity, on himself. Yeah, they could have. They really could have. But redemption had flown right out the window, back to heaven where it belonged. And angels only fell once in a blue moon.

The air inside the chamber was hot and stifling. Yet he refused to ask for the vents to be switched on. No, better to suffer, that was some small, strange victory. He tried to call to Cloud again, thinking he saw the man's eyelids flutter but there was no response. He looked so broken. The mako-colored tint had left his skin, left it cold and white but Vincent knew the eyes behind his lids were still those of a madman. Still those mako green Sephiroth eyes. It rather made some sense now, Vincent thought sadly. Hojo's eyes were brown, Lucrecia's had been blue. Why would their misbegotten son's be green? Heh. He knew why now, for all it was worth.

Fight it. Fight it, Cloud. I'm going to. Fight it for them.

"Stop calling to him, you ignorant cretin. He can't hear you. I doubt he could if he wanted to."

Hojo turned slowly from his reflections at the barrier and faced Vincent with a gently glowing yellow gaze. A sudden flicker of intense lightening glared suddenly through the electrical field, momentarily lighting the scientist in a bright blue glow. His eyes smoldered in the dimness, piercing Vincent straight through the heart. "And you're giving me a headache. Neto, has it been two hours yet?" Hojo waited patiently for a response, then frowned slightly as none came. He slithered towards the back corner of the room, where the lowered lights didn't quite reach, and found the WDD Head curled into a ball, fast asleep on the floor. He jostled him with one of his tentacles and the tech came alive with a small yelp. He looked around for a moment as though he couldn't remember where he was, then jumped to his feet in terror at the sight of Hojo's twisted countenance.

"Has it been two hours yet?" Hojo repeated, asking the question slowly so the stupid man would understand. Neto gulped and checked his watch with blurry eyes. He hadn't slept in. . . oh, he hadn't slept at all the night before, not at all during that day, and barely a wink tonight. He was too busy running over every word that Hojo said, hoping to find a way out of the hell he was trapped in. There had to be a way he could get out of there. Some escape. But the haze of his exhaustion made everything seem even more like a nightmare, made it even harder to reason.

"Three minutes, sir," the tech replied, blinking hard.

"Three minutes. Close enough. Come along."

The scientist rubbed at his eyes, turning and making his way to the table where Cloud lay, still trembling. On a small steel tray nearby there were eighteen strange looking spheres piled together. They'd been materia at one time but now were only simple glass-like spheres that would shatter at the slightest touch. The mako and color had left their surfaces and they'd reverted to a flat grayish hue. Vincent eyed the orbs, wondering how it was possible to put their immense power into a single human being. He could have asked Hojo for an explanation and the scientist would have gone off on a long self-indulgent spiel explaining how it all worked, how mako was attracted to mako and smaller portions were drawn to larger portions because of the principal of preservation, all that crap. But it didn't make a difference. There was Cloud. There were those lifeless materia. The How's and Why's seemed immaterial now.

"We really can't see too many results until he's conscious," Hojo muttered. He was hovering around Cloud, taking his pulse, checking his vitals, peering beneath his eyelids with curiosity. He'd seen the same reaction on his son years before but to a lesser degree. Hojo marveled at how tightly Jenova's grip on the man must be. He should by rights have been dead, he'd been poisoned with enough mako to kill a dozen men, despite the conditioning he'd received years before, but Jenova was powering his heart and lungs with her own tremendous strength, just as she had Sephiroth's when he'd plummeted into the depths of the Nibelheim Reactor. Life and Death had little meaning for Cloud Strife anymore, Hojo thought bemusedly. He couldn't die if he wanted to.

Grinning, the scientist shot a glance to Neto, then to Vincent, and picked up a rusty scalpel from a shelf beneath the table. He spun it around in his scarred hand, watching it catch the light. Cloud was bare-chested, had been since ripping his shirt off looking for wounds the night before, and Hojo crouched over his torso slowly. He lowered a hand and began tracing patterns into his chest with the razor.

"From what Jenova tells me, Vincent, you're a painter now, eh? You were always a dark, gothic son of a bitch, even as a Turk, so I suppose that's apropos. Tell me what you think of my little composition." Hojo hunched over Cloud's chest a little closer, holding the scalpel like a pencil. He traced a few more lines, bit his lip, then signed his name near the man's navel. Grinning fiercely, he looked up questioningly towards his prisoner. Teeth clenched so hard he could hear the creakings of his jaw in his ear, Vincent ran his eyes over the scientist's twisted work.

"Perspective's off on the house," he said quietly. Hojo looked thrown off for a moment, then shrugged, sticking the razor absently into Cloud's sternum as though it were a pencil holder.

"Well, hell, that's why I became a scientist and not an artist, I suppose. Heh. Thank you for critiquing my work. But here's the real masterpiece. Observe." Hojo gestured smally to the bloodied lines on Cloud's chest, which had beaded and ran red rivulets onto the steel examination table. Already, as if by magic, they were healing. After thirty seconds or so the marks were gone and there was only the blood to mark the drawing which Hojo motioned Neto to sponge up with a wave of his hand.

Vincent couldn't believe his eyes. "What. . . how? What have you done to him?"

"It's called having the effects of two Mastered Full Cure materia coursing through your veins. I'd do the same for you, but even Jenova wouldn't be able to keep you alive through the process. And I don't have four years to condition your body so that you could stand the infusion. Sorry."

Hojo laughed a little crookedly, highly amused by the look of hatred on Vincent's face. He turned to Neto with wide eyes and asked, "So, my little man, are you impressed? In all honesty you told me last night that you thought materia was a tool of the past, primitive and outdated. Why don't you try telling Cloud that? Tell it to him when he wakes up and blasts you with the life energy of the Planet. Argue and lecture him while he's burning you alive in mako fires that he conjures from his very core, yes, you try and convince him how "primitive and outdated" his powers are. I'm sure he'll listen intently before blasting you into a pile of soot and bones."

Neto paled to the color of new snow and stepped back, not sure if Hojo's words were a joke or a promise. Cloud Strife, coworker and head of security wouldn't kill sniveling Matsuo Neto, would he? the WDD Head wondered. No, Hojo was crazy was all, Cloud disliked him, as did Reno, hell, everyone did except the department techs looking for promotions but no one would take the time to end his existence, that was for sure. Neto kept telling himself this, glad to become lost in the words. He was safe as long as he believed them.

Hojo saw the distressed look in Neto's eyes and grinned even harder, content in the power he held over the man. The scientist glanced down to Cloud's sweat-soaked, unconscious face and thought he saw the same surrendered expression. That only fed his lust further. Hands clasped tight behind his back, tentacles flicking about his body like the wild tails of a school of squid, Hojo looked to Vincent, desiring to see defeat written in the man's red eyes.

But no. Behind the locks of ebony hair, there was only hatred in his gaze, hatred so intense the scientist nearly had to turn away and Neto began to wonder at Vincent's attitude, whether his defiance was bravery or just plain stupidity. To Vincent, his anger was nothing more than necessity. He'd go on hating Professor Hojo until he was dead, then use his last breath to curse him to his face. If he surrendered the loathing for even the space of a sigh, than Hojo and Jenova had won. And CJ and Ifalna had died for nothing.

"I've never seen you so upset, Vincent," Hojo cooed, half a smirk on his twisted lips, "Bad for the blood pressure you know. Chaos likes it, I'm sure though, so by all means--"

"I'm going to kill you."

The words came out deep and feral. They felt good to say. Hojo eyed Vincent in slight surprise and Neto watched the scientist closely, expecting him to pounce.

But all he said was, "Really, don't you think killing me once in your lifetime's enough?"

"I'm going to kill you." The words weren't even a threat really. They were matter-of-fact.

"Will you use the same bullet, I wonder. . ."

Vincent laughed, feeling slightly unhinged. He crossed his arms and leaned back, the rear of the small mako chamber only inches from him. He never took his eyes off Hojo.

"This time I'll kill you with the claw you gave me, Professor," he said quietly, "I'll rip your throat out."

Hojo's mouth was a tight thin line, but still it trembled with insanity and mirth. He stepped towards the chamber, standing with his hands behind his back only inches from the double-paned, leaded glass window. "Do you enjoy making hollow threats as a full time career or is this a hobby you've only recently acquired? Vincent, my boy, you're so clueless it hurts me. After tomorrow you won't ever threaten me again. Hell, after tomorrow, you'll think I'm the greatest thing since sliced bread. Maybe I can't blame you for working out your ire on me now. Go ahead, dammit, get it out of your system." The scientist threw back his head and laughed, keeping the barely noticeable slit of one eye open so he could watch Vincent, wary despite the fact they were separated by half a foot of lead and steel. Vincent could threaten him all he wanted but there was no way he could hurt him, not while in the mako chamber. No way, not a chance Vincent could touch him.

But Chaos could.

Neto cried out and Hojo gasped in uncharacteristic surprise as Chaos' pebbled blue arm smashed through the round window and wrapped its claws around the scientist's neck, the fresh blood of transformation dripping from its fingers and running cold down Hojo's chest. Chaos shook him around like a paper doll, cutting its upper arm on the ragged glass about the window's rim but not giving two shits about the pain so long as it knew the man its master wanted dead was suffering. Like an animal, it snapped its foaming jaws about the window, trying to sink its teeth into its victim and frustrated that it couldn't. It's cramped wings flapped futilely about the inside of the chamber, the space too small and making it claustrophobic.

"Ghyagh. . . great kkchkbloody beeeeast. . ." Hojo sputtered, fighting for breath. His skin was turning blue beneath its natural greenish tint, his yellow eyes bugging out from his skull. Neto backed away from his flailing tentacles, eyeing the scene in horror, almost, only almost just barely, feeling sorry for the man. Chaos roared, squeezing his fist tighter, trying to pop the scientist's head off like a campaign cork.

"Release him!!"

Chaos glanced up, a look of surprise on his demon face as Chieko charged from the darkness, snarling bloody fury. Too enraptured by the pain he was inflicting, the creature didn't have the presence of mind or the self control to release Hojo and pull his arm back into the safety of the mako chamber. Hojo eyed his "daughter" almost lovingly as she sank her envenomed fangs into the demon's arm, ripping out a sizable hunk of flesh. Neto turned green as she thoughtfully chewed, then swallowed it, red blood bright on her lips.

With a shriek of pain, Chaos released Hojo who tumbled roughly to the tiles, clutching at his throat and gasping. Five claw marks rent his neck and he felt them gingerly with the tips of his fingers, cursing violently. "Th-thank you. . . Chieko, "he wheezed and the creature nodded, gaze proud as she continued to eye the mako chamber warily. Hojo rose to his feet, his tentacles actually, and approached the broken window, Chieko tense at his back. Her unease was unnecessary though. Cautiously the scientist raised himself up and put an eye to the shattered chamber window, gazing upon the form of Vincent Valentine laying restored on the chamber floor. His newly reformed human skin shone wet with his own blood. Chaos itself had absorbed Chieko's poison, but hadn't had stamina enough to heal the chunk of missing flesh Vincent was now staring down upon, the top layer of his right forearm torn away to reveal pale bone and arteries. The latter spilled his warm life all over his clothes.

But despite it all, there was a smile on his face. It was a tight-lipped grin, not reaching his eyes, but it was there nonetheless and it lifted some of the mold from his spirits.

"Feel better?" Hojo asked in a hoarse voice, still rubbing his neck. Vincent didn't answer. He shut his eyes and turned his face away, yet smiling, listening to the thunder rumbling outside the building. He kept his arm laying on the metal grating that served as the chamber's floor, preferring not to have to look at such an ugly wound.

"I do actually, "he finally sighed. Chieko growled lowly and Neto gibbered at his foolishness. Hojo only laughed.

"Enjoy it while it lasts, my friend. It's your turn on the table tomorrow."

~\*~

"S'really comin' down out there, "Barret remarked as he stepped through the door of Marlene's apartment, shaking flashing raindrops from his hair. He ran a massive palm over his face, then flung the water that came off onto the carpet gingerly. Berk looked up at the sound of his voice, the only person in earshot, and shrugged noncommittally.

"Weatherman said there was a line of tropical storms moving in, "he said in all helpfulness, "Tornado warning, hail watch, all that nice stuff in effect. Maybe we'll end up in Oz, eh?" Berk laughed lowly, pressing his knuckles into his tired bloodshot eyes. The clock on the wall read 1:38 am. Not exactly late by Berk's standards, he was nocturnal by nature, but

he hadn't slept in a few days and it was beginning to wear on him.

Barret eyed the young Turk distrustfully, setting down the coffee in his hand. It was the worst stuff he'd ever had in his life, some anonymous brown swill from the kwickie mart down the street, but it was better than trying to work Marlene's coffeemaker with only one hand. And Barret was just a bit too proud to ask for assistance. Especially from some sneaky Turk bastard on the Shinra payroll.

"They still back there minin' fer ideas?" Barret asked, surprising himself by attempting conversation with the man. Berk blinked in slight amazement, putting down the pencil he'd been doing a crossword with and giving Barret his full attention.

"I went back there a few minutes ago and watched in disbelief as everything they said flew straight over my head," Berk laughed, "I managed to catch some of it though. As far as I can tell, they know how they're going to power Dragon Weapon with mako, they're just not quite sure how to turn theory into actuality. Or something, I dunno. Your daughter knows a lot of big words."

Barret took that as a compliment and grinned broadly. The grin turned into a wince as he attempted to sip the coffee.

"That bad, huh?" Berk asked sympathetically.

"Bad would be an improvement. This shit's undrinkable." Barret stepped over and threw the paper cup in the bin, deciding no amount of caffeine was worth such torture. He slipped his jacket off and threw it over the counter to dry, then slammed his massive form into one of the kitchen table's chairs, putting his feet up and sighing contentedly. Berk watched him out of the corner of one eye, brow wrinkled in curiosity. But it was Barret who asked a question.

"How'd you break yer arm?"

Berk eyed the end of the cast sticking out of his suit jacket momentarily. It had been snowy white but now was written all over with various magic marker scribbles. Most in Reno's handwriting. "For a good time, call Scarlet". "Never rub another man's rhubarb", whatever that meant. There was a doodle of a rather well-endowed woman on there too, well, less a doodle than a stick figure with three, er, one head and two other circles, just as large. He'd fallen asleep on that bench in the park the night before and Reno and Rude had had their fun. He pulled the cuff of his jacket down tighter over the cast to hide the slew of phone numbers they'd written there. "I broke it testing Dragon Weapon actually," he finally answered, "Thing has a hell of a kickback."

"That doesn't reassure me," Barret remarked, leaning his chin in his hands, "Ya really think they know what they're doing?"

"How should I know? I've never met you people before today. But Mr. Reno and Mr. Rude seem to have some faith in you. I'll leave the success of all this on their consciences. Besides," the young Turk shrugged, "I'm just hired help, here because it was ordered of me."

"Izzat a fact?" Barret shivered a bit in his damp clothes, wishing Marlene would turn the AC down. "Well, Turk, I'm glad to know I don't have to be grateful if you're only here for Reeve's money."

"It isn't Reeve's money, it's Shinra's money. And I'm here for Mr. Strife too, ya know. I would never leave my boss dangling."

"Mr. Berk!!"

The young man's head jerked up, the sunglasses propped on his forehead falling down over his eyes. He got quickly to his feet from the table and walked through the kitchen and down the rear passageway of the tiny apartment, shadowed by Barret who had absolutely nothing else to do. There were too many things on his mind and too much going on for him to attempt something as mundane as sleep. Leaving his shades covering his eyes, Berk popped his head into the guest bedroom, which had been converted into a miniature war room. Marlene, Bugah, and Nanaki were seated on the floor around the chamber's lone bed and treating it like a table. Pages of spiral-bound notebook paper littered the floral comforter and Barret glanced over Berk's shoulder to see what was written on them, immediately getting a headache. Shit like that had made him give up his Planetary studies. Pages of numbers and letters that weren't really letters but something else, and argh! math was for people with too much time on their hands and a lack of calculator access.

"What is it, Miss Marlene?" Berk asked politely of the seated, auburn-haired young woman. Reno and Rude had left him as a sort of temporary guard while they'd wandered off with their own secret agenda.

"We're outta potato chips." Marlene held the empty bowl towards him and he snatched at it, sighing. If Shinra wanted to pay him four hundred gil an hour in overtime to be someone's manservant, who was he to complain? He turned around and headed for the snack stash while Barret stepped into the room and leaned heavily against a wall, arms crossed and running a critical eye over the scholars.

"How's it goin'?" he asked hesitantly.

"Surprisingly well," Bugah answered, flipping rapidly through the pages of a thick textbook, "We've designed a missile I think even Cid Highwind would approve of."

"A mako missile, dad," Marlene said in enthusiasm, "A regular projectile laced with massive amounts of mako from the WDD's stash. Actually all of their stash, they don't have much to begin with thanks to restrictions, but it should be enough."

"So are ya done?"

"Not exactly," she sighed, scribbling a few notes down, "The thing is, we have to figure out just where to fire at. Too low and we may knock the whole building onto its side. That's obviously not an option. But there's only so high we can fire without risking hurting Cloud and Vincent."

"The roof!" Bugah said insistently, the tone of his voice betraying they'd been arguing over it for hours, "We fire at the roof, dissolving the barrier at its pinnacle as though we were unscrewing the top of a bottle of soda. Then we descend and it's only a few floors to the labs. You'd get there quickly enough to gain the advantage of surprise."

"But Elder," said Nanaki wearily, "Reeve said that would destroy Shinra. You'd take out the company's entire file archives and mainframe on the sixty-ninth floor. Plus it's still too close to the sixty-eighth to be safe. This missile is going to pack quite a punch, we have to account for that."

Nanaki crossed his fore paws and flicked his head to clear his vision of a few strands of his mane, tail waving hypnotically back and forth. Bugah shot him a glare then sighed, shaking his head.

"What Reeve says is inconsequential. Getting to your friends is more important."

"Of course," said Marlene quickly, biting her lip at what she said next, "But I have a feeling that if we ask him to let us blow the top off the Shinra towers, in the process destroying the company's archives and data bank. . . well, I just don't think Reeve'll allow it. He won't hand over the missile or the mako we need. Shinra's his responsibility and a major world power, maybe the most powerful organization on the Planet. He can't let it all fall to ruin, no matter how desperate the situation. And I guess I really can't blame him. He'd only be protecting the company's interests. That's his duty as president."

"Never thought I'd hear my own daughter talking like that," Barret spat, eyes dark with anger, "Marlene Wallace, this friggin' city is turning you into someone you ain't."

"Daddy. . ." the woman sighed, "Let's not get into this now. We have to figure out a way to get this to work. This is more important. Yell at me later."

"Have you friggin' li'l bears in your cave bothered to look outside in the past couple hours?" the man snapped. His question drew blank stares so he stalked over to the window and flung back the curtains, yanking on the blinds beneath. The white slats jerked upwards, revealing the hellish attack of nature outside. Rain spattered the window, winds buffeted the dark, sharp forms of trees. A brief flash of lightening made the group jump, throwing sharp shadows around like playthings.

"An unwanted element," Bugah sighed, bitterly adding a large H2O randomly onto the page of calculations before him.

"You scientists can hole yourselves away in here, thinking, planning, trying to change the world to suit your needs, but while your scribblin' away, the Planet's gonna g'wan bein' as unpredictable as it pleases while you're lookin' the other way. That Turk told me the radioman said this was a tropical storm. This ain't gonna clear up anytime soon. So what do we do?"

"What do we do?" Bugah asked while Nanaki gulped and Marlene turned pale, "We pray to Shiva that it defies what you've said and does clear. This is all a lesson in hope, Barret. If we don't at least have that, then we have nothing."

"Hope," spat Barret, scratching at the back of his head in aggravation, "Yeah, you keep hopin', Bugah. See how far it gets ya." He glared viciously at the three, seeing in them something disturbing that he couldn't quite name. Perhaps it was their naivete, maybe their blind, scientific approaches to the woes of the world. Whatever it was, it made Barret's skin crawl, and the fact that one of them was his daughter didn't help. He felt in a room full of strangers, so, huffing bursts of annoyed, heated air from his lungs, he spun around on his heel and stalked out, nearly knocking Berk and the renewed potato chip bowl onto the ground.

"What's your frigging problem?" the young Turk asked, steadying himself and throwing a glare at his back. Barret flipped a middle finger his way and Berk had to forcefully remind himself not to draw his gun and shoot that finger off.

"He's frustrated," said Marlene in apology. She turned her eyes to the window where they were assaulted by more sizzling lightening. The Planet seems angry, the woman thought, but we're trying to help. Doesn't it realize it's only hindering us with this rage? "I'm frustrated too," she said a little sadly. Nanaki frowned and nuzzled her hand with his nose until she smiled and he sat up again, satisfied.

"Well maybe we should start a club," Berk sighed, setting the chips on the middle of the bed, "Is the rain really that much of a problem?"

Bugah got slowly to his feet and approached the window, pressing his face close to the glass.

"It isn't the rain," the Elder said, "It's the blasted wind. We can't aim in this."

Berk wanted to stick his hands casually in his pocket and say, "Well I can" but it would have been a cocky lie. He squinted through the black window and frowned at the seventy mile per hour winds assaulting his vision. He wasn't that good, no one was. Heh. It wasn't even a question of skill, with variable winds like those whipping around, screaming from every direction, there was no possible way to accommodate one's aim. He saw the worry on Marlene's face and suddenly found his heart tugging at him. "Don't worry, Miss Marlene," he said, "I don't see why waiting for this to clear up for a few more days is going to hurt anything. It's not like Mr. Strife and that Vincent fellow are going anywhere. They're as stuck inside as we are stuck outside, or so I would imagine."

The woman shook her head, grateful for his good intentions, but immediately dismissing them. Berk just didn't know what was really going on. Well, it was no use worrying. Whether it cleared or not the next morning, they would still eventually have to make the Dragon Weapon function to their needs. For that, in addition to the WDD's mako, they were planning on using materia and attempting a six-slot linkup. It was risky, but would really boost the missile's power if they pulled it off.

"Worrying about this is futile," she said as Bugah sat himself back down at the foot of the bed, "We should continue as planned and deal with the weather as it occurs. Right?" Berk grinned and nodded his head at her while Nanaki and the Elder only sighed but renewed their calculating. "So, did we decide which materia to use?"

"Added Effect obviously," Bugah said, voice betraying his weariness with the whole affair, "And then we'd chosen the four elementals which should really pack a punch. One more though."

"Summon materia have powerful auras, did Reeve say he had any mastered summons in the WDD store?" asked Nanaki. Marlene nearly snorted.

"He wouldn't know," she scoffed, "But yes, there's a wide selection, well wide enough since we only have access to the testing hangar. Want to go with Knights of the Round? It's the most powerful available to us." The two scholars nodded while Berk looked blank and shrugged. "Then again. . ." Marlene continued with a sudden thought, "What about that summon materia you gave me Bugah? Last week, before I left. I can't quite get a reading from it, I'm sure it's one I've never cast before."

"Impossible," the Elder said quickly, "I gave that to you more as a memento. I'm rather sure it's useless, I also was unable to get a read off of it. Occasionally the Planet will produce faulty materia, mere baubles."

Marlene leaned over and pulled the red orb from her bag, rolling it delicately in her palm. It looked perfectly functional to her. The mako swirled inside, it tingled against her flesh as she moved it from hand to hand. She was almost itching to attempt to summon whatever power was within. But Bugah only gave it a glance and turned away.

"Knights of the Round sounds like a good choice," the older man said. He wrote KoR on his notes and sighed, turning over a new piece of paper. "Let's adjourn for a bit and come back with fresh minds. Then we can decide upon the issue of where to fire. Perhaps Barret was right about us "holing" ourselves in this room like bears in their cave. Though he could have been a bit more polite about it."

"Has that man ever been polite in his life, I wonder?" Berk asked frowning, "I only met him today but he seems the sort who'll kick ya in the face for a candy bar. The gun on his arm isn't too friendly looking either."

Marlene shot him a small scowl and he remembered the man he was putting down was her father. Oops. "I guess he's just as bothered by all of this as we are," Berk said quickly, grinning apologetically towards the woman, "I mean, if I let myself, I wouldn't mind firing off a couple rounds into yonder wall just to feel some solid kickback, let off some steam, ya know?"

"I know." Marlene returned his grin, grabbing a handful of chips and exiting the room gratefully. She'd been in there since early that afternoon, figuring out mako ratios with Bugah and Nanaki. Computations could become quite tedious if you gave them enough time. Marlene found them interesting for the first thirty seconds, but after that. . . she wished calculators had a materia function key.

Entering her small living room, the sound of the storm outside became obvious. A grumble of thunder assaulted her ears as she crunched her chips. She noticed her summon materia was still in her greasy hand and stuck it absently in her pocket, then threw herself on an armchair and shut her eyes.

"I do hope Mr. Highwind and the children are alright. . ." she heard Bugah say suddenly, "This is terrible weather, I hope he's not foolish enough to attempt to fly in it."

Marlene opened her eyes and exchanged looks with Nanaki who had plopped at her feet. The creature rolled his one eye and she shrugged. Of course Cid would try to fly. What a stupid thing to say.

"Well, I'm sure they made it to Wutai all right, it's not that long of a flight, I've flown there myself a dozen times in Shinra choppers," Berk reassured, "I'm sure they beat the storm. He'll probably hold out there until this passes."

"A logical person would," Nanaki began.

"Cid's not logical," Marlene finished with a laugh. The small group was silent for a while, each listening to the sound of the rain as it filtered through the thin apartment walls. The woman let the sound of it wash away her worries, even though the storm itself was a major cause of them. Thunder chuckled distantly, laughing at some joke nothing else found funny. Marlene had to blink hard to keep from falling asleep. The armchair was so soft and yielding, she felt she could sink into it forever. All around, the world seemed perfect, wet but perfect, defying the events transpiring in the city. Marlene knew that all through Midgar, families slept in perfect unawareness that death herself was plotting in the looming Shinra tower. She longed to be one of the ignorant.

Berk scratched at his nose, standing stiffly at the rear of the room, staying alert though there wasn't anything to possibly fear. Just wearing his uniform kept him at attention though, the weight of the gun against his chest keeping him wary. As useless as his presence was there, he was still being paid for it and his scruples told him to earn his paycheck, if only by keeping up his guard. The young Turk looked to Marlene, considering her to be the leader of the group with that pilot fellow gone. She was sitting there rather unprofessionally with her eyes shut, head leaning back against the soft fabric of the massive, overstuffed chair she'd plopped her lithe form into. Berk found his gaze lingering on her lips. They were rather beautifully formed, naturally shaped in the position of a permanent kiss. The soft pure skin above her upper lip ran a curve into the bottom of her nose, a curve so delicate it seemed the angels had molded her flesh with their own careful hands. He didn't know why, but he had the urge to approach the woman softly and run his fingers along those moist pink lips, palavering for a while at the faint indentation beneath the nose and between the nostrils. He could almost feel her warm breath against his skin.

Well, that's not good, he told himself in slight unease, snapping suddenly out of his fantasy. This was definitely not an opportune time to strike up a relationship with a new girl. He was a bachelor again though. He'd called Julie, a waitress he'd met and wooed a few months before, that morning to cancel their date for the night after Rude had so graciously gotten him additional hours, and received a rather snippy message from her answering machine.

"Berky, if you're calling I know it's to back out of tonight. Kate, if this is you, ignore the following, I'll call you later. But Berk, I don't know if you've lost count or not but this is number five. The fifth time you've traded me off for Shinra. It gets a little old, you know. I'm not going to waste my life waiting around for a man who loves his guns and his swords more than me. So I'm saying goodbye, Berk the Turk. You can get that skunk Reno to give you your jollies from now on because I'm out of the loop. Let Shinra keep you warm at night. Good bye. Ahem. Bye. . . goddamned stupid machine. . . stop! Stop recording alrea-- beep. . ."

Berk wasn't positive but he was pretty sure the message meant he was no longer dating Julie. He wondered what it would have been like if Rude hadn't screwed him over with work and he'd just called his girlfriend for directions to the restaurant they were supposed to meet at that night. He wondered which would have felt worse, getting dumped because he was a workaholic, or getting dumped because he was bad with directions.

When Berk finally looked up, pulling himself away from his thoughts, he saw that the living room had grown strangely quiet. Upon closer inspection, he realized the three Planetary scholars had all fallen asleep. Bugah was sprawled as dignified as possible on the sofa, Nanaki was curled into a red ball on the carpet, and Marlene. . . well, Berk thought Marlene looked like a princess. She really did. The way she was laying on that chair, long legs curled beneath her, face turned up to the dim light coming from the kitchen. He sighed in what was almost contentment at the sight. His dark green eyes roved over her form hungrily. Her hair, hair that was brightly copper colored yet muted, subdued somehow as well, it sparkled through the dull atmosphere, its amazing length braided and wrapped about her head like a priceless tiara. That was why the man thought she looked like a princess, she wore a crown worth more than gold, tendrils of it snaking down her slender neck, curling enticingly around her ears. But still, her lips. . .

Stop that! Berk scolded himself sharply, You testosterone-soaked bastard, I swear.

The young man shifted uncomfortably, kicking off his dress shoes and sinking his toes into the soft carpet, then began to pace quietly to work off his emotions. Each time he looked towards Marlene had got that stupid, tingling, nauseous feeling in the pit of his stomach. It meant he was in love. Or lust. One or the other. He distractedly figured that Julie hadn't meant too much to him if he was already making eyes at this other woman. Or was he? Maybe he was really upset about Julie and this was just his mind's way of coping with it. He searched his feelings, trying to find the truth. As was usually the case when it came to things inside his head, he had no idea. His brain had a mind of its own. If that made any sense.

"Why you wearin' a hole in the carpet like that?"

Berk looked up, quitting his pacing and saw Barret standing in the passage between the living room and kitchen, the light from the latter streaming out behind him. "No reason," the young Turk answered, sticking his hands roughly in the pockets of his slacks. He could nearly feel Barret's disdain emanating from the massive man's eyes. There was a slash of lightening, tearing through the window like a sword and making Berk wince. Thunder followed, mocking him.

"I'm going for a walk," Barret said suddenly, turning about and grabbing his yet dripping leather jacket from the counter.

"In this mess?"

"This apartment's too fulla Shinra scum and Shinra stupidity, I gotta get outta it for a while. Gotta problem with that?"

"If I did I guess it wouldn't matter, you're not about to take my advice, I'm willing to bet."

"Smart man," Barret said satisfied, heading towards the door.

"You're mad at them?" Berk asked, gesturing to the slumbering three around him.

"None of yer business, Turk."

Berk shrugged, his eye suddenly catching Marlene's face and dragging there when he attempted to pull away, "I just thought. . . "he began hesitantly, "I just thought you all were supposed to stick together. I mean, you guys are like, THE group. The heroes, the main men. But you're split up all over the place and fighting with each other. Seems strange, that's all. Tifa's at headquarters with President Reeve, Highwind's in Wutai, Mr. Strife and that Valentine character I can understand, but you're here with what's his name, Nanaki, and Marl-- er, Miss Marlene and yet you're splitting up from them. Strength in numbers, Mr. Wallace, that's one of the first things they teach you in basic training. That, and knowing your enemies from your friends."

Barret glared at Berk for a second, sizing him up with a practiced eye, one that had measured the worth of many enemies in the past. The young man was rather wiry, something close to six feet tall, dark hair, dark eyes, fair complexion. A certain tightness in his limbs, the way he moved, told Barret there was good amount of power in him and he must have put in a lot of hours of training to achieve it. Barret could respect him for that. He looked to the Turk's face and saw how young he was, still smelled of his mother's milk, freshly pulled from the skirts he'd clung to.

"Ya watched that anime, didn'tcha?" Barret asked accusingly, "Ya think ya know all about AVALANCE 'cause a what you saw on tv. Puh. It wasn't all pretty pictures and camaraderie years ago and only someone who'd watched that butcher of a tv show would say somethin' so corny and misinformed."

"Corny and misinformed?" Berk echoed, trying to keep his voice down, "You arrogant bastard! You're selfish is all and I see it and name it and you practically call me a kid! Well fuck you, Mr. Wallace. I may be young and not in the know with all that went on years ago, but I know Mr. Strife damned well. He was every bit the hero he's always been painted to be. So's Tifa. I know them and I learned it all was true, not a bunch of hype. But what was said about you was true too. You're a hot-headed, selfish prick who let's the past drag at his heels and hurt his future."

"I'm arrogant?" Barret asked, surprisingly cool, "You're standin' there and judgin' me by the news reports you've heard, the articles you've read, cartoons you've watched. Why dontcha try really learnin' about the really real me? Not the jerk they tell ya about in the papers."

"But you're acting like that jerk in the papers! Why can't you let her," and here Berk pointed huffily towards Marlene, "Why can't you let her judge for herself and then accept her decisions. And why can't you learn that Shinra isn't out to gut the Planet anymore. Most importantly though, why can't you learn that it's more important to put differences aside for the sake of friends in trouble than it is to drudge up dead shit in order to feed your own ego and make yourself feel superior? I'm young but I at least know all these things."

Barret drew back a rock hard fist, preparing to slam it into Berk's cocky young jaw. The Turk stood his ground, and Barret's arm wavered in the air threateningly. But then with a sudden grunt of disgust, he whipped around and stomped from the apartment, leaving with a deafening slam of the door that rivaled the thunder outside. Berk sighed, glad he'd decided not to hit him. He'd just gotten his teeth fixed from the last fight he'd been in, a bloody brawl in Junon with another Turk who'd had the gall to say Junon Turks were better than Midgar Turks. Well. That was about blasphemy.

"Where's he going?" he heard a faint voice ask from behind. Marlene was awake and staring with sleepy eyes towards the front door. Berk thought she looked cute as hell.

"I'm afraid I yelled at him," he admitted, expecting a rebuke from the woman. She only shook her head and then plopped it back down into the cushions of the armchair.

"I'm not going to count on him anymore," she said almost sadly, "He just can't control himself like I'd hoped he'd be able to. Oh, well. May as well just leave him alone and spare us both the aggravation. If he doesn't want anything to do with

this, then fine."

"As you say," Berk replied amiably. He looked back towards her face and saw that she'd already slipped off again. She probably wouldn't even remember the brief conversation in the morning. Her gently rising and falling breaths relaxed him for a reason he couldn't explain. He found he wanted to kiss the worried lines away from her face, destroy for her anything that caused her displeasure, conquer the--

There I go again! Berk nearly kicked himself in his own shin, battling down the rising tide of urges. This was dangerous ground. Marlene Wallace over there was dangerous ground. Her father had just nearly punched his lights out and he doubted the man's opinion of him would improve if he started dating his daughter. Berk couldn't believe he'd yelled at the fellow like that. But he'd just made him so suddenly pissed! He was compromising the success of their aims because he couldn't let go a grudge. There was no nobler reason behind it. Barret hated Shinra, so Barret wasn't going to help anyone who worked for them. The facts were that frigging simple. Or so it appeared to Berk.

Frowning for the fiftieth time that night, the young Turk waltzed towards a window and looked out upon the raging storm. Water splattered the panes viciously, as though each drop wanted to shatter the glass and break inside. There were a million reasons he now told himself to ignore that young woman. For starters, she'd barely given him a glance that night. He figured he was too low brow for her, too stupid. She was supposed to be a Planetary genius or something and why would she ever find interest in some young, go-nowhere Turk who spent most of his time being pushed around by his superiors? Not that that mattered. Neto'd made it quite clear a week earlier that the new WDD tech was off limits to anyone else. It nearly made Berk laugh out loud to imagine Neto and Marlene together. Neto was delusional. But as much as he hated to admit it, he was his superior, a department head, and if he ever got the urge he could get Berk fired with a simple phone call or two. He wasn't about to lose his job over a girl. No matter how beautiful she looked sitting there asleep. No matter how delicate but strong her small hands appeared as they lay curled in her lap. No matter her smile, which earlier that evening had nearly made him pass out. . .

Berk sighed shakily. This was all Rude's fault.

The clouds had piled thick above the circular shape of the city. They stretched to infinity on all sides, blacker than the black of night, but greenish-gray where the moon lay secreted behind a massing of them. Sleeping Midgar seemed like a pile of featureless rubble, lit only by the occasional streetlamp glowing pale yellow through the rain. Barret shattered the image of one of the lights as his booted foot broke the surface of a puddle. He was plodding down the street angrily, ignoring the wind and rain battering at his clothes and body. It smacked him in the head and ran cold down his neck, into his shirt. He didn't know where he was going, just so long as his footsteps led him away from what there was to deal with. He wanted to help, but he didn't. He wanted to get Cloud back if only for Tifa and her kids. But he couldn't deal with Shinra. The image of a dark-haired woman fluttered into his mind, then just as quickly left, like a meandering butterfly blasted to sudden dust by the wind. The company had taken her from him. And left him with this. He looked down at the cap on his right arm, Missing Score abandoned back at the apartment. He could never forgive what they'd stolen. Never. And Cloud, in the name of Shinra, Barret thought darkly, had tried to steal his life with Ultima Weapon as a finishing touch. How could anyone forgive that?

The storm battered the buildings of Sector Three, making shutters slam, making wind chimes rip from their hooks. The wind tore stray shingles away, and the lightening turned everything into a sharp silhouette. Barret ignored the knife-like thunder though it shook his heart with its noise. A few blocks away, a streak of blue lightening tore through a tree, a massive oak, sending up flickers of flame that couldn't stay alight on the drenched wood. The tree split and fell, limbs still waving to heaven.

"Damn," Rude commented, stepping gingerly away from the sight and farther onto Reno's small porch, "'Tis a night unfit for man or beast."

"Shaddup."

Reno jiggled the keys in the lock and his front door creaked slowly open. He practically fell inside, Rude shadowing him with his hands tucked away in his pockets and his jacket lapels flipped up around his neck.

"I'm gonna go puke," Reno said wearily, "Be right back."

He stumbled off to the bathroom and Rude headed towards the small armoury, brushing water from his shoulders and head. Reno's place was nice enough. The cleaning lady did her job whenever Reno felt like getting up early enough to let her in, and the place was furnished with top notch stuff, he didn't have much else to spend his paycheck on. Rude gave the living room a look around, sidestepping empty Chinese food cartons and crumpled beer cans. It was pretty apparent Reno hadn't let the cleaning lady in for a while. There was a week's worth of garbage piled by the front door, though it was only five steps or so to the bin out front. Rude just didn't understand slobs.

The armoury the man now stepped into was more like a pantry. In fact, it was a pantry. A Jericho 941 pistol had been

tossed carelessly into a stack of instant ramen boxes. The sugar bowl held a mixture of sugar and assorted caliber rounds. Rude peered into the breadbox, expecting to see knives or something. Surprisingly it held bread. And an exceptionally large Bowie blade.

"So, do you need anything?" Reno asked, entering the pantry with a rag to his head.

"Nah, I'm set." They'd gone to Rude's place earlier and he'd retrieved a shotgun which now hung threateningly at his back. Reno shrugged and grabbed a freshly charged battery off a shelf, slamming it into his nightstick. He tucked a glock away in his concealed holster and then checked on the triggering mechanisms in the hidden knives stuck up his sleeves.

"I'm going to send that Jenova bitch back to hell," the red-haired man muttered as he worked. "Heh, to think that before all this shit started, I was griping to Cloud about how bored I was. Ask and ye shall receive, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow's going to be a blood fest, you know that, right?"

Rude nodded, eyes hidden behind his shades. Reno looked to him, his face uncharacteristically solemn.

"You do know that it's her or me, right?"

"Or me," Rude added, nearly smiling. Reno slammed him on the back heartily.

"Gods, I wish Tseng and Elena were here, it'd be like the old days. Her makin' eyes at him, Tseng on my case, you the stoic, silent one forever talking with your fists, and me cocky as you please. Shinra wasn't all evil, was it, man? I mean, we did some shitty things, but how could something so satisfying be so evil?"

Rude shrugged, gaze unwavering.

"D'you ever think about it?" Reno asked, weapons secured and leaning with crossed arms against the back wall of the pantry, "What it was we were doing, I mean. We were only doing our jobs, right? We heeded the beck and call of the money men and let them have consciences, right? Tseng didn't make the decisions, didn't give the orders. . . it was Shinra."

"It was Shinra," Rude said with a nod.

"Yeah. . ." Reno frowned, eyeing the ground. "Seeing Tifa today. Man, I hadn't seen her in so long. She hates my guts, you know that?"

"At the Christmas party last year she left the room the minute you walked in, even though you were wearing that Santa costume. I hardly recognized you myself but she did, enough to cross her arms and walk out."

"A Santa costume? I don't remember that. . ." Reno said, looking up.

"You were pretty wasted."

"Oh."

"But yeah, I think she hates you."

"You know why, right?"

Rude nodded, knowing full well what ate his friend up inside. Reno glanced down at one hand suddenly with bloodshot eyes, moving his fingers about as though he couldn't believe they were there. "I pushed that button," he said, answering his own question, saying the words out loud though they were unnecessary, "I did it. I made that rotted plate fall. All those people. . . well, it doesn't matter now, that's in the past. And as you said, man, it was Shinra. Not me."

Whatever lets you sleep at night, Rude thought darkly. Out loud he only said, "Yeah, it was Shinra."

"Howard, he was a good guy," Reno remarked suddenly, "They all were good guards. They didn't deserve what they got. Do you think it would have mattered if we'd bothered to check out that gap we saw in the wall last night? You know, when Berk wanted to go and we shrugged him off? Wouldn't have mattered, right? Nah, I don't think so. We'd be just as dead as they are now. And what good would we be then, eh? How could we avenge them then? Gods, I need a drink. Not a stick of gum, Rude, a goddamned drink."

"Haven't you had enough? You made an ass of yourself back at that apartment."

"You think I care?" he asked, pushing himself off the wall and exiting the pantry with violent footsteps. Rude followed him, hands in his pockets. "I don't know why we have to work with those assholes anyway. It's rather wrong don't you think, rather fuckin' weird joining with people we would have taken out years ago. If it wasn't for Cloud. . ."

"Cloud is one of them, why don't you feel strange helping him?"

"That's different," Reno said weakly, throwing himself on his sofa and leaning back on a pile of dirty laundry for some reason piled there, "Cloud's like. . . Cloud. He ain't egotistical and he won't judge a person he doesn't know. Cloud's a good guy, good fighter. If Tseng'd gotten to him in time years ago, he would have made a great Turk. I don't know what he ever

saw in that passel of losers."

Rude shrugged, listening to the storm outside absently. He didn't really mind Barret, Cid and that lot. He was rather apathetic towards whoever he had to work with to get a job done. All he knew was that he felt terribly eager to get this particular job done and over with as soon as possible. Reno wasn't the only one who'd been hurt by the death of those security guards. No one fucked with Shinra personnel and got away with it. That was just Turk policy.

"But we are going in there tomorrow morning, right? If their little plan to break the barrier works?"

Reno nodded wearily, wishing he could shut his eyes and pass out right there. He groped a hand towards his coffee table and grabbed a half empty can of beer. It was warm and flat but he downed it in one gulp. "God help Jenova," he said bitterly, his right hand going unconsciously towards his gun, "'Cause the devil's coming to call."

Rude let half a smile play over his lips. When Reno got dramatic, things got dangerous. A peal of thunder made him jerk his head towards the window and he eyed the remains of the struck tree out front soberly. This storm could seriously hamper their plans tomorrow. He hoped Marlene and the rest were accounting for it. "C'mon," he said to Reno who glared at him from half-lowered eyelids, "We need to go check in with the President before two."

"The president. . ." Reno mumbled, getting stiffly to his feet, "Why don't you call him friggin' Reeve? I swear, Rude, if you were any stiffer I'd have to de-starch you."

"While this suit's on, he's the president of the corporation I work for, you know that."

"Yeah, yeah. Sometimes I'm glad I'm not a fucking Turk anymore. Decorum always rubbed me the wrong way. You think he's still at headquarters? Huh, what am I askin'. . . he won't leave that cafe until he can step into the lobby, take the elevator up to the seventieth floor, and pour himself a glass of scotch from the bottle in his desk. If there's a bigger Shinra freak than you, my friend, Reeve is it. Heh. Damned loyalties to damned ideas. Loyalties to things you can't even hold in your hand. I don't get it."

"Let's go," Rude said impatiently, throwing the front door open and stepping into the maelstrom. Reno tossed the battling nature outside an evil glare and followed, disconnecting the wires in his electromagnetic nightstick with a petulant hand. It would rather suck to electrocute himself before he got to slam the business end of the weapon into Jenova's jaw and depress the button. The smell of burning flesh was one he'd learned to love over the years. He only hoped Jenova had flesh to burn. Ah, it didn't matter what she was, Reno was convinced he'd find a way to make her scream. Make her pay.

The fat drops struck at the two men mercilessly as they walked the dimly lit streets. The cobblestones were slick beneath the smooth soles of their dress shoes and they tread carefully, sunglasses down to hide their identities, Reno having donned a black trench coat whose hem nipped at his heels as he walked. Rain streaked down their faces, ones strained with their own thoughts. No one was out on the street in the storm and they passed through the city unheeded, heading towards the glow of blue emanating from its center. Everything was dead but the rain. Everything was black, colorless except for the flashing of light and hue that the drops emitted. Midgar seemed desolate and washed out.

Tifa woke with a start, her head slipping from the weary hand that had been propping it up. She was seated in the dark, silent front room of the inn, the one Reeve had bought for her. It boasted a perfect outlook onto the black, storm-wracked city outside, the window large and uncurtained. Recently uncurtained anyway, she'd taken the floral print hangings off the hooks herself to better the view. She glanced at the glowing LCD display of the clock behind her. The blocky red numbers screamed that she needed to be asleep. She would be of no use to the others in the morning if she couldn't even keep her eyes open.

It rather alarmed her that it was still raining. Not only raining, but frigging storming with a bloody fury. She pressed a bare hand against the cold glass, as though to absorb the energy of the drops that assaulted it, wishing to be able to draw such strength into herself. She felt so zapped out, she had trouble even keeping her head up, every part of her ached in exhaustion for no particular reason. Reeve had left her around nine o'clock, off to take up Shinra's battles again. He thought he'd had it bad with those investors, they at least, had been tangible, manageable. Now he couldn't even see the threat to his company, he could only imagine that long-tailed, winged beast they'd battled years before. And when the image of the thing he could've sworn they'd butchered sprang into his mind, it all seemed nuts.

For what seemed the hundredth time that day, Tifa ran her eyes over the length of the Shinra building, over the gently humming, brightly blue barrier surrounding it. She wasn't sure why, but she felt suddenly at peace with the whole situation, as though she were a mourner who'd finally moved into acceptance of the death she was grieving over. A tear rolled down her cheek and she brushed it away, not sure why she was crying if she didn't feel sad.

Something's going to happen, her heart whispered. Something good maybe. Perhaps something bad. But something. And after it's over, things will never be the same again.

Suddenly, she found Cloud's name on her lips and she licked them, as though to taste the sweet flavor of his mouth

when she kissed him. Bright eyes wet with tears she stared at the building through the rain, almost able to feel his presence, feel his hands on her face. Smiling for a reason she didn't comprehend, smiling because she'd cried so much it didn't mean anything anymore, she laid her head in her hands and waited. Waited patiently for that "something".

On the sixty-eighth floor of the building so far above Tifa's window, the rain hadn't so far to fall. It slapped against the electrical barrier with a hissing sound, sending steam and flecks of water through the gash in the wall and into the darkened labs within.

There is no describing rain, Vincent thought, eyes closed, breathing in the smell of the storm, There's nothing to say. If one wants to know what rain is, go walk in it. Go and try to hold it, savour it on your cheeks, bottle it in your head. It's impossible. Rain is something no memory can hold. It's a million trills, a thousand fingers through your hair, infinite hands stroking your brow. It is everyone's mother and sister to the world. It will not stay bottled in the hall of a head of dusty corners and shelves thick with webs. Want to remember rain? Go and stand in it.

All experiences. I wonder if it might be best if all were like the rain? No memories. Only shadows doing nothing but reminding us of the things there are to remember.

The pattering of water drops, the belligerent sound of thunder, the relentless glaring of lightening; Vincent sat in the mako chamber trying to imagine he was out in the thick of it. Water running down his chest, sticking his thick hair to his scalp. But no. He found he couldn't remember it vividly enough to satisfy himself, or to truly leave his real surroundings behind. Were all memories like that then? He supposed so. The mind could only do so much. It was the pang of the actual experience that held the most weight. Remembering rain. . . his efforts were wasted.

He turned his gaze down to his right arm laying splayed on the chamber floor and smiled weakly. Hojo could do what he would to him now. He'd managed to hurt the scientist, hurt him in a small way granted, but Chaos had wrapped his demon claws around his neck and squeezed. He only wished he'd been in control when it had happened and been able to feel Hojo's futile breaths trying to struggle past the constricting grip, felt the gurgling windpipe beneath his strength, seen a rare look of surprise as it claimed the man's twisted face. It was one of the only times he'd been glad to let the monster within take control.

His arm throbbed. The dim blue light glinted off the wet, exposed bone and muscle. It was truly a new experience in pain. Vincent squirmed about uncomfortably. It'd bled a small puddle inside the chamber and his pant legs were stiff with red. As a lesson, Hojo wasn't healing him. Hmph. Vincent was glad.

"Valentine!"

The hissed, low voice sounded in his hear and he glanced up. Neto's mouse-ish face was framed in the broken chamber window. The WDD Head looked down at him fearfully.

"Hojo's in back, I need to talk to you."

"I'm listening, Dr. Neto."

Vincent shifted to a more comfortable position, leaning his heavy head against the wall. Loss of blood was making him dizzy but he pushed it aside impatiently.

"I have a plan, "Neto said in half excitement, half fear, "I've been thinking about that electrical force field outside and --"

"An electrical barrier, is that what it is?"

"Yes, I've already tested it and it's power is quite deadly. It must be what's keeping help from coming. I can't see outside but I'm sure all of Midgar must be gathered around the building, don't you think? Anyway, it must be that Jenova thing that's powering it. If we can somehow distract her, or even kill her, than the barrier will dissolve and we can expect rescue."

Vincent smiled smally and looked away, ignoring the man and listening to the rain again.

"What's the matter? Don't you want to get out of here? Help me take down this force field, Valentine! You're one of the saviours of the world, it's your responsibility!"

"Why don't you let me out, Dr. Neto?"

The tech looked to Vincent with wide eyes and a sneer on his lips. "Why? Do you think you can take these freaks out yourself? With your arm stripped to the bone like that?"

"I could try. . . "

Neto shook his head. "No, that's pointless, it wouldn't happen. We have to let the others in here."

"You can't kill Jenova, "Vincent sighed, "Haven't you realized that by now?"

Neto sniggered in that scientific way he had, eyeing the man on the chamber floor cockily. "Professor Hojo said that Jenova was keeping you and Mr. Strife alive. Valentine, if I . . . if I were to attempt to kill one of you, er. . . it would distract

that thing and she'd have to vent her powers towards you and away from the barrier. It's taking all of her strength to keep this thing up, that's why I think she hasn't shown herself in the past few days. So if she has to refocus that strength, if only for a while. . . "

Vincent opened his eyes slightly wide in amused surprise. This little weasel of a scientist had some backbone after all. "Doctor, are you asking for my permission to kill me?"

"Well, "Neto began, averting his gaze, "Hojo said you couldn't die if Jenova didn't want you dead, so it wouldn't be permanent, and might not even work at all, I don't know. Mr. Valentine, you don't comprehend what he's planning. . . to do to you. He told me last night. It, it isn't pleasant. It isn't even sane. But Professor Hojo seems to follow an entirely different scientific dogma than anyone I've ever known. He also seemingly practices his own branch of study. Genetic alteration and mako and Jenova experimentation. It's like nothing I've ever heard of. The things that were formerly practiced in the Shinra laboratories always seemed like fantasies to me, like bed time stories made up to frighten children. But it was all true! How did his theories come about? How was he able to alter your cells and turn you into that creature? I feel strange admitting it to you, but I half wish I could learn more about his research and studies. Horrifying though it is, it's quite fascinating. I digress though."

A fanatic, Vincent thought mildly. "But you still haven't answered my question."

The man hesitated for a moment, then screwed his courage and suddenly spat, "I suppose the answer is yes. Do you have any other suggestions?"

Looking off into the darkness, Vincent went over Neto's words in his mind. He hadn't particularly thought about escape much in the past two days. It was rather a foreign concept, being caged in the Shinra building was something he was nearly accustomed to now. It was very difficult to work up the desire to save himself at all. He deserved the prison after his failure. But Cloud certainly didn't. Cloud. Vincent had to get him out of there and home to Tifa before it was too late. If it wasn't already. He immediately pushed the image of his friend out of his mind. It was too uncomfortable to even think about, too unfair. It seemed that Cloud had discovered madness was a sweet release. An escape from a world that saw fit to hurt the man in the most painful ways it could come up with. Vincent had to convince him there were things to stay sane for, things to stay human for. It was almost funny. Here one of the most misanthropic people on the Planet now had to convince one of the kindest, most humane men alive that humanity was worth fighting for. Vincent wagered that if Sephiroth was there, he'd be laughing his ass off. He wouldn't blame him either, it seemed that Jenova and the Planet were true little comedians in their own rights. Too bad their sense of humors were so damned sadistic.

"Do as you will, Doctor, "Vincent said finally, glad something was about to be done in the name of action. Neto could blow his frigging head off if it meant that maybe someone would come.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Turk? Peaceful easy liberation. Sorry, not this time."

He looked up and without surprise saw Hojo. Neto was gripped tightly in one of his arms, looking pale and shaken. In his other hand was a rifle. Yellowed eyes smoldering in the darkness, the scientist flung Neto away and into a wall, hefting the weapon in both hands. Vincent only stared on indifferently.

"Plotting behind my back. Naughty, naughty, ungrateful fellows. I attempt to grab a nap and I come out here to this. . . just as well. I was getting bored. Sleep is a waste of time, I've always thought so. Why waste the hours beneath the darkness of lowered lids when one can be in the world, altering it, changing it, making it better, more efficient. Why spend time in the grip of unconsciousness only dreaming of what could be, when one can be out making it?"

Hojo's gaze locked with Vincent's, the latter feeling too defeated to even throw a useless threat at the other man. Maybe he would really kill him with that rifle. A rather unspectacular ending to it all but at least it would be an ending. Hojo's head cocked a bit to one side suddenly as a peal of thunder caught his attention. He gave Vincent a quick wink and remarked, "This is mad scientist weather. How apropos."

Laughing so hard he had trouble keeping his breath, Hojo braced himself and fired. There was a sharp snap, a burst of compressed air and Vincent felt a sting in his neck. Manipulating the fingers of his claw, he plucked a tranquilizer dart from the skin right around his jugular, distractedly thinking that Hojo had rather good aim, and then flung it away, hearing it clatter from what sounded like a million feet off. He had to fight a moan, disappointed that it wasn't a bullet.

"I don't want to be under your scalpel again, Professor."

His voice sounded washed out and weak. His vision swirled into a dizzying whirlpool before his eyes. The last thing he saw before Hojo's potent drugs did their work and blackness claimed his mind was his own devil's face, yellow eyes laughing.

The laughter was a frightening sound that Neto tried to ignore as he lay playing dead at the base of the wall. He opened one eye and saw Hojo had flung open the door to the mako chamber and now was hauling the unconscious Vincent

Valentine out by the excess of his torn cloak, chuckling all the while. Using the tentacles sprouted from his body, ones that were much stronger than they seemed, he grabbed the man by the arms and tossed him onto the steel table opposite Cloud's.

"Neto, if you wish to be redeemed in my eyes, I would advise you get over here and assist me."

The WDD Head was on his feet in a flash. He would bide his time. He would be free of this place whenever Hojo left the room again. He'd already discovered a rather massive gun with the words "Death Penalty" inscribed in the stock hidden away back in the menagerie. It was loaded and ready and concealed in one of the lab's drawers, ready to help Neto blast his way to freedom. And to do so would be so easy, all he had to do was. . . kill one of those men on the tables. Neto swallowed hard. No use thinking about that now, he told himself, he would cross that bridge soon enough.

Under Hojo's direction, Neto went to work prepping Valentine for what the scientist had told him were "necessary improvements". He cut the man's shirt away, and set up an IV in his exposed arm. He'd interned in a hospital during graduate school and at least knew enough to be somewhat useful to Hojo. Useful was good, the young tech thought, useful kept him alive. Still, his conscience nagged at him as he worked, as Vincent's almost peaceful face lay there in the harsh fluorescent light, nearly rebuking him for his cowardice.

It's not my fault, Neto thought, He should have never come up here. I should have never come up here. Shiva, help us all.

After a few minutes of staring at the tech's actions with crossed arms, Hojo stepped forward and ran a critical eye over Vincent's pale form, laid out like a slab of meat under the lights. He moved a strand of blood-caked hair off the man's forehead, distastefully flinging it back away with the rest.

"Gods above, does this ever bring back memories, "he whispered, ignoring Neto who only stared on fearfully, "Vincent Valentine, lecherous Turk again in my operating room, looking like he always did. Well, except for that claw. And this unkempt hair. And these vampiric clothes. A real Turk was never seen in such tatters. Always the suit. Always neat and efficient. Maybe that's what she saw in you." Hojo had grabbed a few syringes off a previously arranged tray. He now began injecting them into the IV line, vials of dark liquid that he was very careful not to spill upon himself. A shriek of thunder nearly made his already trembling hands shake the needle into his own flesh. "I nearly felt pity for you years ago. You were so naive. You were older than me, but still so naive. Someone had to wake you up, show you that just because you were handsome and mysterious and suave that it didn't mean you automatically got what you wanted out of life. Just because you wanted her didn't mean you could have her. That was why I had to do those things to you. Knowing that your looks were worthless, you didn't need them anymore. Knowing that that face of yours could do nothing to bring her back, that she could never see your big beautiful brown eyes again, I did you a favor and never let you see them either. I gave you a link, Vincent. I let you live yet killed you, so that for all time you'd have a link with her. Both dead. That unrequited love you both shared, dead but preserved. Sealed away in wooden boxes. You should have never left yours, Turk. You were never meant to. If you hadn't, I wouldn't be about to do this. You'd still be dreaming. Dreaming of yesterday. Of her. Dream of her now while you can, my friend. For when you awaken, the nightmare begins."

~\*~

Onward to Part Six: Now Wakes the Owl, Now Sleeps the Swan

I probably should have named this too-long chapter "Depressed people with some rain thrown in". Poor everybody, everyone's just feeling sorry for themselves, but at least the kids are alright. For now anyway, heh heh. Not a horribly action-packed part, I know, but I'm building up, peeps, I'm building up. . . . Be forewarned, if you're going to go on straight to part six from here, be prepared to be either freaked out, disgusted, or totally absorbed. Email me with your comments, crits, whatever ^\_^