



Part Seven:
DUSK OVER MIDGAR

Soberly, Lenny the barkeep assessed the damages. Collapsed chairs, splintered tables, strewn cigarette butts, smashed liquor bottles and scattered, unconscious bodies. Fists stuck in his hips, he grinned. This wasn't nearly as bad as last Saturday night. But still, he surely hated Sunday mornings. Normal people spent them sleeping in, or hauling themselves to church. Lenny usually spent them with a broom in his hand and a scowl on his face, sweeping up his customers' messes and then shooing away those customers who'd gotten themselves knocked out the night before. There'd been quite a brawl last night. A group of bandaged reporters had staggered into the place, looking for people to sign a petition they were planning to mail to President Reeve requesting a new law that would grant the press complete protection from Shinra employees, who, as one of the little reporters had said "were sadistic, bullying psychopaths who could shove their 'no comment's' up their asses". The reporters hadn't known that Lenny's bar catered specifically to those "bullying psychopaths". Ugh, the carnage was something else.

He jabbed the toe of one shoe into a trench coated young photographer laying on his side in a puddle of cheap scotch. The guy didn't move a muscle. Lenny sighed and decided to go for a walk. Maybe when he came back they all would have cleared out. Or have died, and then he could just chuck their lifeless bodies out the door. One or the other, he wasn't particular.

It was startlingly cold outside. The barkeep figured the storm that'd ravaged the city the night before must have been the head of a cold front. Even for November, it was just damned cold. Lenny stuck his hands in his pockets, keeping his arms close to his sides and his shoulders up around his ears. His breath billowed out before him in a cloud of white. Slouching against the front of his building, he surveyed the dark, empty streets. There were few people out at six in the morning on a Sunday, just paper boys and garbage men. He began ambling down the sidewalk casually. Chewing the side of his mouth, he played around with his steamy, visible breath, blowing shapes out of his nose. He watched it rising up, pale against the sky. It was sprinkling lightly, the clouds were over their little crying jag and now sobbed quietly, trying to forget whatever had upset them. Far in the east, Lenny saw the pretty pastels of dawn playing pink and purple off the remaining thunderheads. The sun's precursors were quite lovely, he thought, blowing breath upwards in an attempt to warm his chilly nose. Still, there was something odd about the color of the sky. It seemed too warm. The sky was always cold, no matter the shade, be it the stark blue of mid afternoon or the biting black of midnight. But now, it was a warm shade of blackish green. The blue was there too, always the blue, but still is looked odd to Lenny. He scanned the skies, looking towards the west, where it was still almost like night. There was a single star visible there in the distance. The barkeep watched it absently, wondering how it could still be glowing so brightly even with the sun so near to rising.

He pulled his hands from his pockets and rubbed them together slightly, blowing warm breath on his fingers to warm them, remembering when he was a kid and would light fires in the oil drums in Sector Seven to keep warm on mornings like this. That's what he needed was a fire. Something to push the chill away. Squinting, he peered up at that object in the sky again. The more he looked at it, the less it looked like a star. And with every passing second, it was growing brighter. Now, Lenny didn't consider himself to be the smartest guy in the world, but he knew for a fact that stars were supposed to fade as the sun rose, not get bloody brighter. This was just cock-eyed.

"Yo, Lenny, you seein' that?"

The barkeep looked over at his neighbor Jack who owned the pharmacy next door. He was staring up at the star with one hand shielding his eyes from the glow of the still illuminated street lamps. Lenny mimicked his actions, noticing that nearly everyone else out on the street was looking up and mumbling questions. The paper boys had forgotten their deliveries, the garbage men stood with their hands poised to grab the handles of the trash bins, but their eyes were all turned up to the skies.

"Yeah, Jack, I see it."

"What d'you reckon it is?"

Lenny shook his head slowly. "I don't particularly like seeing strange things in the skies over Midgar. They seldom turn out to be anything good."

"Don't even think that. Don't ya know that's bad luck? God, it's nuts, it just keeps getting brighter. Doesn't have

anything on Meteor though. Nothing scares me after Meteor. That's probably just a plane or something."

"Yeah." Lenny didn't feel it necessary to point out that planes moved while this thing didn't or at least hadn't yet, but Jack knew that. Delusory reassurances were part of human nature and Lenny would let Jack have his. The man shrugged suddenly, turned, and unlocked his pharmacy, waving the star off dismissively.

"No time for this nonsense," Jack said, "It's just another day. The world isn't going to stand still for one little glowing thing in the sky."

Lenny nodded absently, unable to tear his eyes off the unnamed glow. He saw now that it was what was making the sky such a strange color. A color that grew more intense and more putridly yellow with every passing minute. "Yeah," he muttered as Jack flipped the sign on his front door from Closed to Open, "But maybe it should."

~*~

"Rude, c'mon, buddy. Rude, don't you stop breathing, I'll. . . I'll have Tifa kick your ass. Dammit, what's wrong with him? I've seen him take a cinder block to the jaw and laugh it off," Reno growled helplessly, gently slapping his friend's face. Rude's head only lolled unhealthily to one side, teeth clenched, eyes shut so tight that tears glistened at their corners. Reeve stood over him, pressing the excess of Rude's sports coat to the front of his chest where Chieko's claw marks had torn into him. They weren't bleeding that much and all told were not very serious injuries. Reeve didn't know why the man now seemed in so much pain. Why his heart had quit just a few seconds ago and he'd had to administer CPR while Reno'd looked on, swearing profusely in his panic. The Shinra President thanked god it had worked.

Tifa shot a glance to the two men. She'd plopped herself in the passenger seat besides the stoic helicopter pilot. Reno seemed about ready to choke someone in his frustration. But Reeve. . . despite Rude's condition, Tifa was surprised to see he couldn't keep his eyes on the man. Something outside was drawing his attention and his eyes constantly strayed through the small rear, chopper window.

"What's going on, Reeve? What was your big hurry back there?" she asked coolly, turning and leaning her elbow in the side of her seat. He looked up at her in incomprehension, then shook his head fiercely, trying to keep his attention on Rude.

"I called Ikari and had him wake Lieutenant Mannik over there. It took him a while to scramble a chopper and send it over from the airfield. I- I figured. . . well, dammit, I didn't know what to figure, I just decided that I couldn't remain standing and staring up at the building as it continued to devour all my friends. Right before the chopper arrived. . . I. . . I saw something that made me know it was all over."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Reno growled. His voice was so violent and filled with fury that Reeve flinched. There was something helpless in his aqua-colored eyes, something Reeve had never seen before. The Shinra President shook his head slowly, pressing the jacket hard into Rude's wounds, probably harder than necessary.

"I don't think I can say it without going into fits. Look for yourself." He flicked his head towards the window he'd been looking out of and Reno got unsteadily to his feet, wavering as the chopper shot forward. He leaned against the vehicle's side and craned his neck to look. He felt Tifa close behind him, peeping over his shoulder. Upon glancing back towards the Shinra building they were speeding away from, Reno suddenly realized what Reeve had meant.

There was an intensely bright blueish-green glow pulsating roughly five hundred feet above the roof of the towers. Embedded in the center of that glow like a finely-cut jewel in a silver setting, was Cloud Strife. It was hard to make the man out from this distance, but Reno saw he was standing straight and tall, every muscle tensed, his mussed blonde hair moving gently in the breeze. Reno couldn't tell what expression was on his face, but it was easy to see he had his gaze pointed towards the Shinra building. Crackles of power ran over his body, power that seemed to be mounting.

"He's gonna blow it up, isn't he?"

Tifa looked to her husband's partner as though she'd throw an uppercut into his jaw if she thought she could get away with it. Eyes hard, she shoved him violently out of the way and peered out the window, nearly clawing at the glass. "He won't do it," she insisted angrily, "He's going to snap out of it. He's going to. . ."

"Why is he acting like this? Like blasted Sephiroth?" Reeve demanded, face drawn.

"It isn't him," Tifa corrected, not taking her eyes off Cloud's almost divinely lit form, "This is Jenova. It's Jenova, god dammit."

"How can you be so sure?" Reno snarled, "He was himself enough to apologize to you. He was himself enough not to blow us all away back inside."

"Shut up, Reno!" Tifa fairly screamed, "This is Jenova! It's that bitch who's out there making him do this, it's not my Cloud! Reeve, turn around, we have to get to him, we have to help him!"

The president looked up at his friend, nearly incoherent in her panic. Her eyes pleaded with him so sincerely, so desperately he nearly told the pilot to head back the way they'd come and straight towards the vengeful specter in the sky. He wanted to do that. He wanted to see Tifa mutter a few loving words to Cloud and have everything go back to how it should be. A part of him, a naive part of him perhaps, was totally unable to comprehend why this wasn't possible.

"Do you think he's gonna just let us prance right up and have a chat with him?" Reno asked, looking first to Reeve, then shooting a quick, infuriated glance to Tifa, "Cloud's hard enough to talk to when he's sane."

That was enough for Tifa. Giving a short, animalistic snarl, she socked Reno hard in the face, sending the man flying backwards against the wall.

"Damn, Reno, seems you're a regular fist magnet today," Reeve commented, looking on a little dazedly as his friend blinked hard, leaning up from the floor on two petulant elbows.

"What the hell was that for, Tifa?" he asked, getting shakily to his feet, a hand to his jaw. The split lip that Rude had given him a few hours ago was bleeding fresh, a line of crimson running down his stubbled chin. "All I did was tell the truth!"

Reeve was standing by Tifa's side suddenly, a restraining arm before her as she nearly lunged again. Her frustration was turning her belligerent and violent. More so than usual anyway.

"Calm down," the president ordered, "Fighting each other is not going to help anything. Tifa, control yourself, we're going to do everything we can to help Cloud and Vince. . . hey, where is Vincent, did you find him up there?"

Stretching her self-control to the breaking point, Tifa lowered her fists, impaling Reno with a murderous gaze instead of a heel in his chin as she would have liked. "We didn't really see him up there, I don't know, there was --"

The rest of her words were left unspoken as the helicopter gave a sudden lurch, throwing all of its passengers to the floor. Reeve fell onto Rude and the two of them rolled backwards, smack into the rear bulkhead of the chopper, the president trying to cushion his unconscious employee's head from knocking into anything. Tifa gave a cry as she fell on top of them, followed by a cursing Reno and his bony elbow, jabbing her painfully in the gut. She wondered briefly whether it was an accident or not.

"Lieutenant Mannik! What's going on?" Reeve demanded, trying to get to his feet but failing miserably, Rude rolling right back onto him and getting blood on the front of his shirt. The Shinra pilot glanced back at his president, hands clasp the chopper controls desperately as the entire craft bucked and nearly flipped itself upside-down.

"I'm not sure, sir! Seems like torrential wind shear. I-- I think it's being thrown off by that light back there. Damn! I can't control her!"

The helicopter lurched forward in the air then was jerked sharply back, like a dog on his sadistic master's leash. Tifa grabbed at the edge of the passenger seat and pulled herself to a standing position, then into the chair, immediately strapping herself in. She had something clutched in her right hand. Something she'd pulled from Reno's jacket as he'd briefly lain across her.

"Turn this helicopter around, Lieutenant," she said calmly, cocking the pistol in her hand and waving it suggestively. She didn't point it at the pilot, but there was something in her voice that let the young man know she wouldn't hesitate to if he didn't comply. Reeve looked on in horror, clutching at a handle sticking out of the chopper's wall and leaning his weight on it to keep himself standing. Reno remained on the floor, rolling Rude onto his back and trying to keep him from banging around. Great, he thought contemptuously, now she's snapped too. A bloody matched set.

"Tifa, what are you doing?"

"I think it's pretty obvious. Cloud needs me. Turn around and take me to him. Now." The president watched her lift the heavy semi-automatic ever so slightly in the pilot's direction. He had no doubt she knew how to use it. She'd spent five years of her life living in the Sector Seven slums after all.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Mannik asked, voice cool, hands still gripping the controls of the convulsing craft. He was a young fellow, in his mid-twenties with curly black hair and small green eyes. He'd been an enlisted man in Shinra's reserves for three years and brought home a damned good paycheck. He wasn't about to throw it away because some broad was flinging a gun in his face. He'd let his president decide whether the young pilot would live or die that day. Reeve didn't exactly appreciate the honor. Luckily for him, he never had to make a decision.

The helicopter lurched again, nearly giving those two in the front seats whiplash and sending Reeve, Reno, and Rude all tumbling back into the wall. Forgetting Tifa, the pilot struggled to keep his vehicle in the air, racing to remember emergency procedures from flight school. A rumble of something like thunder made them all jerk their heads around to

stare at the air in their wake. For a moment, Reeve figured the storm was about to pick up again. But no. This thunder had come from the north while the remainder of the storm hung heavy in the skies to the south of the city. This wasn't thunder, this was something else. Something horrifying.

"No, Cloud, don't. . ." Tifa whispered, dropping the gun and unbuckling her seat belt. She staggered from her seat and fell against the rear wall, face pressed to the window. Cloud was suddenly nowhere to be seen. He'd been engulfed in his own immense power. It filled the skies, a sickly orange color as though the angels above had been ill all over the heavens. Reeve flung himself at Tifa's side, staring out the window with his chin nearly on the floor.

"My company," he moaned, "Oh god, no."

They looked on with pale faces as the mako energy suddenly focused into a single lethal beam of gold. The Shinra building stood there in the sky, a pinnacle of power, money, and, even now, corruption. It didn't matter that Reeve and the other reformers had put thirteen years into turning the company into something to be respected and not feared. It didn't matter that the building had stood for nearly seventy years, that it had made billions upon billions of gil in revenue, that it had housed geniuses and diplomats and four generations of presidents; the extravagant receptions, the parties, the meetings, the gut-wrenching, nauseating experiments that had been conducted in its bowels; Diamond Weapon's beam couldn't break its foundations; Meteor's fury couldn't make it fall. In all its misguidedness, it seemed nearly like the epitome of mankind's power, of their dominion over the Planet and over each other. The entire city of Midgar stood still as the golden power tore into its symbol. The energy, composed of Jenova, the Planet, and one man's anger, consumed the structure, throwing a ripple of crackling gold in a half mile radius around it. For just a moment, the building sat, silent, engulfed in the blaze. And then the silence ended.

"Son of a bitch--"

The explosion was deafening. It struck at the base of the building, shooting ten foot square blocks of concrete out and away like flicks of dust. Every pane of glass shattered, raining down on anyone unfortunate enough to be in the streets and gazing up. Screams filled the air after the initial blast throbbed away, because now, with a huge crater torn in its bottom quarter, the majestic Shinra towers began to sway.

~*~

"What the hell was that??"

Lenny stood with his hands in his pockets as Jack ran back out of his store, panic on his red-splotched face. The barkeep gestured loosely to the sky. The entire heavens blazed gold. The Shinra building stood crippled against them, at a seventy-five degree angle, tipping back towards Sector Three. Jack froze, gaping, and all about, darkened windows lit up and heads peeped out. The city was waking up to a nightmare.

Lenny continued to stare, an almost thoughtful look on his face.

"Someone needs to yell 'timber' really loud."

~*~

"No. No."

Reeve pressed his forehead against the glass, gripping the upraised frame tightly. Tifa reeled on her feet, eyes unbelieving as the Shinra building continued to slide backwards, the snapping of steel girders like fireworks in the air. She strained her eyes to see Cloud and was not pleased to find him suddenly plummeting from the sky like a struck bird, the glow about his body gone.

"Cloud!" she gasped, trying to see outside over Reeve's trembling shoulder, "Can't we--? I mean--"

"I think he can take care of himself," Reno snapped, giving her a dark glare and frowning so deeply it hurt his face. He punched Reeve hard in the small of his back until the man looked around, his face ashen and drawn. "We need to evacuate Sector Three, Mr. President. And we need to do it now."

Reeve stared at Reno in utter incomprehension, the noises of his towers buckling and snapping in his ears, the glare of the golden flash still half-blinding him. "Evacuate. . . ?" he muttered, blinking hard, struggling to keep control from slipping between his fingers. Reno smacked him hard across the face, leaving a bright glaring hand mark on his cheek. That did it. He came alive with fire in his dark eyes and stumbled towards the pilot.

"Ground," he said, flinging himself into the passenger seat, "Ground. Ground. Ground. Now, now, now, now, now!"

"Yes, sir!" Lieutenant Mannik nodded, anticipating his president's orders and steering hard for Sector Three. The morning sun was just peeping its timid orange head over the horizon. Its glow lit up the crippled building, and it cast its black shadow hard behind it. Tifa remained at the window, searching desperately for any sign of her husband. He'd fallen from sight, as though the expenditure of power had been too much for him. Laying her trembling fingers against the cold glass, Tifa stroked its smooth surface tenderly, as though rubbing Cloud's tired brow, as she'd so often done when he'd come home tired, or frustrated from work or from the battles of years ago. Her rusty-colored eyes bright with unshed tears, she gazed at the skies, the skies he'd dyed golden with his power, and almost saw them as a gift to her. Despite their eeriness, they were quite beautiful.

Reno glanced up from Rude's side, looking towards the woman with hostility, glad he hadn't seen and only heard and felt the explosion from his position on the floor. He had too many horrible images collected in his mind he could call upon at random without another one added into the mix. Noticing the expression on Tifa though, his own angry gaze softened.

"I guess. . ." he began, his voice uncharacteristically gentle, "I guess I'll have to find a new job."

It was meant to be a joke. Reno wasn't really sure how to comfort anyone with anything but humor, even lame, inappropriate humor. "He coulda just said, "I quit" or something. He didn't have to blow it all away." The man winced as the snapping sounds of the slowly collapsing building thundered in the air. He opened his eyes to find Tifa gazing at him and smiling weakly.

"But Cloud's never been one for subtlety, has he?" she asked, a catch in her voice. Reno shook his head, looking back down at Rude's still form to avert her eyes, "Oh, gods, doesn't he realize he doesn't have to do this? I have to tell him that CJ and Ifalna are alright. That. . . that it was the Planet that saved them, it didn't kill them. Damn you, Jenova. . . how can you be putting him through this? God damn you!" She pounded a gloved fist against the glass, teeth grinding in fury. "If it's the last thing I do, I swear I'll get back at that thing for this. I don't care what she is, I don't care about that theory of Red's. . . she can and will be destroyed! She's not going to make a murderer out of him."

Reno put a hand to his weary forehead, shutting his eyes for a moment, trying to make the events of the last half hour sink in. The helicopter zipped forward in something approaching blind panic.

"You're right, Tifa," he said in a low, strained voice, "She's not going to. We're not gonna let her."

~*~

The LifeStream was roaring. The green sea frothed and beat on itself in endless waves of agitation. The power behind each swell seemed to be a single word. It echoed off of the place's invisible walls, it mixed with the mako and formed fury, shouted in the voices of infinite different entities: Jenova. The name was the catalyst of the Planet's desire for vengeance. And it was the object of that vengeance.

"Let me help you!"

The green did not heed this cry, it only felt a twinge of fear upon hearing it. The voice had bellowed out the same phrase for what seemed forever, and never once did the LifeStream answer. To do so would've seemed like madness. To listen to, to accept the assistance of a human who had tried to destroy the Planet years ago was insane. No matter how strong, even in death, that human still was.

Sephiroth shuddered, feeling the Planet's hatred towards him emanating from all sides. Even after thirteen years in his self-forged hell, the fact that life itself held him in such fear, such contempt, made him feel worse than any guilt ever could. Sephiroth, in his ignorance, had sided with Death. And now even though he had realized the truth, there could be no going back. He would for all time be labeled as Jenova's puppet. Jenova's servant. Jenova's son. It was no comfort to know that now he had two others to share in his misery. He knew they were above him now, toiling under the same dark orders he'd received years before. He knew so well of that pain, of being broken and then reshaped into something you didn't want to be. Fear and hatred in the eyes of everyone. But that was nothing. The worst was when you came to depend upon that fear and hatred, when it became a part of you, when it became easy and expected because it was so much simpler to deal with than anything else. If someone hated you, you simply shoved your sword through them and shut them up. You acted on passion and instinct without thinking because thinking was too hard and hurt too much. You relied on madness to make the hurts of the world easier to bear.

"Let me help you!"

The LifeStream ignored his plea, mumbling on in its incoherent language. The mako beast was dead. Its crafted warrior had been easily slain by Jenova's power, leaving mako enough within it only to save Cloud Strife's children. Saving those lives had been the beast's decision, the Planet had had nothing to do with it and the omnipotent entity knew not the

reasons its son had chosen to prolong two lives when customarily it so enjoyed halting them. Perhaps because Cloud had sworn an oath to kill Jenova, not knowing that his power to do such a thing was very short-lived. Perhaps because those children had been innocents and the misbegotten beast had a sense of right and wrong in his leashed brain. The reasons were unknown to the Planet. But in all truth, it really didn't care. It only knew that Jenova was rapidly gaining in strength and that she had two new warriors to fight for her side. The dark power that could destroy the entire world held the upper hand over Life. And so the Planet raged.

Sephiroth made his offer again, louder, more forceful. He realized only too deeply what was happening in the world of humanity. The two men involved were well known to him. Vincent had been a love of his mother's, his true mother. He'd fought him like any common man thirteen years before, not realizing the link. When he thought about it now, he wished he could find Vincent and ask him about Lucrecia. About what she'd been like, about her laugh, about her personality, her features, maybe ask what color hair she'd had. And then maybe ask a question that never left his mind, that tortured him incessantly: Why had Lucrecia agreed to have a baby with Hojo and then allowed him to be made into a monster? It was a question that screamed for an answer, that made him half-mad, even now when he considered it. Just what kind of woman had his real mother been? A cold scientist desiring selfish discovery just as much as his horrid father? Or an innocent who'd been victimized like every other person Hojo'd ever come in contact with. The thought that there'd once existed a person who'd loved him, truly loved him as a human being, loved him for nothing more than the fact that she'd given him life, this thought sometimes soothed his turmoil of a psyche. But was such a thought a fantasy? He wanted to know more than anything. His chance to know once and for all was waiting even now. Lucrecia had loved Vincent, Sephiroth knew that, and he deeply desired to help him, if only for her sake. If only for his own sake so that he could, perhaps, ask his question.

As for Cloud Strife, it had been his home that Sephiroth had set ablaze in his madness, killing the boy's mother. He'd impaled the young guard on the end of his sword and then been thrown by him into the mako pit below, staring all the while in disbelief at the fury to be found in his snapping blue eyes. He'd hurt that man so indifferently all throughout those months Cloud had spent hunting him down. His actions burned at his conscience now, gnawed at his emotions, made him feel more like a monster than most of the crimes he'd committed. Because he'd done worse than kill Cloud. He'd ruined his entire life, he'd tortured him. Now that the man's darkest hour had come, he desired to keep Cloud from suffering the same fate that had befallen the great General Sephiroth. He had to keep Cloud from acquiring the same reputation. Jenova's son. Jenova's puppet.

He realized now that he didn't want to help the Planet. He didn't care at all about the Planet, not really. He wanted to help the humanity that he'd nearly destroyed. He wanted to preserve life.

"Do you hear that?" he called, "Sephiroth wants to preserve life, not take it. I'll wield Masamune against Jenova. If you'll only let me! Please! Damn you, if you don't accept my help, you deserve everything she throws your way. Do you hear me?"

The LifeStream thundered around him, churning furiously, infinite voices screaming protests, or agreements, or helpless cries. Finally, the screeching quelled and the brilliantly glowing green calmed. The Planet no longer had the Weapons of years ago. Ultima Weapon, Diamond, Ruby, all of them had been harnessed by Jenova and then destroyed. Unless it desired to sink quietly into the black of oblivion, the Planet needed a new Weapon, a new protector.

After over thirteen years, a smile spread across Sephiroth's ghostly thin lips.

"Thank you," he said, voice trembling in his gratitude, "Thank you."

~*~

Berk jerked awake, falling messily from his hard seat at the kitchen table. Before he even realized he'd gotten to his feet, he found himself in Marlene's living room, staring out her front window towards the center of the city. His ears were ringing and he didn't know why. At least he didn't until his vision adjusted and he was able to really take a good look outside.

"What was that horrible sound?" Nanaki demanded, galloping up to the ashen Turk. His one eye was open wide in unpleasant anticipation. He hopped up and leaned his fore paws on the window sill, peering through the light scrim of November frost on the panes, trying to keep his warm breath from fogging up the view. "I thought that Barret had come back and had the radio blasting or some--"

"No," Berk interrupted, blinking hard and rubbing recent sleep from his eyes. "Someone's blown up the Shinra building."

"WHAT?!"

Nanaki was outside before Berk could finish a yawn. He followed him out, stretching his shoulders and popping his spine. He'd fallen asleep at Marlene's kitchen table the night before with his forehead resting on his drawn gun. There was a mirror image of the word "Colt" in between his eyes. He rubbed at it irritably as he stood out front in the biting morning air, gazing up at the sight now souring his eyes. The atmosphere was strangely expectant, the gray buildings of Sector Three stood as though awaiting something grand. Or something terrible. Nanaki was frozen on the spot, looking at the smoking towers in the distance with his jaw hanging half open, eye narrowed against the bizarre bright coloring of the sky. Berk followed his gaze, trying to shake off the stupid, half-asleep feeling settled over his brain.

"The barrier's gone. . . "he breathed, beginning to really wake up. He pushed the palms of his hands into his eyes, suddenly convinced he was still dreaming, "Someone's blown up the Shinra building!!" He shouted these last words, finally comprehending. Nanaki shot him a glare. He didn't understand humans in the least.

"Are you alright?" the creature asked, his own low voice barely composed.

"I don't know." Berk put a hand to his head, which was beginning to throb intensely as a stress headache kicked in. He staggered backwards and it was only a sudden pair of strong hands that kept him from falling straight on his ass. He glanced behind and saw Marlene standing there, her hair dripping, a towel over one shoulder. She'd been in the shower and rushed out upon hearing the thunder of the explosion, throwing on the same clothes from the day before. She pushed Berk to his feet and he bit his lip hard to keep from turning red. He saw that Bugah had rushed from the apartment with her and now the Elder and his pupil both looked up where Nanaki was gesturing. Marlene nearly stumbled to the ground herself.

"We've woken up to armageddon, "she mumbled, "The barrier, the, the building, the sky. What's wrong with the sky?"

"Someone's cast a powerful spell, "Bugah murmured, staring at the towers thoughtfully, a hand to his wrinkled brow, "Is it my old eyes, or is that building getting closer?"

As though to answer his question, there was a sudden wailing screech in the distance, and a noise like a muted gunshot as a steel girder snapped in two. The massive building gave a pained groan and lurched further forward, a giant mountain taking a final bow. Its lengthy shadow stretched over Sector Three, desiring to consume it all.

"Oh shit, "Berk groaned, taking a step backwards and bumping into Marlene. The shadow blanketed them, covering and dimming the colors as though it had already stolen the Sector and its citizen's lives away. He looked down at his hands with a mildly panicked expression and shook them slightly, as though he could fling off the shadow from his flesh.

"It is coming closer, "he heard Nanaki say calmly, "It's going to topple."

Berk suddenly noticed other people out on the street, standing frozen to the sidewalks in shock. Low moans came to his ears as they realized what was happening, then the moans mounted to screams as the citizens of Sector Three began to panic. The formerly still air now played a tune composed of fear and promises as the people shouted and the threatening building screeched and roared. The young Turk seized a hold of his self-control and whipped about to face Bugah, Nanaki, and Marlene. Rude and Reno had left him in charge of their well-being and he'd be damned if he'd let them down.

"Listen, "he said, surprised at how calm he was able to suddenly make his voice though it would have been easy to slip into panic with the rest of the crowd, "That building's going to come crashing down and take out this entire area. Dammit, we're in the line of fire here, we need to stay focused! We have to get these people to evacuate."

"Evacuate to where?" Bugah snapped, "I don't give that thing another five minutes before it falls. Shiva help us, listen to it groan! We must worry about ourselves, Mr. Berk, there's no time to save everyone. Self-preservation is the law of the Planet."

Marlene heard the Elder's words and paled to nearly the same white as her towel.

"Five minutes isn't even enough time to get ourselves out," she whispered, "We're too near the center of the city. . . "

"Dammit, don't tell me that! C'mon!"

Berk frowned, gritting his teeth and began moving down the sidewalk, gesturing to the others to follow with a frantic arm.

"But I left the shower running--!"

The young man jogged back, grabbed Marlene's arm roughly and then shot forward again, Nanaki right on his heels with the Elder perched on his back and clutching his mane in a very undignified manner. He led them down the suddenly crowded sidewalks, pushing people aside and closing his ears to their confused screams and the shrieks of the collapsing building. He had to get them out of the thing's range. He had to get them away from the blasted shadow.

"Get out of here!" he hollered to the milling men, women, and children as he ran. He pushed them aside as gently as he could but his frustration began to mount at their blind fear and he shoved a few to the ground. "Evacuate to Sector

Four, you idiots!" He drew his gun and began firing it off into the air to grab their attention. "Evacuate! The Shinra Building's going to collapse and take this whole Sector out!" The sound of his gun only prodded their panic. He had to duck a punch some beefy guy threw at him, thinking the Turk a terrorist. Speeding forward desperately, Berk felt Marlene suddenly jab his hand with her fingernails and he released his hold on her, swearing violently.

"How can you be so cold-hearted?" she hissed when he'd skidded to a stop. She turned her back on him and suddenly shouted out at the top of her lungs, "Citizens of Sector Three! Follow the man in the blue suit to Sector Four! We'll lead you to safety!" The people were talking and yelling too loudly among themselves for her words to butt into their attention. They sailed uselessly past their ears. A panting Nanaki stood at Marlene's side, Bugah clawing at his mane. He eyed his friend curiously, admiring her courage, and without warning let loose a roar that shook the golden morning air, silencing the prattling people's shouts and screams. The crowd looked at him with startled eyes and he flicked his head towards Marlene, who threw him a grateful smile.

"We can escape the shadow if we all go now!" she said, looking away and shattering the sudden stillness. She ran a hand through her wet hair to clear it from her face, "Help each other and let us help you! Come on! Follow us!" Without another word, she took off, acting fast so the panicked people wouldn't have time to think or second guess her. Blinking hard, Berk ran after her, the flaps of his sports jacket billowing behind him, the snapping of the crumbling Shinra headquarters loud in his ears. A sizable gap of supporting wall gave way suddenly, a noise like the crumbling of a mountain filling the air and the building shifted a fair bit towards them, spewing rubble and glass. The crowd rushed past Berk, eager to follow Marlene's advice, but the Turk knew there were plenty of people still in the houses and shops they fled by. There were the elderly, too old or too tired to flee. There were people who hadn't been awoken or had shrugged off the sound of the explosion and gone back to sleep. There were so many, he thought with a frown, but there was so little time.

He caught up to Marlene, huffing loudly, and asked, "Where are you leading them?"

She didn't look up at him for a moment, but when she did, it was with a smile of reckless abandonment. "To Sector Four."

"But you said there wasn't time to escape."

"There isn't. But we can try. Do you want to die today?"

Berk grinned and shook his head. He tried to make his grin last but the shadow was growing larger. And darker. And the death rattle of the crumbling structure roared in his ears, increasingly frequent.

The young Turk glanced up as a helicopter roared overhead, the clean sound of its blades a marked contrast with the snapping of steel girders. There was a Shinra seal on its side but it was still too high for him to see who occupied it. He tapped Marlene on the shoulder and pointed up.

"That's nice," she said irritably, "But what the hell can they do for us? Faster, Mr. Berk, I think there may be someplace up ahead." She would have liked to elaborate but the air was too precious a thing and her lungs were already bursting. The young Turk just shrugged, his lungs ready to quit themselves. He wished to God he'd gone with Reno and Rude when they'd left the night before. Being crushed by a building seemed a stupid way to die.

"Any last prayers had best be uttered now. Here it comes."

Bugah's voice was surprisingly composed as he said these words. The old man's head was turned up to the sky as suddenly the magnificent Shinra building's base crumbled away completely, the last thin bit of wall left supporting it disintegrating under the structure's weight. With a terrible creak, a deafening roar, a noise unlike anything the people there had ever heard, the Shinra building began its long fall.

"Fuck!!" Berk skidded to a halt with horrified eyes as the people about him screamed bloody murder. Couples clutched each other and children cried, men were on their knees with clasped hands and eyes focused on the heavens, but Marlene merely shouted, "This way!! Now!" She took off running towards a massive warehouse just across the street, barging in the side exit and completely ignoring the plummeting box of concrete and steel. Debris rained down, massive chunks of masonry bashing potholes in the street. Berk sidestepped them, following the woman inside, Nanaki, Bugah, and some of the more clear-headed of Sector Three's citizens behind him. A thundering filled the air and the building blocked the sun so that the inside of the nearly empty warehouse seemed like a cardboard box in a hurricane. And, Berk thought fearfully, it would offer about as much protection. But Marlene thought differently. With a panicked expression on her pretty face, she darted towards the far wall of the warehouse, flinging open a hatch embedded there in the ground. A hatch leading to a concrete-lined, underground bunker. She dove inside, and Berk followed, amazed at the possibility that they might just survive.

Once inside, the two of them moved as far back against the bunker's rear wall as they could, to accommodate all those who'd followed them. As the last man scrambled through the hatch, or at least Berk hoped he'd been the last, everything

went suddenly dark and the world shook. A massive thundering reverberated in the air, a noise that deafened them all as the building found its final resting place, landing and shattering into immense chunks of architecture. Marlene, Berk, and the rest were thrown to their knees, crying out, expecting to be flattened at any moment. With her eyes pressed tightly shut, Marlene sobbed quietly, clutching her hands over her head like Bugah'd always told her to do during earthquakes in Cosmo Canyon. The sliding of concrete slabs roared above them, the snapping of wires, the shattering of glass. A gas main exploded suddenly, shaking the floor of the warehouse above their heads and immediately starting a fire. Berk was convinced they all were going to die. One hand clutching the handle of his gun, he waited for Death to come. He was going to put up one hell of a fight.

~*~

"Mr. President, sir, I can't do that! I can't land! There's no where to land!"

"Dammit, Reeve! Think clearly! Snap the hell out of it!"

Reno shook his friend's shoulders violently, fighting to keep standing despite the chaotic shaking of the helicopter. Reeve was staring out the window at the pile of debris that had once been Shinra headquarters. Sector Three was nearly completely obscured beneath it. He'd been expecting some miracle, some hand to reach from the sky and mend everything. No hand had come. He looked to Reno with his mouth half-open, his jaw slack, his head shaking slightly. It was all gone. The Shinra building, and Sector Three. Gone.

"Yeah, they're gone, but there's people down there. Tifa said she thought she saw Marlene. We have to go and help, Reeve. This is practically your city and it's your responsibility to do what you can to protect it, Shinra be damned."

Reeve looked up, blinking hard, swallowing harder. There was a lump in his throat that suddenly disgusted him. He shook it off and nodded, pulling his cell phone from his jacket. He punched a few numbers in it with a shaking finger and then donned his President persona, speaking into the phone in a concise, calm manner that rather amazed Reno. It was strange to see such a confident voice coming from a man whose face now looked as though someone'd splashed it with a bucket of white paint. He turned to Tifa who stood quietly behind him, leaning against the rear chopper wall, her eyes turned down to the ground.

"What's the matter?" he asked her, running a hand through his mussed red hair, "You're not gonna faint again, are ya? Heh."

"I saw Marlene, "she said softly, not looking up, "I saw Red too. But then the building fell and I-- gods, Reno, it fell right on top of them. I'm so sorry. Oh, my god, Barret. . . "

"Hey now, it's alright. Berk's down there with 'em and that kid's got balls. Rude told him to keep an eye on the brainiacs and that's what he'll do. He's too scared of Rude and I to do anything else. No worries."

"I wish I could be as naive as you, Reno."

The man scowled, shoving his hands in his pockets but controlling his temper. "I don't call it naivete, sweetheart. I call it flaming optimism. I learned it from Cloud believe it or not."

"I suppose I should apologize for him, "Tifa said, suddenly glancing up. She crossed her arms and hugged them close to her chest, smiling awkwardly. "Apologies are pretty lame though, eh? And they usually only work for accidents. And they never work for murders."

Reno wasn't sure how to answer. He glanced outside at the spreading cloud of dust and the settling debris. His own office was buried in there somewhere. The Turk facilities were there, the bar where he, Tseng, and Rude had spent so many evenings drinking and planning raids and assassinations in the old days. A million memories, twenty years of his life. He supposed he knew why Reeve was so upset. If he thought about it too much longer, he'd probably turn into just as much of a gibbering idiot.

"EMS is on their way, "the Shinra president interrupted suddenly, snapping his cell phone shut, "Ikari and some troops as well. Lieutenant Mannik, I apologize for yelling at you. Land us on that strip of pavement down there."

"Yes, sir."

The helicopter buzzed closer to the ground and Reno gripped a handle nearby to steady himself as it descended rapidly. He saw few signs of life upon scanning the rubble below. Only cold, gray rock and steel. He remembered Sector Seven suddenly, afterwards when Shinra'd arrived to "offer aid" to the injured, though they themselves had been the ones to cause the plate to fall. The scene had been very much the same. He was glad Rude was still passed out and wouldn't have to relive that nightmare today. He only wished Tifa had slugged him harder, and let him slide into easy

unconsciousness too. She'd never forgiven him for pushing that button and carelessly ending all those lives. But Tifa wasn't the only one to hold a grudge. Reno'd never forgiven himself for that day either. He wondered if after what he'd done today Cloud would relive his actions in his dreams, the same way Reno had for thirteen years.

~*~

A foul hush spread over Midgar after the stentorian roar of the collapsing building died away. People stood whispering in the streets, on the sidewalks, gazing up at the sudden, blaring absence at its center. It just seemed wrong for the Shinra building to be gone, as though the very body of the city had been stolen away, leaving nothing but a collection of useless limbs. People were too scared to go about the city's business. Normalcy was on hold for a time it seemed. Shops stayed closed, homes stayed hushed, the churches stood empty. It was a quiet, nearly expectant Sunday morning. Over the cowered metropolis, the sky remained the color of tarnished gold. The sun tried to disperse the uncanny energy dying the heavens but its rays only added to it, the mako power somehow found a way to feed off its light and turn it against the sun for its own purpose, creating something like a shield against the orb's light. What did get through filtered down and colored everything a sickly yellowish-orange, a hue that made the people look at each other suspiciously. No one seemed human bathed in such light.

The people of Sector One stayed inside, preferring not to have to look at their neighbors in the ghastly illumination. The streets in the upper-class neighborhood were barren. A few chunks of concrete lay embedded in the pavement, the force of the Shinra building's explosion had been that great. Somewhere on twenty-sixth street, a house had been demolished by a flying slab of steel. It lay in ruins in a pile of rainwater, bare planks sticking out stark in the morning air. A single pale arm jutted out of the wreckage. Chaos eyed the limb carefully, looking to be sure its owner wouldn't give the demon any trouble, then plopped himself down in the dirty grass before the house. He was tired. His claws were caked with the blood of dozens whom he'd spent the last half hour ripping apart. He didn't know why but it was his purpose to kill every human he came in contact with. It was just something he knew, the one instinct that blared above all others in his primitive mind. Kill people. Tear them into pieces. The demon didn't mind obliging. It found a good bit of thrill in the hunt. It only wished that the other voice inside of him, the man's voice, wouldn't shout out so horribly every time he took a life.

But then, Jenova made up for his maledictions. She stroked the demon's ego, told him how grand he was, how with each human he killed he was making himself more and more the conqueror of the Planet. Chaos thought that sounded like a good deal. Well, actually, he didn't really care two shits for it, he only knew he enjoyed death. It was easy and it was fun. And it wiped away all the questions in his skull. He only wished it would wipe away that man's voice. It grated after a while.

~*~

"So, Mr. Valentine, what do you think?"

The Shinra building stretched before him like an elder god reaching to touch the sky, a glistening jewel amidst the gray desolation of the rest of Midgar. It symbolized so much power it nearly made him grin. But Vincent kept his expression cool, detached. It wouldn't do to go about grinning like an idiot, like a rookie, his first day on the job. He only nodded to the blue-suited man who'd addressed him, then shuffled a bit uncomfortably in his own blue suit. It was a tad too big for his slender build.

"It's very impressive, sir," he stated simply. The man laughed aloud, slapping Vincent roughly on the back and stepping forward towards the structure's main doors.

"Impressive would describe perhaps, the building itself, young Valentine. I meant what do you think about Shinra? The company, the monopoly, the entity that will very soon rule over this entire continent, maybe even Planet?"

Vincent shrugged, following the man through the tinted main glass doors and into the expansive lobby inside. "It's a powerful corporation, sir, with a history that's grown more lustrous with each passing year. I wouldn't have come here if it was anything less."

"Good answer, good answer. I have to say, I like your attitude. You sound more as though you chose us rather than we choosing you. I'm not sure whether it's self-assurance, cockiness, or mixture of both that I see in you, Valentine."

Vincent only shrugged, flicking a strand of his black hair back behind his ear. The man could say what he liked, Vincent had chosen to be a Turk. He'd waltzed into the building, snuck past the guards and made his way to the Turk offices on the fifty-ninth floor. He'd barged into the room where the four current members of the Department of Administrative Research had been holding a meeting, and demanded to be made a Turk. They'd opened fire on him in annoyance of course and

he'd scuttled out of the way, raising his own gun and wasting two of them right then and there. He hadn't cared for his own life. He'd gone inside expecting to die, consumed with a madness and a melancholy that he hadn't been able to explain to himself much less anyone else. He'd only known that he was tired of living as another anonymous bastard, scabbling around, trying to live a life worth waking up to every morning. He knew he could shoot, he knew he could fight, and he knew he had very little regard for human life. A perfect Turk.

Shinra'd agreed with him. They'd been ready to haul him off to the gas chamber after killing two of the company's finest, but a word from the President had stopped them. He'd been impressed. Despite the two remaining Turks' protests, Vincent was handed a blue suit, a pair of shades, and an ID card. And then he was told in no uncertain terms that he'd be shot in the head the first time he failed a mission.

"Yes, self-assurance, cockiness, something else though. You shot my two coworkers with hardly a second of hesitation. You burst into our office knowing that you'd be killed for such an action. But you didn't even flinch as you made your demands. Hmph. I think you're psychotic, young Valentine. You're lucky that Grey and James were such bastards, or I might just have had to avenge them. As it is, I have my eye on you. Shinra has enough crazies on its payroll without adding a lunatic Turk into the mix."

Vincent nodded, the hint of an arrogant grin on his thin pale lips. He wasn't scared of Shinra. He wasn't scared of this threatening fellow, the leader of the Turks. The young man wasn't scared of anything, he thought he'd lived through the worst that life had to offer. His mother and father had been killed in a train wreck barely a week earlier. He hadn't spoken with either of them for years, his father'd all but disowned him after he'd slighted Godo. But the news of their deaths had struck him hard. It all had flooded upon him then. The emptiness, the meaninglessness of his life had fallen atop his head and threatened to suffocate him. He needed something real, an accomplishment that meant something. So he'd gone to Midgar, gone to Shinra, gun in hand. He would become a Turk, or he would die trying. He was sick and tired of waiting around as a worm under someone else's thumb. He wanted to take control.

~*~

What a stupid, young fool I was. I wanted control. Ha, here's my penance for such a misguided dream. Utter lack of control. The deception is over. I was always a monster hidden away behind a fair face, an old assassin, an old Turk with so much blood on my hands I couldn't even see the flesh anymore. A murderer. I murdered because I was good at it, because I could make money off of it. Goddamn me. And goddamn Hojo for seeing behind the facade and giving me a body to match the devil inside. At least now, I'm not lying to the world anymore. Heh. Few things worse than a hypocrite.

Vincent looked around through Chaos's eyes. He wasn't sure, but he thought he was in Sector One. He'd had to put himself into something like a delusional state to keep from going insane as Chaos had killed all those people. There'd been nothing he could do but watch. He'd shouted out protests, shouted out curses, but the demon had continued to plunge his dark claws into humanity despite his feeble cries. He wondered after a while if they really were Chaos's claws and not his own. How could it be possible for him to sense the warm blood on his arms, hear the victims' screams in his own ears, feel their hearts beating beneath the strength of his hands as he crushed their rib cages, snapped their bones? Who was in control?

Vincent balked at this last question, ready to scream out. Jenova was toying with him again. He knew it was Chaos' will that had killed those people. It had disturbed Vincent too deeply for it to have been him. All those innocents, staring up into his eyes, searching for mercy, searching for a reason why they had to die. And he'd stared back at them, unable to do a damned thing but watch as they were torn apart. He thought he might very well become that "lunatic Turk" he was labeled years ago. He didn't know how much longer he'd be able to go on witnessing such acts before it began to seep into his mind and take it away from him.

"Is this your final joke, Professor? Gods, you took such enjoyment in torturing me, in thinking up the most perfect ways to make me pay for the fact that she loved me, and not you. Was I such a monster in your eyes? I must have been, must still be for you to have sculpted this thing to imprison me in. I suppose you think it's suiting. Heh. My Lucrecia had a taste for monsters. She married one, she loved one, she gave birth to one. I feel as though the world may end today. It would be quite a relief if it did."

You do want it over. You yourself, a human, wants it done.

"Well, well, look who's come back. The first chance I get, Jenova, whatever you are, I'm going to cut you in half and burn each section in a separate fire."

You'll do nothing. Nothing but watch as it all falls down around you. Falls by your hands. And by Cloud's.

"Why don't you leave us alone?"

I left Cloud alone. He convinced himself what a murdering, cowardly worm he is. It took very little prodding on my part. As for you, you constantly tell yourself what a fitting form this is for you. You know yourself as a monster. Ah, Vincent, your race has so very little time left. Your Planet is approaching the brink. And it is two of her own who shall pull her over the edge. Go now and stop trying to fight. It will be so much easier when you accept that this is all inevitable and unavoidable. Stop fighting. Perhaps soon, once you've seen the light, the inescapable truth, once what you humans call sanity but what I call a hindrance has left you, I'll grant you control over this beautiful creature that Hojo made for me. And then, my love, you can destroy the last of your race yourself. And revel in that destruction.

"I'll die first, I swear I will. You took those children, I'll do everything in my power to stop you from taking others."

But that's just it, Vincent. You have no power. Ha hah, silly little man. I'll see you tonight, my love. For now, I'll leave Chaos to entertain you.

Vincent would have shot back an insult but a movement to his left caught his attention. He still couldn't grow accustomed to the way the demon's sight worked. The eerie red tint and the harsh shadows it filtered everything into were disturbing. It was like seeing the world through a veil of dirty red glass. But it didn't obscure his vision, it almost heightened it. He could easily see two young women approaching from down the street. They were speaking in hushed tones, occasionally looking up towards the place in the sky that the Shinra building customarily occupied. They were so young, Vincent thought desperately. They had their whole lives ahead of them.

"No, Jenova," he thought, wishing he could close his eyes as Chaos hopped enthusiastically to his feet, "No, please. Isn't your appetite for death satisfied yet?"

Was yours ever satisfied years ago?

"What? I didn't kill because I enjoyed it, it was simply my job."

A sorry excuse. You were able to murder because you didn't care. Which is worse though, Vincent? Enjoyment or apathy? I'll let you stew that question over. Heh heh, you didn't care. Why do you care now? Stupid human worm.

Two shrill screams filled the air over Sector One. There was another cry that mingled among them though, louder in a way, more forceful. A pity no one could hear it.

~*~

Cloud opened his eyes and stared at the sky. He thought he'd heard a shout but he shrugged it off, admiring the way the fleecy clouds moved behind the thin golden membrane of power filling the heavens. The membrane was fast disappearing, the spell's residue dying away. Still, he figured he'd enjoy it while it lasted. He didn't really know where he was or how he'd gotten there. He knew he was bare-chested and cold as hell. His hair was wet, he now noticed, his shoulders too, and his pants and boots soaked through. Hell, he was just plain drenched. Leaving the sky-gazing behind, Cloud pushed himself to his feet, shaking rainwater from his shoulders. He'd been laying in a puddle in the street for some reason, the ground beneath him crushed under his weight. He examined the crater he'd been lying in carefully until a small noise behind him made him turn around.

"Hey, mister."

It was a kid. Cloud looked the little guy over and the boy did the same to Cloud. They stood staring at each other for a while, the kid sucking on a hangnail on his pinky finger.

"What?" the man finally answered, wringing the water from his pants as best he could.

"That was pretty cool the way you blasted that building back there."

"Uh huh." He had no idea what the kid was talking about but he nodded absently, flinging water from his boots.

"Mom said it wiped out all of Sector Three. She said I don't have to go to school tomorrow."

"Yeah, that's good."

"Man, you're freaky lookin'. How come you didn't get hurt when you fell outta the sky?"

Cloud looked at the kid with one eyebrow raised. Seemed someone had had too much sugar on their cereal that morning. "I fell outta the sky?" he asked skeptically.

"Yup, a little while ago. I didn't think you'd wake up, I thought you were pretty dead, but you ain't. What's the deal?"

"Go home, kid, you're buggin' me."

"I can't go home, my house got squished by a rock."

"A rock you say?" Cloud sighed and stuck his fists into his sides, looking around himself finally. He didn't recognize anything. Wherever he was, it looked like a friggig demilitarized zone. Bus-sized hunks of concrete littered the ground, steel frameworks stuck jagged out of what seemed a solid wall of shattered glass windows. Debris stretched as far as he could see. "Kid, where are we?"

"Earth."

"What?"

"You're on the Planet earth, mister. On behalf of humanity I welcome you." The kid had memorized that line from a movie and recited it now diplomatically, throwing a smart salute. Cloud rolled his eyes.

"I'm not an alien, kiddo. Be more specific."

"Oh." The little guy's hopes fell a bit. He'd thought an alien would be rather cool. "This is Midgar, we're in Sector Three, Shinra block number twelve, north. That's my address. My house is over there, but you really can't see it anymore. It was a big rock."

Cloud glanced to where he pointed. The kid wasn't lying.

"We got out in time. We live on the border anyways, so it was easy. Mom went to help the other people and I'm supposed to stay with stupid ole Mr. Ube but I hate that guy. You're cooler. You're tough. Blow something else up, eh?"

Cloud eyed the ground, struggling to remember something, anything. He recalled the cold, the biting cold that still was making him shiver. He remembered pain and voices and a haze of something. He certainly didn't remember blowing anything up though. The faces of his children tickled his mind but he shoved them away. He couldn't deal with it now. Biting down hard on his lower lip, he took a few steps forward, feeling a weird buzzing beginning in his head. The buzzing he remembered. In fact, it was one of the last things he remembered. He rubbed his throbbing temples, eyeing the wreckage of the building all around him, noticing the blazing red Shinra seal on its side and realizing what it really was and why the skies overhead, as beautiful as they were, seemed so empty suddenly. But he hadn't done this, no matter what the little psycho kid said. Cloud Strife, as angry as he might get sometimes, certainly couldn't knock down an entire building. He began walking along the edge of the wreckage, peering carefully at the debris scattered among the masonry. Strange things. Coffee mugs, and papers, and pens, and pipes sticking out jagged from shattered plaster. He was sure Reeve must be going nuts. He certainly pitied whatever poor bastard had done this. Probably terrorists, he thought absently. Or one of the newly sprouted rival companies. He and Reno had been fearing an attack for a few years. They'd never thought it would be this bad though.

"You cold, mister?" The kid asked, tagging behind him, still chewing on his fingernail, "You're shaking a lot. It is cold out, man, it wasn't this cold last night, dumb weather."

Cloud nodded absently. In the faint breeze, something was flapping on the ground nearby. Clothes hanging from a wardrobe sticking out of one of the decimated houses. The wardrobe was cracked open like an egg, spilling its contents onto the dirty sidewalk. Cloud approached it, the kid on his heels, and began rummaging through the clothes inside, looking for something to throw over his bare chest and arms. With a small sound of triumph, he pulled out a tattered black leather jacket, not unlike the one he normally wore. He wondered where that jacket was now. Doubtlessly laying somewhere amidst the wreckage. With the garment on, he felt a little better. The thing was too big on him, hung nearly to the middle of his thighs and the cuffs spilled down over his hands but he shoved them impatiently past his elbows and turned the collar up against the cold. The kid looked at him with wide eyes.

"You look cool!" he said admiringly, "What're ya gonna do now?"

Cloud thought that was a rather appropriate question. He stuck his chilled fingers in his pockets and looked around at the remains of Sector Three, eyes narrowed against the breeze and the bright morning sun. He honestly didn't know. He felt so strange inside, empty almost, but at the same time, so many things milled in his head it made it hard to think a clear thought. Maybe he'd find answers somewhere in the remains of the Shinra building. Maybe Hojo was behind all this, he didn't know. Hojo was the one usually behind everything. He paced alongside the border of the debris, looking out over the sea of ruin. He'd just keep walking, looking, if that's what it took. There was nothing else to do.

~*~

"Marlene!!"

A half-naked Barret Wallace catapulted down the streets of Sector Four. Like the rest of the city, he'd been awoken from an uneasy slumber by the sound of the exploding Shinra building. He'd rushed outside to see a forlorn figure plummeting from above, his shock of blonde hair standing stark against the gold of the sky he'd dyed with his power.

Barret had recognized him instantly as Cloud, a part of the man had known it couldn't possibly be anyone else. The radio inside the inn he'd been staying at had declared the staggering building was leaning towards Sector Three, and warned all citizens to evacuate from beneath its shadow. Barret had decided to evacuate towards it.

People gave him questioning glances as he ran desperately towards where everyone else was fleeing from. He pictured his daughter's sweet face in his mind and sweat stood out on his forehead, trailing behind him as he ran, his steps not fast enough for his liking.

"Stupid stupid stupid asshole!" he muttered to himself, "You shoulda stayed there! You shoulda been there! Damn you!"

He was bare-chested and panicked, tripping every few steps as he tried to pump energy into his legs that he just didn't possess. After a few minutes, the streets thinned out and a thick dust filled the air as he approached the wreckage of the Shinra building. The wreckage had no defined edge, chunks of architecture spilled everywhere, glass crunched beneath his hastily booted feet. He stood staring at the desolate, gray, smouldering debris with a blank expression on his face, disbelief in his eyes. Now that he was here, he wasn't sure what to do. Marlene could be buried anywhere out there. He needed help. He pulled his PHS from the pocket of his pants and feverishly punched a few numbers into it, all the while staring out at the shattered remains with a wild look in his features. A deep red fury filled his chest. Shinra, even in its downfall, had seemingly managed to take his most precious possession away from him. His massive hand closed tightly around the PHS and his eyes narrowed as his anger mounted.

"Reno here."

Barret nearly hung up. As it was, he grit his teeth and forced himself to speak for his daughter's sake. "What the hell you doing with a PHS? Where's Reeve?"

"Occupied. Where are you?"

"Sector Three. Where are you?"

"Sector Three. What a coincidence."

"Listen, dirt bag Turk prick, I got no time to be cute with you. Marlene's somewhere in this mess. What're we gonna do about it?"

"Berk, Bugah, Nanaki and a couple thousand other people are also underneath this, Wallace. Why don't you pray really hard and maybe we'll get a miracle, eh? Listen, tell me exactly where you are and I'll send a chopper 'round to pick you up, alright?"

"But I--!"

"We've got a massive search for survivors going on right now. That's where I am. Don't you want to be here with me?"

"Not with you. . . "

"Well, you get my meaning. We're based almost right on top of her apartment building. What's left of it anyway. That's no biggie though, Tifa swore she saw Marlene at the head of a big group of evacuees heading towards Sector Four. Now, what's your position?"

"Third and Twenty-Se. . . . "

Barret's voice died away and his hand unconsciously moved the PHS a bit further from his mouth as a figure suddenly stumbled into his vision, steps weary and measured. He blinked hard, not sure what to make of this newcomer. His hair was blown back away from his face, trailing behind him messily and matted with sweat, water, and dried blood. His eyes glowed an intense green, eerie against his pale flesh, while a gaping J stretched over his face gripping everything it came in contact with like a bright red leech. He was dressed all in black, soggy boots stretching up to mid-calf, roomy, torn pants, and a tattered leather jacket that hung loose from his muscular, but pale frame, the collar pulled up to protect his neck and face from the cold.

"Cloud?" Barret called hesitantly, taking a slow, unsure step forward.

"Cloud?" Reno echoed in surprise from over the PHS, "Holy shit-balls, Wallace, is Cloud there with you? Dammit, is he there?"

Barret dropped his left arm, bringing the phone away from his face completely as he looked over his friend. Cloud gave him a quick glance but that was all. He immediately turned his face away, a hand going up to clutch his head before he could stop himself. He stood there, massaging his brow and Barret dropped the PHS onto the ground. Reno's faint voice could be heard in the still air, demanding to know what was going on.

"Hullo, Barret, "Cloud finally greeted, not looking up. A little kid emerged from behind him, biting at his pinky finger with his eyes open wide and Barret shot him a glance before returning his gaze to the man.

"What the fuck happened to you, spike?" he asked, his voice a strange mixture of pity and restrained anger. Cloud shrugged, fingering his face as though it was burning him.

"People have been messing with me the past couple of days, I suppose. You know how it is. Sephiroth, he came and cut this mark into me. Jenova, she. . . Hojo did something to me, I don't know what, I only know I hurt all over. And there's something inside a me, something that makes everything fuzzy. I dunno."

"Your eyes, man. . ."

"Yeah, I thought you saw my eyes already."

"Well, they was bad enough when they was blue. At least, at least then they were yours. But now, I just don't know." Cloud didn't quite understand what his friend meant but he didn't ask about it. He still refused to look up. Suddenly something occurred to Barret and he raised his voice in sudden belligerence.

"Why didja do that, huh?" he demanded, raising a fist and jabbing a finger towards the decimated building. "Why, dammit? Marlene's under there somewhere, ya bastard, didn't ya think about what would happen when ya blasted that thing?"

"What're you talking about? I didn't do anything."

"I think he means the buildin', mister," the kid pitched in helpfully. Barret stalked forward a few paces, and shoved Cloud confrontationally in the shoulder, hard enough to send him stumbling back a step. The blonde-haired man glanced up with a dangerous twist at the corner of his mouth.

"You're just lookin' the part now, ain't ya?" Barret snapped, glaring at him straight in his green eyes with a sneer on his lips, "Yeah, lookin' the part. I saw what you did, I saw you up in the air like a damned god. You thinkin' youse God now, spike? Flying around like a stupid freak, with some sorta insane magic. What did you do ta the sky, eh? Where's the blue? Where's the blue in your eyes, man? What the hell's wrong with you?"

"I'm warning you, Barret," Cloud growled, uneasily searching for something to stare at, anything but his friend's face, "Leave me alone. I don't know what the frig you're talking about. And I don't care."

"You don't care. . ." Barret stewed the words over in his mind for a moment, a hand to the back of his head, scratching there almost thoughtfully, "You don't care." Suddenly, his short temper snapped and he lunged towards Cloud with a grunted shout. The man just stood there, a blank expression of shock on his face as the kid who'd been hiding behind him darted for cover. Barret landed two solid punches to Cloud's unprepared head, the first sent his neck snapping painfully back, the second sent him hard to the ground. He sat on the litter-ridden sidewalk for a moment, eyes unfocused in pain, trying to still the world from spinning around him.

"Ya care about that?" Barret asked. He backed off and stood a few feet away, panting slightly and eyeing the man on the ground with blatant disdain. There was a line of red running from Cloud's left nostril. He smeared it away and got to his feet, clutching his head.

"Do you want to fight me, Barret?" he asked quietly, finally looking him in the eye.

Barret heard a frantic, muffled voice coming from the PHS still lying on the sidewalk but he ignored it, stepping forward. "You knocked that buildin' down without a thought for anyone--"

"What are you talking about??"

"Right on top of my daughter's home. You tried to kill me two days ago, do you think I just forgot about that? Yeah. Yeah, I think I wanna fight you. I think I wanna take you down. Let's see how bad you are without your precious Ultima Weapon."

Brandishing the silver cap on the end of his right arm, Barret charged him, ready to bash the appendage into the side of the man's head. Cloud saw him coming.

And smiled.

Movements lightening fast, he leapt out of Barret's way and the larger man crashed into the pile of debris, unable to stop in time. Though he lay there for only a fraction of a second, it was long enough for Cloud to whip around, grab a good, solid hold of his throat, and pull him close. Muscles tensed, veins sticking up stark from his skin, he hurled Barret about a foot in the air and drove his knee into his gut. The man landed with a grunt, breathing hard.

"You're getting on in years, pal," Cloud remarked, hands on his hips and standing over his fallen friend. He had a sneer on his face that Barret just wanted to slowly peel off. He got to his knees, his good arm wrapped around his midsection.

"I'll never be too old to wipe the floor with you, ya cocky punk."

"Bring it on then."

Snarling, sweat standing out glistening on his cheek, Barret charged again, a bit more cautiously this time. He always fought offensively, being a massively built man, it was his tactic to overwhelm his opponent with his strength early on. Cloud met his charge again, darting out of the way, knowing full well that he wasn't as strong and would be conquered if pinned beneath him. Once his target had leapt away, Barret pulled up sharp, whipping about and narrowly avoiding an uppercut. As Cloud was recovering from the force of his attack, Barret knocked him a quick jab in the side of his head, sending him sprawling messily. He followed him to the ground, pinning the man's right arm under his massive knee, and then bashed his face with three more good punches, finishing off with a kick to his ribs as he got off him. Cloud lay there for a moment, spitting blood. Then he started to laugh.

"Hyuk it up, green eyes. You're the one in the dirt." Barret watched warily as he rolled about a bit, a hand to his ribs where he'd been kicked, then slowly sat up, folding his legs and sitting there casually, still chuckling.

"What the hell's so funny?"

Shaking his head, eyes bright, he replied, "Who says you need something to laugh at? Sometimes laughing just feels good, just makes the sour air a little sweeter. I hate empty air now. When it's quiet, all I hear are these voices. And this noise. Better to have something to drown them out. I suppose though, that this situation is rather hilarious."

"And why's that?" Barret asked suspiciously.

"Well. . ." Cloud got slowly to his feet and stood there, the faint morning breeze tickling the hairs around the nape of his neck, "I know something you don't."

"What? You ain't gonna pull a sword outta your pocket, are ya?" Barret shuffled his feet slightly, the look in Cloud's face damned uncanny, damned creepy. He'd heard from Reno and Rude that someone had attacked him, cut that J in his cheek. He'd been told that all the events of the past week had really taken their toll on his old friend but God, those warnings had just been words. Looking at Cloud now, Barret got a horrible feeling in the back of his throat. He didn't even recognize this thing before him.

"Stop looking at me like I'm a god damned monster," Cloud ordered, frowning upon seeing the uneasy scrutinizing look in Barret's eyes.

"You stop looking like a monster, I'll stop looking at you like you're a monster."

"Fuck you."

"Heh. You kiss Tifa with that mouth? No wonder she likes you so much."

Cloud stepped forward a few paces, arms held rigidly at his sides. Barret watched him through slitted black eyes.

"If you ever say her name again, I swear to God I'll kill you," Cloud hissed, clenching his fists.

"She's my friend, man. I can talk about her if I want to."

"If I tell you to do something, you'd better damn well do it."

"You trying to give me orders?" Barret asked in amazement, two deep frown lines stretching from his nose to the corners of his mouth, "You trying to tell me what do? A little skinny bastard like you, walkin' round laughing like someone'd stolen your head away. You try to give me another order. Go ahead, bitch, let's have it."

Cloud smirked, quickly brushing a strand of blonde from his vision.

"Okay," he complied, "Eat dirt."

Before Barret could blink, the man moved forward with nearly inhuman speed, leaping from the ground and shooting the heel of his boot into his opponent's jaw. The blow flipped him around twice, blood gushing from his split chin, and then, with a yelp, he struck the ground and slid, plowing up a length of sod into his half-open mouth. In the same instant, Cloud kicked him savagely no less than five times in the side of his head, each blow like a sledgehammer in his skull. Barret could only lay there for a few moments after the last one, fighting to stay awake. His bloodshot eyes opened a crack and stared forward at Cloud's two bloodied boots.

"If. . . if you've hurt Marlene wit' yer damned. . . thoughtlessness. . ." he began, trying to push himself up but slumping messily back onto the ground, "If she's hurt'n anyway, I'll come after you, Cloud. I'll make sure you pay."

"I'm sick of hearing you spout this shit, old man," Cloud snapped, turning away and walking in jerky, nervous circles, "I ain't done a god damned thing to anyone. I'm the victim, they were the victims. I haven't seen Marlene in days. I haven't hurt anyone."

Barret laughed darkly, wincing as the action caused shooting pains to jab him in the face. "Don't you even remember, you wonky idiot? You seem to get a swiss-cheese brain whenever it's convenient. You don't frigging fool me, spike. You know damn well that you knocked that building down, that you wiped out thousands of people in the sector below it, that you've turned into the very thing we fought so long ago. I don't even know ya anymore. I thought it was bad when you

went to Shinra. I told ya so and ya ignored me and so I kicked you outta my home, wouldn't have anything to do with you. But you ignored me, as though my friendship hadn't been worth spit to ya. As though my opinion wasn't worth a damn! Well see what's happened now? What it's done to you? I swear by everything, Cloud, by the Planet, by Life, by Death, by whatever Gods are watching this now, I swear I'll fucking kill you if you've hurt Marlene! I'll kill you, no matter what godly powers you think you have. And then I'll spit on your bullet-ridden corpse and curse yer name. Pray, Cloud, pray that she's all right. . . "

Cloud threw Barret a startled look then began to stumble away, off into the darker areas of the devastated Sector, where cement pilings had fallen flat and formed a tunnel-like walkway. It led off into the heart of the wreckage and he was glad to fling himself into it, just to get away from those accusing words. "Where are ya goin', spike? I'm on the ground, you pummeled me. Why then are ya running away, huh?" Without a single glance back, Cloud took off at a fast clip, entering the shadows of the fallen Shinra building and sighing in relief as they swallowed him. The kid who'd hidden during their entire fistfight, shot out of hiding and darted after his retreating form, sucking furiously on his pinky finger. Barret watched the two for a moment, sinking quickly further and further away in the distance, then pushed himself painfully into a sitting position. The fallen PHS was laying just a few feet from him and he stretched his good arm towards it. There seemed to be three phones laying on the spinning ground, but he clenched his teeth and made for the center one, grabbing the still-squawking thing and sticking it to his ear.

"WHAT THE HELL'S GOING ON??!!!"

Woah. He moved the thing away from his face a bit, wincing. Once he'd said hullo and Reno had calmed a bit, he tried again.

"Wallace, was Cloud just there?"

"Uh, yeah actually. He beat the crap out of me. I think he may be making his way towards y'all, I'm not sure. He's walking off into the wreckage." Barret rubbed at his face, shutting his eyes wearily and struggling to stand. The entire side of his head burned, throbbed so badly he could hardly see. Already his left eye was swelling shut.

"I can't believe it. You sure it was Cloud?" Reno asked in disbelief, "I mean, I heard you two fighting. . . but you sure it was him?"

"Why izzat so hard to believe?"

"He just ah, blew up where I work. And we saw him fall out of the sky. You're sure it--"

"Send that goddamned chopper, Turk."

"Did he say anything to you? I mean, did he say why he's doing all this?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. There's definitely something wrong with him though. I mean, he did--"

"Blow up the Shinra building, yeah. Ah, don't fight with him if he comes back, alright?"

"I can take that punk. . . "

"Uh huh, from the sound of your voice, it sounds like you just took him on really well, sure. I can't believe he left you standing. He takes out an entire Sector but leaves you standing. Go figure. We gotta stop him. Chopper'll be there in a few."

"Yeah."

With a wince, Barret snapped the PHS shut and jammed it in his pants pocket. Breathing hard, he squinted off in the direction Cloud had disappeared, just barely able to see the man's silhouette in the dimness created by the building. A still swirling cloud of dust hung in the air, smudging the finer details of the morning, making everything dull, everything scratched like an old photograph. He laid a shaking hand to his chin, smearing away some of the ticklish blood, then plopped himself down on the dirty ground to wait for the helicopter, all the while keeping his gaze fixed on that slumped, retreating figure.

"You won, Cloud. . . "he muttered darkly, "Why then, are you the one runnin' away?"

~*~

"All aboard the Highwind Express, kiddies! Don't make me tell ya twice."

Cid took a deep breath of the morning air, reveling in its pureness, loving the smell of the flowers in the wind, the clear aroma of the ocean nearby, the very faint, but still present smell of recent rain. Then he lit a cigarette and started sucking on it.

"Hey, Cid, can I try one?"

The pilot glanced down to CJ Strife, the kid looking back up at him with grinning violet eyes. They were approaching the anchored Highwind, the old ship set down in a deeply green grassy strip of field at the edge of Wutai. The city lay behind them, engulfed in the morning mists off the sea. Cid didn't mind leaving it.

"CJ," he said in response to the kid's question, "This is a dirty habit. If I ever see ya smokin' I'll make ya eat it."

"That ain't fair, man. You're one a them things. You're a ah, hippocurt."

Cid blinked a few times, picking up pace as his airship grew large in his sight.

"A hippocurt, eh?" he asked, regretting even bothering the moment the question escaped his lips. CJ nodded violently, stepping on Ifalna's heels as the little girl walked ahead of him.

"Barret taught me the word. It's a good word. Not as good as the words you taught me, but good."

"Hey now, Ceej, let's not go saying those words out loud, eh?" Cid asked nervously, "They're not ones your mom would appreciate, okay?"

"Yeah, whatever. I can't believe you're scared of my mom."

"Hey, you never seen your mom throw a punch. Or have ya?"

CJ shrugged, then half a grin crept across his face. "She slugged my third grade teacher once. Mrs. Coe. Heh heh, she told mom I was a bad influence 'cause I talked about Meteor all the time and scared the stupid kids in my class. Wasn't my fault, they were always askin' me about dad. Mrs. Coe was in the hospital for a while. The substitute we had ruled. He just put on movies and fell asleep at his desk."

"That's why your mom, er, concerns me. Not frightens me, mind you, but concerns me. There was this time in Junon--"

The three looked up suddenly as a voice from ahead halloooed them, calling Cid's name loudly. A blonde-haired woman in dress slacks and shirt with her sports jacket off and flung over one arm. She'd been standing at the Highwind's side giving orders to a few sweaty, shirtless men and now she walked forward a bit as Cid and his charges approached.

"What is it, Elena?" the pilot asked wearily. He ran his eyes over his airship, lingering over Lady Luck's face and giving his patron saint a wink. The blonde-haired woman frowned, crossing her arms.

"Mr. Highwind," she began, "Mayor Kisaragi wanted me to inform you that conditions are still unsafe for flying. She's had me load Dragon Weapon as agreed, you have made the proper payment after all, but radars show that the storm front, while it's no longer over Midgar, is still moving this way and stands between us and the city. You'll have to pass through it if you leave."

"Did Mayor Kisaragi say that now?" Cid asked heatedly, "Well you can tell Mayor Kissyerarsie she can take five gil, go down to main street, and get screwed. She's only sayin' that 'cause she hopes we'll wait it out till tomorrow and have ta pay another materia in rent for this damned contraption. I know just how her sneaky little mind functions, Elena. How you can work for her with a clear conscience is beyond me."

"She has quite a point though," the woman responded composedly, "It's dangerous weather this time of year. And if you'd rather not pay the extra day's materia orb, just imagine how much materia you'd lose if you crashed the Highwind into the Eastern Ocean and destroyed Dragon Weapon completely. But then I suppose, you wouldn't really have to pay squat, you'd be dead."

"Exactly," Cid agreed, shoving her gently to the side so he could pass into his ship. Elena scowled, eyeing him darkly, then glanced at the two kids who followed him in. Only people as crazy as AVALANCE would leave two children in the care of such a man. She threw her jacket over one shoulder, spoke a few words to the work crew who'd just finished loading the weapon, and began to trudge back to Wutai huffily.

"Hey, Elena!" she heard a voice cry out suddenly. She turned and saw Cid leaning out a port window. "What is it, Mr. Highwind?"

"You sure you don't wanna come with us?"

"Mr. Highwind, we had this discussion last night," she replied, steel in her voice, "I haven't been a Turk in years. Just because Reno and Rude are in Midgar under Shinra orders, doesn't mean that little Miss Elena needs to go running there to help. My job is here, I'm Mayor Kisaragi's official bodyguard and executive assistant."

"Aw, you're a secretary, admit it."

Elena's cheeks flamed slightly red at the word but she only said, "What the Turks and what Shinra are doing is no longer my concern. Now fly off like a good little asshole."

"Woah-ho!" Cid hollered and she winced, "Seems I struck a nerve. I-- wuzzat, CJ? Oh, CJ says you don't wanna come 'cause you're a wussy. . . and Ifalna says she likes your shoes. Hm, I dunno Eef, they make her calves look awfully pale. Black

will do that I hear. Elena you should get yourself a nice pair of creme-colored pumps."

"Are you royally screwed in the head, Highwind?" Elena slammed her arms into her sports jacket and pulled the flaps around her front jerkily. Her eye wandered down to her calves for half a moment. They looked perfectly alright to her. "I'm going back to Wutai. I suggest you get to Midgar if you're going to go. From the stories I've been hearing on the news, that entire city is half way down the porcelain throne. They probably could use me, but that city's used me too often in the past and I'm not about to give it the opportunity to do so again."

Cid eyed the ex-Turk thoughtfully, then shrugged, ducking his head back inside.

"CJ still says you're a wussy. I'm inclined to agree. Later, sweetheart."

Before Elena could snap out a reply, the Highwind's engines began to roar deafeningly in her ears and the workmen still around her sides quickly cast off the ropes keeping it anchored and backed away. In a matter of seconds, the massive airship was off the ground, rising steadily, engines shooting out brilliant streaks of blue fire. As Elena glared, it soon rose to just a speck in the sky, darting quickly away towards Midgar. Though not before a cigarette butt had been flicked out the port window and smack onto Elena's blonde head. The woman eyed the smouldering stump of cigarette then ground it to a soggy mess beneath her shoes. She didn't care what the bastard pilot said. Midgar would be fine without her. And so would the Turks.

~*~

Cloud kicked at stray rubble as he walked, watching the gray chunks of rock roll away before him, smack into larger chunks, then disintegrate into really tiny chunks. Jenova was having a one way conversation inside of his head. He refused to answer her, not realizing that with every step he was answering her plenty. She was steering him somewhere. To a final destination only she knew of. The kid with his pinky finger forever in his mouth was jabbering on about something or other, chocobo races the last time he bothered to listen, but Cloud ignored him now, heeding only his own thoughts. Dark destructive thoughts. Urges that frightened him. A desire to feel hot blood running between his bare fingers, a desire to shove things through other people. He wanted to hear screams for reasons he didn't understand. He wanted to see other people in pain.

". . . what's wrong with me. . . ?"

"Huh?" The kid looked up, brushing his feathery bangs from his eyes. "Wuzzat, Mister Cloud?"

The man shook his head, letting out a long shaky sigh.

"Nothin', kid. Listen, why don't you scam? I'm not a safe guy to be hanging out with. And your parents'll get worried."

"Nah, "the kid said confidently, half running to keep up with Cloud's long-legged strides, "I knew after I saw you do all the cool stuff to the sky that you were an awesome guy. And you just knocked the crap outta that big dude back there. You're like a walkin' movie. I wanna see what you do next."

"This isn't a game. Really now, run along home."

"I told ya, my house got squished by a rock and my mum's out helping other people. I don't have anywhere else to be right now."

Cloud sighed, eyeing the sky, letting the kid babble excuses in his ear. As he walked, he held his hand out before him and wriggled his fingers around, watching the green sparks that wavered between them in fascination. That ungodly buzzing was beginning again.

"I don't suppose you hear that sound, eh?" he asked of the boy. The kid shook his head, eyes narrowed to try and pick up what the man seemed to be so intently listening to. "Yeah, I didn't think you would." Cloud grit his teeth, lowering his hands from his face and sticking them in his pocket. From far away, there was a screech, like great rusted plates rubbing against each other. Only it was feral. And more piercing.

"That noise?" the kid asked, suddenly hearing the awful cry.

"No." Cloud shook his head, raising his eyes to the sky, trying to see what was screaming so horribly. The heavens looked back on him in their usual shade of pale blue. A dripping white sun shone in the east, lighting everything harshly. But suddenly that light was snuffed out. A horrendous black shape swooped over the two of them, a massive creature with outstretched wings, grasping claws, eyes so sharp and red it seemed they'd burn a whole through whatever they fixated themselves upon. Cloud jabbed a protective arm out towards the kid as the thing flew close to them. It shot them a glare then continued on its way, heading intently for somewhere far ahead of them, somewhere embedded in the heart of the wreckage. As the creature passed overhead, it dripped some warm liquid onto the tops of their heads. Cloud wiped it from

his cheeks and smeared it between his fingers: blood. Fresh blood. Squinting, he saw the demon's claws were covered with it and every so often it lifted one of the gory appendages to its lips and licked some off.

After only seconds, the black beast was out of sight. Cloud looked after it, wiping his hands on his pants. "I don't know why people are worried about me," he said faintly, "Not when something like that is flying around."

~*~

The cicadas were beginning to hum. As the sun rose higher, defying Cloud's promise that it wouldn't shine its glow over the city that day, the insects buzzed louder and louder, intensifying the heat. A haze rose over everything, made the sweat pour down the backs of those searching through the rubble of the Shinra building, but then the wicked November breezes blew cold and had them shivering.

The makeshift search party headquarters was barely discernible from the rest of the wreckage. There were some hastily erected tents, an awning or two, a line of ambulances and an ancient firetruck recently brought out of retirement. These had been spread out as though to fool whoever stumbled upon the site into thinking Reeve was perhaps more organized than he really was. Reeve wasn't sure who he was trying to fool. Probably himself most of all.

Tossing arrogance to the wind, the Shinra president was down on his knees, sports jacket off, sleeves pushed up, serving water to a little old lady sitting on the ground with a broken arm. Similar victims were scattered around him and the other healthier volunteers, and EMS workers flitted back and forth, tending to wounds.

"That's right, junior, you just keep dishing it out," the older lady snapped, jiggling her empty water cup back and forth. They'd pulled her out of the wreckage of her item store a few hours ago. Reeve was debating whether or not to put her back.

"I'd like to know how all this happened," she spat, slurping her water messily, "I'd like to know who I'm going to get to sue. Do I sue Shinra, do I sue that blonde guy who fell outta the sky, or do I sue the city itself? So many choices."

"Sue Shinra," a guy next to her helped, and Reeve gave him a blank stare, "The city doesn't have a pot to piss in, Shinra's where the real money is."

"Hey now. . ." Reeve began, sitting back on his bottom and throwing an arm over his knee.

"No, it's true. They say President Reeve has diamonds for teeth and had his fingernails replaced with thousand gil marks."

"Aye, and he shoots bolts of lightning out of 'is arse."

"Maybe you shouldn't sue anyone," Reeve put in hastily, wiping sweat from his hairline, "I mean, I think it's pretty obvious the company's financial situation is going to be rather desperate after today. . ."

"Even better!" the old lady snapped, "Hit 'em while they're down! You think I've forgotten about Meteor? That was their bleedin' fault and I never saw a gil after it wrecked my house. I got something coming to me and I'm gonna get it, by God. Any of you know the numbers of any good lawyers?"

Taking his pail of water, Reeve stood up with a groan, leaving the survivors to sit in the street and exchange phone numbers. Sighing and blinking hard, he made his way over to the main medical tent, dropping his bucket off at the entrance.

"President Reeve!" a polite voice called and he turned around, shoulders up around his ears, "One of the search parties just returned with twenty or so survivors they pulled out of a gym. Where should we stash them, sir, we're running out of room."

"I don't care, General Ikari, let them eat cake. No better not actually. They might frigging choke on it and sue me. The gods hate me. . ."

Leaving Ikari scratching his head, Reeve entered the tent, wiping an irritated hand across his sweaty, gritty brow. He wished that Cait Sith was around. He'd go and hide somewhere and face the world through the robot, it was always easiest that way. He knew he shouldn't feel so bitter. Fate was actually, just this once, smiling his way. They'd found a large number of survivors amidst the wreckage of his shattered Shinra towers. People had had the foresight enough to hide in basements and cellars and the tactic had paid off. At least it had for those far enough on the fringes of the destruction. At the core, where the bulk of the debris were and the impact had been greatest, Reeve and the rescue teams had found an unsettling number of corpses, people crushed in their beds, or curled up in doorways and bathrooms, thinking the noise and vibrations had been from an earthquake. It was all a disaster of the worst kind. And the people were looking for someone to blame.

The inside of the medical tent was rather typical. It was dark and smelled of blood and pain. People were spread out on cots to either side of the central path and they moaned or cried or joked depending on their dispositions and conditions. The extremely understaffed medical team moved back and forth among them, tending to newcomers, pulling sheets over those who'd decided to give up fighting, take a last shuddering breath, and leave the problems of living to those in better health. Reeve averted his eyes from most of the patients who watched him as he walked his way down to the end of the tent. He certainly didn't look like the most powerful man in Midgar today. His clothes were stained, his hair was a wreck, and he smelled like a basketful of dirty socks, but it didn't matter. Inside, Reeve knew all that he was and all that he'd let happen. The guilt was annoying more than anything else. It was hampering his efforts to fix his actions. And it was pissing him off. Why did these sorts of things always happen to him?

"Yo, Reeve. . . "

Reno's tired voice greeted him as he reached the very rear of the medical tent. Shinra's co-head of security was seated on a low stool, his head in his hands, his hair curtained over his dirty face. The bed he sat beside contained a yet unconscious Rude.

"Hey, any changes?" Reeve asked, gesturing his head towards his employee.

"Nah, that doctor said it was some kinda poisoning but he couldn't identify it. I think it was from that big cat. I remember Cloud's kid saying something about it poisoning Valentine when it bit him. I felt rather shitty myself for a while, I guess I got a little helping of the bitch cat's venom when she bit off my fingers. But not like big man here. Hmph."

"How's your hand?"

Reno shrugged, keeping his eyes on Rude's passive face. "Fine," he answered, as though his own injuries were nothing in comparison with his friend's. He glanced briefly down at his bandaged right hand. He'd decided earlier that it was the creepiest feeling in the world to look down and see three fingers there instead of five. He could almost feel the missing digits, almost believe nothing had happened until he looked down and saw the blaring absence. "The mayor here yet?"

"No," Reeve spat, taking a seat on the edge of the bed, "That little maggot is hiding from me. I've called his home three times, the press has hounded me, wanting to know where he is. His god damned wife just called and grilled me. He just doesn't want to deal with it."

"Aw, don't fool yourself, Reeve. The mayor is a puppet. Someone who they can stick up on a float on the Christmas day parade. You're the real ruler of this city."

"Not a very good one. . . "

"That's irrelevant, you're still the man with the power, with the connections."

"Gee, thanks for boosting my self-confidence."

"No prob," Reno said, but there was no laughter behind the words. He kept glancing at Rude and with his sunglasses pulled down over his eyes, Reeve couldn't tell what kind of look he was giving his unconscious friend.

"He's going to be all right, ya know."

Reno looked up and smiled weakly.

"Yeah, no shit."

"Then why the long face?"

"I mean no disrespect, Mr. President," Reno answered, his voice dripping heavy sarcasm, "But are you delusional or just damned blind? There's a hell of a lot of cause for long faces around here. You should've seen Tifa's before she headed out, it was dragging on the ground." Reno sat up, resting his elbows on his bony knees, and sighed. "I dunno, man. Maybe it's the fact that Shinra's finally dead. Sephiroth couldn't do it but now my frigging partner has."

"I can't believe you. You think just because headquarters is gone that the company'll fade into the night? In a pig's eye. I brought Shinra back from the brink thirteen years ago. I'll do it again or die trying, you can quote me on that."

"Maybe I will," Reno laughed, a little of his normal optimism creeping back into his tired aquamarine eyes, "That would be a great spiel to feed the press."

"Hey! That's no spiel. It's my creed, pal, like it or lump it."

"Well, the best of luck to ya, Mr. President," Reno sighed, absently rubbing at his bandaged hand. Reeve looked surprised.

"You're not going to help?" he asked in a hesitant voice. Reno shrugged noncommittally.

"You weren't the only one who busted his ass bringing Shinra back on-line after Meteor. I was there too, I carried a fair share of lumber on my back when we rebuilt. It really stings to see it all smashed on the ground again. I don't want to

rebuild just to see it destroyed another time by someone, something else. Maybe we need to be getting a clue. We're not supposed to be here."

"What, in Midgar?"

"I dunno. I really don't. But don'tcha find it odd that the Planet or whatever keeps sending disasters this city's way? And we keep ignoring it, or fighting it. I dunno. I feel like a damned idiot. We keep ignoring the oh-so-subtle clues that keep being tossed our way. Reeve, when we rebuild, let's do it somewhere else."

"What do you mean?" the Shinra president asked, almost standing from the bed but forcing himself down, "Midgar is Shinra. The city built up around the corporation, if I leave, everything'll go to hell."

Reno looked to the open tent flap, gesturing to the scene of ruin and chaos visible outside, and raised a red eyebrow.

"Okay, point taken," Reeve said with a growl, "I guess it can't get too much worse. But it can get a lot better. I'm going to stay here, rebuild my company and get the city back on its feet. Besides, I'm not going to let the Planet boss me around. Neither shall Jenova, dammit. They can both go and battle each other, and leave mankind out of it."

"That's the thing though," Reno sighed, "We can't stay out of it. We're their fucking pawns. The little soldiers in their stupid war. Cloud and Vincent Valentine's problem right now is they were drafted onto the bad guy's side. And if we're on the side of the Planet, that means they're our enemies. Heh. Maybe that's the reason I'm so bummed. Certain realizations are no better'n kicks in the face."

"Screw that," Reeve said decisively, suddenly getting to his feet and running a hand through his black hair, "I'm not on anyone's side. No wait, I'm on this city's side. On humanity's side. Humanity needs a champion when the elements start warring, someone to keep an eye on the masses."

"And are you gonna be that champion?" Reno asked with a grin.

"Me?" Reeve questioned, brows coming together and eyes going distant with thought, "Hell no, I'm a businessman, not a bloody warrior. But you're pretty scrappy in a fight, why don't you sign up for the job?"

"That's a laugh. People piss me off too much. Besides, I don't give a rat's ass. Why don't you ask Rude when he wakes up? This guy loves a lost cause."

Reno slumped in on himself, weaving his fingers through his mussed hair before plopping the weight of his head down onto his hand. Reeve stood watching him in silence, arms crossed. His eyes wandered over to Rude. He'd spoken with the doctors earlier. None of them had been able to give a definite, black and white answer to his question: Would Rude wake up? No, they'd all been clueless, faced with something they'd never seen before. All they could do was treat his shoulder wound, treat the gashes from Chieko's claw and then hope for the best.

"He doesn't look quite the same without his shades, does he?" Reeve asked, eyeing Rude's face thoughtfully, "Come to think of it, I've never see him without them. He's an evasive sonuvabitch, eh?"

"Nah," Reno answered, sitting up in his seat, "He just has a problem looking people in the eye sometimes. Rather like a certain guy I know who used to spend his life hiding behind a robotic cat. I told Berk once that you used to be a spy for old man Shinra and he cracked up. He says you wear your heart on your face, he couldn't see how you every passed as a member of AVALANCE."

"Gee, glad to know young Berk has so much faith in my abilities," Reeve said, scowling.

"Hell, that was nothing. Cloud brought Cait Sith in one day and Berk was on the frigging floor. He thinks you're fruity."

"Hmph." Reno suppressed chuckles while the Shinra president frowned. Both men were startled when his cell phone suddenly rang. Reeve put the thing to his lips, spoke for a few minutes, then slammed the phone shut with a decisive click. "Team B's back," he explained, "That was Ikari. I think I scared him a few minutes ago, I don't know why else he'd report to me over the phone when he's only just outside."

"Did they find 'em?" Reno asked, not much hope in his voice. The second rescue team had been sent off in the direction of Sector Four, where Tifa thought she'd seen Marlene from the helicopter. Reeve eyed the floor of the tent and shook his head.

"Doesn't mean anything," he said reassuringly, "I'm going to head on out with the next team and keep looking. We'll find 'em."

"Don't you think it's a little selfish to be focusing on them when all these other people are lost?" Reno asked, raising an eyebrow curiously. Reeve smiled.

"Now you're the last person in the world I'd expect to think to that."

"Oh, I know," Reno replied winking, "But I was sick of waiting for you to say something about it. Morality is your department."

"Morality can go take a flying leap for the day, man. I have friends out there. I don't have enough of 'em to go and be getting careless with 'em. Besides, the other teams have the rest of the Sector covered."

"At least that's what you'll tell the reporters when they ask, right?"

"Man, shut up!" Reeve hissed playfully, jamming his hands in the pockets of his slacks and making for the exit, "I'm not worried about them. You sent the staff of every major paper and news program in Midgar to the hospital anyways, didn't you? I should go and get all of my sex scandals and drug trafficking out of the way now while there's no one to report it." Reeve laughed to himself, tossed a grin to Reno, then flipped the flap of the tent aside and stepped out into the air.

"Wait!" Reno called after him, getting quickly from his stool when the president ducked his head back inside, "I'll be out in a sec. I'll give you a hand with the search."

Reeve nodded, glad that Reno had snapped out of his funk, and went off to find Ikari. Reno stared at the vacant tent exit for a moment, thoughtful frown lines drooping down from his nose, then turned back around to stare at Rude. Suddenly sighing, he slid the sunglasses off his own face and planted them firmly on his friend. Now he figured Rude didn't have any reason in the world not to open his eyes again. He turned away with a sniff, scratching at the back of his head.

"Get well soon, buddy."

And without another word, he was off chasing after Reeve.

~*~

"Alright, everyone, on my word. . . one, two, three, HEAVE!"

As Berk gave the signal, he and four dirty but determined men shoved at the blunt end of a ten foot long slab of concrete blocking the exit of the cellar. The slab of masonry was grotesque and jagged, like the broken bone of a giant, covered in the dust and mold of years and years of neglect. Berk wasn't sure which part of the Shinra building it had belonged to, but he knew for certain it was pissing him off.

The block didn't move at first, but with ten strong arms harassing it, after a few seconds of grunting it began to gradually slide back. After a minute that seemed to last forever, it tipped over and fell onto its side, nearly taking Berk with it.

"Careful--!"

Marlene stepped forward and grabbed the young Turk's collar, pulling him away from the dangerous slab. He blinked hard, righting himself.

"Oops. . . "

"Don't have the good sense to let go," she grumbled, jabbing her fists in her pants and looking around through the dust the fallen block had created. The small cellar of the warehouse she'd seen fit to lead them had almost totally imploded. Spikes of rubble jabbed down from the floor of the building above, glass littered the ground, steel girders formed a network of debris above them. It was like being trapped in a giant pincushion. Marlene, Berk, Nanaki, Bugah, and the fifteen or so citizens of Sector Three who'd followed them inside, regarded the wreckage with a sense of awe.

"Shiva is watching over us. . . "Bugah said piously, then quickly raised his eyes to the ceiling and murmured a prayer. Berk eyed him and sighed.

"I'd love to know how she's able to see us with a building in the way," he said impatiently, "C'mon, peeps, let's work on clearing a path back up to the surface. That slab of wall was the main obstruction, it's all just piddly crap beyond that. Heave ho, a little elbow grease, I wanna be home in time to catch the game at six."

Berk ripped his jacket off and smeared his forearm across his brow, flinging sweat away. Whistling a song, he began chucking rocks, plaster, and steel away with gusto. The startled people pitched in and Marlene rolled up her sleeves and went at it. Soon, the small space echoed with the sounds of rocks smashing in the walls.

"I once knew a girl from Mideel, that town beneath the green

The prettiest chick, the cutest thing my eyes had ever seen.

I gave her my all, my soul, my heart, my love, and all my dough

I even took her for a moonlight ride on my golden chocobo.

Her best feature? Damn, her eyes, my friend, blue as all get out
Blue as the sky, they shone when glad, but I'd love to make her pout
For they shone brightest when she was mad at me
They'd shine like the sun upon the sea
They'd outshine the stars, out-glow the moon
Brighter than the heat off a desert dune,
Damn, I'd do anything, no reasons, no why's
Just to see a smile from those blue mako eyes. . . "

"Yo, songbird! Is that necessary? I don't know which is worse, the song or your singing." Marlene heaved a hunk of concrete away, teeth clenched, strands of her chestnut hair stinging her eyes. Nanaki grinned, standing off to the side and feeling a little guilty that his lack of thumbs kept him from helping.

"I think it's probably an unhealthy combination of both," he said, sniggering as Berk burned red.

"I'm just trying to cheer everyone up," he huffed, "A little mood music."

"Unnecessary," Bugah said darkly, "Everyone's already in a bad mood."

"Hey, hey, score one for the Elder!" Berk said and grinned in good humor. He chucked a rock at the old man and Bugah skipped out of the way, cursing.

"Less chatter, more working!"

The speaker was a tall guy in his thirties, still in his pajamas. He eyed Marlene and Berk in distaste, somewhat irked that he owed so much to two such younger people. He'd lost his wife while fleeing the shadow of the tumbling building. He wanted only to be free of the wreckage so he could find her. If there was anything left to be found.

The group worked on in silence for a few minutes, the air broken occasionally by huffing and exhausted gasps as the opening gradually cleared. Shafts of morning sun filtered through from outside. Marlene couldn't help but grin as they struck her cheeks warmly. She pushed stray hairs behind her ears and redoubled her efforts. She'd been so sure it was all over, so certain that the book of her life was about to be abruptly slammed shut. But hey, looked like the sadistic author behind it all felt like writing another chapter. Hell, Marlene wasn't going to complain, nothing like a nice, long, complicated read.

~*~

Chaos landed a bit awkwardly, sliding in a pile of rubble and kicking up dirt and tufts of grass. The black demon stood silent for a moment, head turned up to sniff at the morning air. Arching its long, razor sharp wings at a comfortable angle, it stepped forward a few paces, every movement a lesson in stealth and beauty. The thing was evil looking, but never had evil looked so good. Sleek and massive and lethal to a tee.

You really outdid yourself, Professor Hojo.

Vincent caught his reflection in a puddle of rainwater and would've sighed, if he'd been able to. He wondered if this was how Chaos had felt all those years. Always looking out, always aware, never able to do a god damned thing about it.

The scent of humans was everywhere, it drifted in the air. But then Midgar was a hub of humanity, there was no where in the city you could go without being constantly assaulted by the stench of man. Perhaps that was why Chaos was so edgy, the smell of potential prey polluted everything. The demon paced, claws clacking, trying to isolate the scent of something nearby so it could attack and feed its desire for death. But Vincent could sense that it sought something specific, something beyond the random stranger that it could rip apart. He'd watched so many shredded before the thing's claws that morning, it was so impartial it made him sick. Old, young, male and female, ill and well, it didn't make any difference. Jenova hungered for destruction and Chaos was one of the tools granted to her by Hojo with which she could acquire such destruction. Cloud was the other.

Vincent could sense Cloud nearby. His senses themselves were amazing, Or rather, Chaos's were. He almost thought he could pick out Cloud's footsteps from at least a mile away. He could swear he heard people calling out names far off in the distance, three miles or more. Far, far superior to the enhanced hearing he normally enjoyed. Again, he found himself impressed by Hojo, though he wished the scientist was there so he could personally tell him so. And then of course, tear him apart. Oh, did he want to make something pay for this. . .

Not far away, there was the slightest hint of movement. A rock rolled down from a pile of similar rubble and settled on

the dusty ground. Chaos's head snapped around towards it and a growl ripped through its throat. Vincent felt power enter the demon's limbs, limitless, wicked power that made him nearly breathless.

Wings opening expansively, snapping like a gunshot in the empty morning air, Chaos leapt into the sky towards the movement. His sharp features parted the air before his face like a blade and his claws rubbed together in anticipation. Vincent could only hope the demon's target had sense enough to run.

~*~

"What do you think? That good enough?"

Berk stood looking up, his scraped, dirty hands stuck wearily in his pockets. Marlene shrugged, eyeing the tunnel they'd made skeptically.

"It's a steep climb," she commented, "But we just escaped near death, I think we can handle it. What do you say, Nanaki?"

"Has nothing on the ladders of Cosmo Canyon. Elder Bugah, you can ride on my back. I can climb up there easily. I'll go first, Marlene, and make sure the path is safe for the rest."

Bugah rubbed his fat, wrinkled old fingers into his eyes and climbed onto his student's fiery-furred back. He enjoyed riding more than he cared to admit. It took him back to his chocobo racing days. "Lead on, son of Seto," he said, fighting the urge to spur the creature on with his heels.

The people cleared away for Nanaki as he strutted forward, tail flickering and throwing up weird shadows. He had his claws sheathed and his mouth closed, fangs hidden away, but the simple people still eyed him uneasily, not sure whether he was some trained animal act from the circus or a really sophisticated robot. Whatever he was, since the people'd never seen his like before, they automatically snapped into fear-mode.

The way up was steep, Marlene hadn't been kidding. The original entrance down into the cellar had been a short tunnel studded with footholds to make a sort of laddered passageway. But that had all been smashed to dust, what remained now was a vertical chute with iron girders crisscrossing its length, walls crumbling away if Nanaki so much as looked at them wrong. He dug his claws into the sides of the thing, cautiously inching his way towards the bright glow of day at the top. The Elder hung onto his back skin and mane for dear life.

"Has nothing on the ladders of Cosmo Canyon, eh, Red?" Marlene called from below, "Shall I catch you if you fall?"

Nanaki chuckled to himself and shook his shaggy head ever so slightly. But he was concentrating too hard to bother with a reply. Bugah closed his eyes as a bit of wall suddenly gave way and the beast slipped the barest fraction of an inch, catching himself just in time. He heard the fallen rocks clatter below and gulped.

Another minute or so and Nanaki was clawing at the ground above. He leapt from the chute and shook dust from his mane, Bugah practically tumbling from his back.

"Are you all right, Elder?"

"Of course, of course, excellent job," the old man muttered, brushing himself off, "Mr. Berk! Marlene! Come along now!"

The sun was nearly at its zenith. Still, November had dyed the winds a frustratingly chilly shade of blue that had even Nanaki shivering beneath his thick coat. The desolate wasteland of Sector Three spread about him and his teacher, a landscape so changed it was surreal. Neither said a word about it but neither could pull their gaze away from so much carnage. And neither could stop thinking that this was just the beginning.

"Elder, do you think this is Jenova's doing?" Nanaki asked softly as the first of the people began to pull himself up over the edge of the passageway. Much to the guy's alarm, Nanaki grabbed his collar in his teeth and gave him a helping haul up.

"Of course," Bugah answered, his voice low but loud in the still air, "She's signed our death warrants. The only thing to do now is wait for the executioner."

"Hardly optimistic," Nanaki growled.

"Give me a reason to be optimistic and I'll oblige. Don't act like such a naive little cub."

"But there must be a way to stop her. . . I refuse to go down without a fight."

"No, Nanaki," Bugah contradicted soberly, "It isn't she we must worry about. She didn't do this. It was your friend. Cloud Strife."

"But it wasn't Cloud, Elder! He can't help what she makes him do! Anymore than he could truly help giving over the Black materia to Sephiroth years ago! This is just a cruel trick of fate."

"What is? The fact that the man most responsible for saving the Planet thirteen years ago now seems to want to destroy it? Lesson one, Nanaki, life is cruel. This entire situation is extremely cruel."

Nanaki was silent a moment, helping another person up through the tunnel and into the sun. The struggling young woman, a little dirty and worse for wear but otherwise fine, accepted his help gratefully and threw the creature a smile that warmed him. He smiled back, or as near to a smile as an animal can manage, and nudged her gently to her feet, sighing. As often as humanity puzzled the hell out of him, he wouldn't see it destroyed. Not when some of them could smile like that. "What makes you think he's after the Planet, Elder?"

"Do you think he'll stop with the Shinra building?" Bugah snapped impatiently, forgetting himself in his frustration, "Do you think Jenova will stop at this? She is destruction incarnate, she'll never rest, she cannot rest until all is reduced to such rubble as this. It's simply her nature."

"Yeah, and it's our nature to fight."

Berk dug his fingernails into the loose earth around the broken tunnel entrance and pulled himself through. His face was streaked with dust and sweat, his wet bangs stuck to his forehead. Pushing them from his eyes, he sat on the ground and fought to catch his breath. "I hear you talk like such a walking load of doom and gloom again, Bugah, and I'll chuck your ass back to Cosmo Canyon. We have a saying here in Midgar: It ain't over till you're buried. And I've just pulled myself outta the friggin' ground to take another stab at all this. I ain't giving up, you ain't giving up, and by the gods, we're gonna rebuild. Shinra isn't going down this easy."

"You're worried about Shinra?" Bugah asked in disbelief, "Young man, the Planet's at stake!"

"Yeah, but the Planet doesn't pay my salary."

"Heh, spoken like a true Turk."

Berk eyed Nanaki and grinned. "You think so? Tell Reno that next time you see him, I can use the brownie points. But seriously, old man, why don't you spend your time constructively. Try thinking of a plan instead of sentencing us all to death, eh?"

"A plan. . ." the Elder muttered, plopping himself down on a dirty cinder block, "The only plan I know of is to strike out at the tools of Jenova's destruction: Cloud and Vincent."

"Well that's not an option," Berk answered quickly, attempting to straighten his suit.

"If that's your attitude then, Mr. Berk, what's your coffin size?"

"Hey! Don't get smart with me, ya sour-faced geezer! Elder or not, I don't care, I'll take ya out!"

Berk tugged on the lapels of his sports jacket and began pacing angrily. He almost grinned as he saw Bugah clenching his little wrinkled fists out of the corner of his eye. Pessimism really tended to annoy the Turk. Maybe he'd been hanging around Reno and Cloud too much.

Above ground, the air remained quiet and still for a few minutes as Bugah fumed and Berk lent a hand to Nanaki, pulling the rest of the people into the light. The small group stood in a bit of confusion for a while, lounging against the wreckage, staring each other down. Their homes were gone, their lives destroyed, all in the blink of an eye. They'd only been able to watch helplessly, then scurry away with their tails between their legs, more of an insult than all the destruction combined. Now there were two options: rebuild, or lay down and die.

Marlene shoved the last citizen up the chute before her. She was a little girl, no more than seven or so. Tears had snaked a crooked path through the dirt on her cheeks, her pretty nightgown was in shreds. The sight of her made Marlene's thoughts flicker towards CJ and Ifalna and the young woman wondered if they were all right. She saw no reason why not, she knew Cid was a pretty responsible guy, with other people's stuff anyways. He'd let his own airship be blown to bits all in the name of a stupid stunt, but he'd stake his life to protect what he'd been entrusted with. All of her dad's friends were like that, they were good people. She respected them infinitely. And she respected Barret more than she could ever express. Marlene just wished he wasn't so unforgiving, so stubborn. She said a brief prayer for her father, wherever he was. She'd take all of his annoying nuances gladly, ignore his every fault, if only she was given the chance to see him alive again.

Rubbing at her stinging, tired eyes, she allowed herself a moment to lean back against the wall of the dark bunker and breathe deeply to herself. The stress of all this was catching up to her. Why couldn't it all go back to how it'd been? Why wasn't she in Cosmo Canyon, her pert little nose embedded in one of Bugenhagen's tomes, the wind through the valley whistling in her ears? What was this place? Midgar. Not even Midgar anymore, but something worse, something filled with complexities and evil, where the people who were supposed to love her had suddenly turned into things she didn't

understand. Her scientific mind balked against all these contradictions and it was giving her a headache.

"Yo! You fall asleep down there! Marlene, I don't know what we need to be doing, but we'd better get started. C'mon already."

Berk was really starting to get on her nerves.

"What's it look like up there?" she called, craning her head to see up through the opening. The harshness of the morning light nearly blinded her.

"Looks like someone dropped a building on Sector Three. Didn't do much to improve the scenery."

"Understatement of the year," she heard Nanaki growl lowly. Marlene grinned, glad that her best friend was there to keep her company. Bugah was Bugah, and Berk was a Shinra Turk, but Nanaki would always be her confidante. She got the sudden urge to scratch him behind the ear, so leaving the lonely solitude of the bunker behind but mumbling a grateful word or two for its existence, she began to make her way back up to the surface. The crisscrossed steel bars blocking the way were hazardous, scraping at her arms cruelly. The daylight up ahead blinded her, her flimsy sandals worked against her progress, everything just seemed out to make her life more difficult. She could hear her friends above her, talking lowly among themselves, and then the even lower mumbles of the other people as they whispered about their decimated sector. It seemed they all either wanted to find someone to sue, or they wanted to move, or both. Marlene felt really bad for President Reeve.

"It's been nearly forty-five minutes since impact." Berk's words floated to her ears and she had to admire his efficiency, "I figure there has to be a search going on. While we were down there, I heard choppers moving around. I guess they've just already covered our area but they should be sweeping back around any time. Knowing emergency procedures, there'll be some rescuers on foot too. I suppose we can either wait here for air support or seek out the search party."

"And what do you suggest, Mr. Berk?" Bugah asked in all earnestness. Marlene was amazed how helpless her Elder had seemed during this entire affair. She supposed even thirteen years wasn't time enough for the old man to become accustomed to his position. But then, he'd never had to deal with a real catastrophe before, this was the first time he'd found his ass beneath the flames. It wasn't very reassuring to have a man she'd considered a pillar of wisdom and strength in the world, suddenly reduced to asking the advice of a twenty year old, peon Turk.

But Berk was loving it.

"Well," he began slowly, and Marlene could hear the mounting arrogance in his voice, "With all these civilians here, some of 'em injured, it'd probably be best for us to stay put. I doubt we'd move very fast on foot anyway."

"Some of us could go while some stayed. You could go, Turk, and that lion thing. Bring help."

Berk looked towards the man who'd spoken and shrugged him off. "Better not to thin ourselves out," he said, slipping his hands into his pockets, "Let's just wait it out here for the choppers to come. Shouldn't be long."

"Ah, yes, Shinra efficiency," the man snapped back irritably, then threw himself on the rubble-strewn ground to toss Berk dirty looks. The young guy found it quite easy to slip on his sunglasses and totally ignore him. He leaned against the remains of a shattered concrete wall and craned his head far back, the chilly breeze playing havoc in his hair. His eyes wandered to the sky above and then strolled aimlessly from cloud to cloud, picking out shapes and daydreaming, though it looked to the others as though he were eagerly searching for the spoken-of helicopters.

Ten or so feet below him, Marlene was having a few difficulties. The cuff of her stupid jeans had gotten caught on one of the sharper corners of the steel girders peeping out from the sides of the passageway. The more she tugged, it seemed the more the damned thing refused to come loose. She could feel the shallow hole she was using as a handhold begin to crumble away so, moving quickly, she wedged her back against the nearest wall and yanked her leg viciously.

A dark blur on the horizon had Berk blinking hard. At first he figured it was a chopper and the thought that it was there to take him back to his element and away from all these rebellious Midgar citizens had him smiling broadly. But the more he looked, the more wrong he found he was. This thing was flying in long, graceful sweeps and moving incredibly fast. And it had wings. "What's that?"

"What?"

Nanaki lifted his head up and squinted his one good eye towards where Berk was gesturing. He stared in silence for a few seconds, then shook his head, earrings rattling loudly in the still air.

"It looks like someone I used to know," he muttered softly, "It looks like Chaos."

"Who'd name their kid Chaos?" Berk asked skeptically, not taking his gaze from the rapidly approaching creature. "Hell, who'd have a kid like that? Hell, what is that?"

"No, you don't understand. . . ." Nanaki stood quickly, beginning to become alarmed at the pace and fury of the

creature's approach. He'd never feared Chaos in the past but this thing was different. Not only did it seem physically larger and stronger, but his keen animal instincts sensed something sinister within it, something dangerous.

"Doesn't look very friendly, does he?" Berk asked nervously, gulping as Chaos let loose a screech that rattled the air and sent some of the wandering people scrambling back closer to he, Nanaki, and Bugah. "Um, should we be worried?"

"I don't know, Mr. Berk, Chaos always fought with us. He is Vincent Valentine's mutated form you see. But with Jenova on the loose, with all these things that have been occurring with he and Cloud-- oh my goodness. . . "

Chaos was overhead now and diving like a hawk coming in for the kill.

"Okay, I'm taking my gun out now. . . " In a flash, Berk had his pistol in his hand and was aiming for the charging demon's head. He emptied his fifteen round clip off, then fell backwards in disbelief as nothing happened. Chaos swooped low, grinning like mad, red eyes glinting, then began eating up altitude again and circling over his prey.

"Yeah, I guess we should worry. Looks like your buddy there wants to bite off my head." Berk quickly reloaded his gun and stepped closer to Nanaki, who could only stare in disbelief as Chaos roared cockily above them. His great leathery wings moved with incredible strength, hypnotically up and down in the wind. Berk saw the red on the thing's massive claws and bit down hard on the side of his mouth. Occasions such as this called for one thing: a lot of swear words.

~*~

Swearing a good bit herself, Marlene gave a final, desperate tug on her jeans and the cuff gave away with a tremendous rip. Good-bye designer jeans, hello garage sale fodder. If she'd have known she'd be spending the day climbing around ruined cellar chutes, she'd have worn her paint-stained "adventure" khakis, the ones that Barret said made her look like a pauper. The ones she wore when they would fight just to piss him off. Ah, the thousand and one ways to annoy a parent. . .

The sound of an ear-splitting screech accompanied by fifteen separate gunshots yanked Marlene from her tangent and she blinked hard, jerking her head up to try and see above her. Just blinding white sunlight. She grabbed at fresh handholds and began hauling herself up faster than she thought possible. Screams came to her ears and a thousand possibilities as to the cause of them pounded her brain.

"What's going on?" she cried out, "Hey! Are you guys all right?"

There was only a roar from Nanaki, and various human shouts and curses in reply. And then that strange, horrifying screech. It made her blood run cold.

Once she'd pulled herself up out of the hole, all the rest of her ran cold too.

"Shit! Marlene, watch out!"

Fangs, red eyes, and black pebbly skin suddenly filled her vision, blotting out the piercing white light of the day and making her scream. But then blue fabric swept it all away and something soft but forceful knocked her back, pushed her so hard that she flipped backwards out of the chute and slid for a few feet on the ground. Broken glass cut through her sleeves and snapped at her elbows but she ignored the sting and tried to comprehend the sudden situation.

"Are you okay?"

Berk's face suddenly, peering into hers. With a grimace she realized she was on the ground and immediately pushed herself to her feet, jamming a hand into his chest and shoving him away. He winced at her touch and Marlene instantly saw why. Her hand came away bloody, matching the color of the front of his shirt. He'd been clawed by something while shoving her out of its line of attack. Snapping her gaze away from him, she sickeningly saw what that "something" was.

Chaos was stooped over the body of a dismembered man only a few feet off, and was doing its damndest to dismember him further. The young woman backed away a few steps, brows lowering, a hand going to her mouth.

"What is that?" she whispered.

"That's Chaos." Nanaki was suddenly at her side, looking serious and stern, "But that means that's also Vincent. I just don't get it. . . "

The two names were familiar to her, she knew of them from her father anyhow. But from what she'd been told, Chaos was an ally. A freaky, dubious sort of ally, but an ally nonetheless.

"Jenova's work, you think?" Marlene asked, fear leaving a nasty, acidic taste in the back of her throat. Growling, Nanaki nodded.

"Well, that's interesting to know," Berk commented, eyeing the new enemy cautiously, "Rack another one up for that

nuisance of a virus, eh? Wow, that thing was a Turk at one time. . . I'd love to have seen it in the uniform." Nanaki glared at the young human, deciding it wasn't even worth his time to try and explain. He'd never entirely understood Vincent's alterations himself, he only knew his friend of years ago was yet another victim of Professor Hojo's, one more unfortunate who'd had his body and soul ripped apart by a madman. The details were quite unimportant.

Chaos suddenly tired of his butchering. Yawning wide, he turned around, wowing them all with the amazing set of fangs he possessed. The very sight of him had them all shivering. All but Nanaki. He gazed into the thing's eyes on a hunch, screwing his courage and meeting its bloody gaze. But if he saw anything there that made him wonder, he kept silent about it. He didn't so much as growl as the demon began to slowly approach, its clawed feet leaving gouges in the ground as he paced forward. Berk wasted no time in firing again. The powerful shots rang out in the air but they had no effect on the creature. They bounced right off his tough hide like pebbles thrown by a few cocky kids.

"Um. . . "Berk looked around, sweat sliding down his forehead, "Scramble!"

Chaos bucked uneasily as the group split apart and took off running. He spotted Nanaki instantly, maybe drawn to his bright red fur like a crow attracted to piece of tinfoil. Screaming out, he lunged, ready to run his long claws the length of the creature's body.

"Comet 2!"

The force of the cosmos smacked into him suddenly and made him stumble in mid-attack, the air tinting a bright, lethal shade of blue as Bugah let loose a spell that could level a two-story building. But Chaos laughed it off. The magic swirled threateningly about him for a moment, but then disappeared as he drew it in, absorbing the energy greedily. The green materia orb rolled out of the Elder's trembling hands as he watched the spell have absolutely no effect. His wrinkled features paled as Chaos suddenly ignored Nanaki and approached him, a strange noise rattling around in the creature's throat. Bugah gazed upwards into its face, swallowing hard at the gargoyle-like features, the glistening fangs, the expression of utter unremorsefulness. Just animalistic cravings there, and greed and lust. Except for the eyes. Those red eyes held something familiar. Something human.

"Vincent, don't you remember who I am?" the old man asked nervously, pressing back into the wall blocking his retreat. He rubbed his fingers together nervously, "Bugah of Cosmo Canyon, eh? It's been a while but c'mon, son, surely Jenova hasn't corrupted your mind so horribly. Don't do this, Vincent, remember who you are and what you fight for, come on now."

Ignoring the words completely, Chaos grasped the little old man tightly in one claw and then brought his other around, looking to neatly pluck off his head. But Berk wasn't about to be having that. Not even thinking about it because he knew he'd never do it if he did, the Turk leapt onto Chaos's back, receiving a slice across the face from his razor-edged wings. Giving a shout, he rammed his elbow into the base of the demon's skull, throwing his entire weight into the blow. Chaos roared savagely, flinging Elder Bugah away and into a pile of rubble, then flapped his wings, stretching them out to their full twenty foot span. The appendages battered poor Berk mercilessly but he kept a firm hold on the back of the thing, knowing that the minute he let go or tried to escape, Chaos would whip around and tear him to pieces.

Marlene knelt briefly at Bugah's side, checking on the unconscious old man. He was breathing and that was enough for her. "Nanaki!" she called out and suddenly her friend was beside her, "We have to help Mr. Berk!"

"No!"

Berk's voice ripped through the air, and Marlene and Nanaki jerked around at the sound of it. Chaos roared and screamed and threw himself against the surrounding debris, sending the scattered people panicking towards shelter. Berk held on tenaciously, digging his fingernails into the demon's rock hard hide, his legs flailing out helplessly with the creature's every movement. Yet, gritting his teeth and breathing hard, he demanded, "Get the fuck outta here, I'll keep this thing busy!"

"Stupid man. . . "Marlene muttered, "I won't let you get yourself killed and then have to stew about it the rest of my life! C'mon!"

She ran forward, intent on slamming her fists in Chaos's side, or kicking the demon's ankles, or pinching the crap out of him, whatever it took. The beast whipped around as she approached and roared in her face, lashing out with a claw that she just barely avoided. She fell back onto Nanaki who nudged her to her feet as Chaos sent its two blade-like wings ripping into Berk's unprotected back again. They sliced through the fabric of his suit and into his skin, making him cry out and use swear words that even Cid didn't touch. Nanaki threw his weight into the demon's side, assaulting him with the lethal diamond hard edges of his headdress. They couldn't make a dent.

Shaking his head and trying to rid himself of an approaching migraine, Nanaki backed off a bit, growing suddenly alarmed at Berk's slackening grip. "Hang on, Berk, don't let him shake you off!" he roared and looked around desperately

for something he could use to save his ally. Marlene, fists clenched at her sides, shook her head and shrugged once her friend turned his gaze her way.

"What do you expect me to do? I'm a scientist," she said defensively, "Not Tifa Lockhart."

Nanaki's fur bristled and he lowered his shaggy head, eyeing Chaos as though he'd like to leap upon him and sink his teeth in. He wished Tifa was there, she'd know what to do. "We need a miracle," he growled lowly. An ear-shattering explosion made him look up and away, his prickly jaw hanging half-open. Chaos flew backwards just as Berk lost his grip and slumped off his shoulders, falling to the ground. The demon lay stunned for just a moment atop the crushed remains of a wooden storage shed, then leapt catlike to his feet, bobbing his head about like an expectant bird. Nanaki looked for the source of the shotgun shell that had slammed quite neatly into the creature's chest and suddenly saw Reno standing in the shadows, red hair blazing bright against the dull gray of a concrete wall.

"You guys don't need a miracle, you just need a Turk. Ex-Turk, anyhow. Are you all right?"

Marlene ignored their sudden saviour and rushed forward to kneel besides Berk's collapsed form. The young guy's head lolled unhealthily to one side, half of his face slick with blood. Yet he managed to throw the young woman a wink and a grin. "Cocky bastard," she swore and punched him in the shoulder. Reno huffed over to them, concern in his face, and she saw Reeve, Barret, and a handful of Shinra soldiers only a step or two behind. Father and daughter's gazes met and clashed in mutual relief.

"Dad!"

In the blink of an eye she'd wrapped her arms around his neck. Barret returned the embrace quickly, then much to her surprise, shoved her away and took a hold of her hand. "We hafta move," he said and jerked her back. She didn't understand his haste for a moment, but then, feeling like a fool, she remembered their enemy. And it was a fortunate thing, Chaos was ready to renew the fight. The black demon didn't seem at all perturbed at the suddenly swollen number of enemies facing him. They were simply more people to kill, more fuel to feed his need for death. Jenova's voice hummed in his primitive mind. Vincent didn't shout out anymore, he only watched each action in anguish and fury. Chaos felt him at the very edge of his thoughts, trying to plot, trying to come up with a way to take back his lost control. But there wasn't a thing he could do but watch. This fact made the demon grin. It felt somehow good to be making Vincent Valentine suffer. The man had kept him caged for so long, he deserved this beautiful turning of the tables now. It was apropos, suiting. At least, Hojo had thought so.

Chaos circled, claws flexing at his sides. His wings were parted comfortably yet purposefully, letting him maintain a perfect balance as they shifted and moved in the gently billowing breeze. He eyed the humans before him with something akin to a smile on his leathery features. He stepped forward and each of them cringed back. He smiled harder.

"I'll be damned," Reno muttered, hefting Rude's shotgun irritably. He preferred this weapon now to his glock, he could fire it with some degree of accuracy left-handed. "The unconscionable little prick is playing with us."

"What's wrong with him?" Reeve whispered, supporting the now standing Berk with a strong arm, "That's really Vincent, isn't it?"

"Yeah, the same way that the guy who blew up the Shinra building is really Cloud," Reno answered with a sniff, "I think Hojo's been screwing with him. If that asshole wasn't already dead, I'd feed him to the cat here."

Before Nanaki could snap out a "Hey!", Chaos roared and charged the group, splitting them apart and sending them scattering. He caught one of the guards roughly by the neck and tore his chest open, but immediately flung the lifeless carcass away in distaste. Jenova wanted the others, she wanted the guys in suits, the girl, the red creature and the black man. The rest were inconsequential, it was these others whose deaths would hurt the man inside him most. Vincent cursed his existence as Chaos leapt after Barret and slashed at his back, a stinging wound that hurt a good deal but did little real damage. Barret shoved Marlene ahead of him and snapped around, pulling his bulging right arm back and ramming Missing Score towards the demon's face. Chaos caught the arm though, and twisted it around, shoving the man down into the dirt and snapping at his head.

"Shinra bastard, what's wrong wit' ya, Valentine?!" Barret shot a leg up and kicked furiously at the massive monster's torso but he was too strong and the blows were ignored. Chaos reared a claw back just as Barret fired off his gun-arm into the thing's face. The demon staggered backwards and Barret rolled away, leaping to his feet and taking off after Reno, Reeve, and the rest. A furious roar followed him and he nearly shivered. He'd pissed it off.

Damn it! Damn you, Jenova!

Vincent lashed out against his intangible restraints, suddenly realizing what was coming and fearing for his friends. Chaos was on his feet but blinking hard. Some of Barret's rounds had managed to nick the not-so-sensitive skin around his blazing red eyes. Bright blood trickled from their corners like tears. He stood trembling in rage, roughly wiping his eyes in

an eerily human-like gesture. Ahead, his prospective prey fled from him. Yet he wouldn't give chase. No, that game was over, he was tired of it. Now it was time to finish what Jenova wanted so desperately, to hell with his own pleasure in the action.

"Do you hear that?"

Reno passed up Reeve and they both passed up Berk who was half running/half limping forward. The young Turk asked his question again when the two men ignored him.

"That damned humming noise, do you hear that?"

"Keep running, Mr. Berk!"

Marlene shoved him from behind, then passed him up. He swallowed hard, his entire body burning, cruel fires running over his skin. He didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep going before the wounds he'd suffered began to really smack him around. He could feel the spreading warmth soaking through his clothes, and the stinging of gashes as his skin stretched with his movements. What was that noise though? And this sudden crackling in the air?

The world began to turn red before Berk's eyes. For a moment, he thought perhaps he was about to pass out and this was some stupid side effect of the fact. But what he heard from ahead quelled that notion.

"He's using magic!"

Nanaki's voice. It was fearful with recognition.

"Brace your--!"

It was as though the sky had split apart and every peal of thunder that'd ever rolled in the heavens now rained down upon the fleeing group. Berk's legs gave out beneath him and he tumbled to the ground, vision reddening, splitting, reshaping, with electrical charges pulsing in the air. Different fires baked him then, he heard a cry and realized it was his own strained, panicked voice. Similar sounds of pain assaulted his ears but it was when he heard Marlene's gasped cry that he forced his eyes open and stared around. When did he get on his back? When had he fallen? The sky above filled his vision but it was too red, too wrong. Struggling for air, cursing his burning lungs, he swung an arm out and pushed himself to a sitting position. But a flaming skull, a refugee from the fires of hell, slammed him back to the dirt.

". . . fuckin' flamin' skull. . . ?" he gasped, clutching at his sides, fighting to stay conscious as wave after wave pounded through him. Who was this Vincent guy? What was Chaos? Had he escaped being killed by Cloud just to die here, beneath the gothic magic of a damned devil?

The fiery projectiles plummeted across the sky, streaking their tails of orange and red across the bright blue of the mid afternoon clouds. They fell to earth like squadrons of kamikaze fighters, grateful for the opportunity to die in the name of something mightier than they. Their shrapnel set the debris of the Shinra building alight and the flames danced merrily, throwing their gorgeous, perfect light onto anything that needed a little brightening.

Through half-closed eyes, Marlene watched the ballet of fire. Each flame curled so beautifully, she thought she'd never seen anything so lovely. What did it remind her of? Ah, yeah, the sunsets over Cosmo Canyon. She'd plant herself on the uppermost deck of Bugenhagen's old observatory, her back against warm, orange rock, and gaze out at the sun as it died after another day. The colors it would make were like living fire, blasting a gloriously deathly illumination over the world before her eyes. A furnace of light that turned all objects into long shadows stretching across the canyon floor. The shadows. . . she'd often thought they were the most perfect part of the sunset; black, immense, consuming, the power of their dark was more impressive than that of the sun's impermanent light. Darkness. A black darkness fell over her vision. Struggling to keep her eyes open, not even sure if they'd already closed or not, Marlene took a quiet, shaky breath, then realized she was staring straight at Chaos' massively muscled black leg. The demon stood silently besides her, claws hanging limp as it surveyed its handiwork. The young woman fought to keep from trembling.

The entire space was leveled and burning. Swiveling her limited vision from left to right, careful to keep from moving and drawing the demon's attention, Marlene looked anxiously around. Berk was nearby, Reno and Reeve beyond him. Nanaki's crumpled red form, Bugah sprawled across his back, lay far ahead at the base of a lot of wreckage. Scattered soldiers and citizens lay where they had fallen. No one moved. No one's eyes were open to meet hers as she glanced from face to face. With the only noise that of the flickering fires and Chaos' heavy breaths, Marlene felt totally deserted, eerily alone.

The demon shifted around a bit, then began walking forward. She bit her tongue to keep from flinching as his leg took a step out of her line of vision, so near her bangs rustled at the movement. The air still crackled softly with residue of the beast's spell. Marlene had to marvel at the power that'd been behind it, enough energy to immobilize nearly thirty people in an area of almost a hundred square feet. A few quick sums in her head gave her a total magic expenditure that made her mind boggle. What sort of thing was this? And what sort of wicked, condemning spell had that been? She felt no wounds,

nothing but a burning in her limbs that intensified with every movement. Ack, as a matter of fact, after trying it, she decided moving was bad. Ouch, she wouldn't be doing that more than she had to. Sighing quietly, she looked around at her friends again. Seemed they were worse off. She hoped for the best, but as always, her calculating mind expected the opposite.

Sensing that Chaos had his back to her, Marlene grit her teeth and turned her head about to eye him, not wanting the thing out of her sight for an instant. The demon strutted away, wings held lightly aloft behind him, gait proud. Though her head felt as though it'd turned into a slightly throbbing rock, she kept her gaze fixed on him, as intimidating as his form was. So lethal and dark, like a living shadow. Marlene squirmed suddenly, the movement causing pain to shoot through her spine. She'd fallen on something in her pocket. It dug uncomfortably into her hip as she lay there and she swore silently to herself. Movements muted, her eyes locked on Chaos as the demon walked off, she slowly reached down and stuck her hand in her jeans pocket, drawing out a smooth materia sphere. She could remember absently tucking it away there the night before, her hands greasy with potato chips, but that all seemed so long ago. Still, here it was, Bugah's gift to her, that mysterious, unnamed summon. She rolled the cool stone in the palm of her hand. It felt soothing and healing against her feverish flesh and had a calming effect on her mind. Just by holding that shard of magic some of the hurt of Chaos's spell faded away, letting her breathe just a bit easier. She thanked the Planet for that.

Pulling her thoughts away from the comforting lull of the softly glowing materia, Marlene's attention snapped back to Chaos. The demon was standing over a guy with a gun for an arm who lay unconscious on the ground a good bit off. The man groaned softly to himself, moving an aimless arm up to rub at his face. Chaos watched him silently for a moment, then jabbed his entire right claw into the man's stomach.

"Dad!"

Marlene flipped around and was on her hands and knees before the pain even caught up with her. Clutching the materia orb like a buoy, she fought to stand but couldn't find the strength, even with the sight of her father being hurt so prominent in her eyes. Chaos heard her cry, turned about, and grinned. He twisted his claw and Barret shouted out, firing a few useless shots from Missing Score into the monster's nearly invulnerable body.

"Leave him alone!" Marlene ordered, crawling forward, incensed with rage, "Damn you, get away from him!"

She felt a tugging at the cuff of her torn jeans and looked around. Reno lay on the ground, eyes closed, hugging his shotgun close like a lover lain beside him. "I can't move," he whispered, voice so low the woman had to bend down till his lips almost touched her ear to hear it, "Take this friggin' gun and blow his head off or we're all dead."

"Get outta 'ere, Marleeeene!!"

Barret's words came to her in a holler, dulled by the hot blood frothing up over his lips. Head pounding, Marlene wiped roughly at her unscientific tears and grabbed the shotgun from Reno's vice-like grip. She aimed squarely at Chaos' head and fired, managing to really do some damage to the air ten feet above her target.

"Well, hell," Reno breathed, laughing softly, "How could ya be Wallace's kid and not know how ta shoot? Hmph. I guess I couldn'ta picked a prettier day to die."

"Damn it!" Marlene ignored him, tossing the gun away, lacking the patience to figure out how to reload it. She crawled forward on her hands and knees, her father's cries the only thing she could hear. "I swear to God, I'll rip you apart! I don't care how, but I will! Leave him alone!"

At her words, Chaos drew his claw slowly from Barret's body, the appendage coming free in a burst of glistening red. With sickening pleasure he ran his long black tongue over the gore, training a ruby eye on Marlene as though to see what effect the action would have on her. The young woman screamed in rage and fear, a combination that hurt the demon's delicate hearing and made him rake his claws over Barret's shoulders in hopes of quieting it. Marlene shook with suddenly repressed loathing, using that energy to make herself stand instead of releasing it in a burst of angry voice. She balanced on two unsteady feet and stepped slowly forward, still convinced that she'd make the thing pay. But Chaos was losing interest in the game.

The air about the creature glowed vibrantly, a gorgeous vision of blue and white. Raising his right arm, this tinted air rushed towards him and immediately began to form a blade. The energy sabre was spectacular after it had materialized, the blade was pure magic, pure Jenova-induced power. Pure death.

Vincent felt the thing as though he were holding it in his own hand. Looking down upon it, he saw the swirlings of energy, the lethal curls and sparks visible on the surface of the sword. It pulsed there in his grasp, nearly numbing all sensation in his right arm. Not that that mattered, it wasn't his right arm anyway, it was Chaos'. The demon that he was looked down at Barret Wallace's bleeding form impassionately. It was going to cleave him into pieces. No, Vincent was going to cleave him into pieces.

Jenova!!

Barret watched the demon watching him. Yet he felt he wasn't really looking at the thing properly, he only saw such sadness in those red eyes, as though he were looking at a mourning friend. Where was his soon to be murderer? Where was he so that Barret could curse him with his dying breath, and die just as he'd always lived: defiantly.

But no, this just wasn't fair. He couldn't curse those eyes that looked upon him with such anguish and frustration. He couldn't be angry at something so irresponsible for what was going on. It looked like he'd have to die softly after all. Just didn't seem right though, not after a lifetime of cursing his oppressors.

Marlene watched the events numbly. The November breezes blew so gently around her, played so innocently with the stray strands of hair shooting from her usually neatly braided locks, that the turmoil of events seemed quite out of place. The smoldering fires burning about her were a bit more suiting. They snapped at the coolness in the air, filled the world with smoke and ash. Marlene saw the flames at the corners of her vision, saw her father laying with a sword raised over his neck, saw her friends and allies laying broken all about her. . . she saw all these things so clearly, watching them, analyzing them. They all worked together somehow. They formed a perfect picture of insanity, anarchy, evil. But such was Jenova. It seemed that the dark creature had finally made her mark on Midgar. This was her signature. Marlene could only marvel at the penmanship.

Something burned in her hand. Her mind starkly calm quite suddenly, she turned slowly to gaze down. The materia was glowing. Her summon materia now burned with what seemed the power of a star, emitting a light so bright she thought it should surely blind her. Yet she found she could look this illumination dead on and still see quite clearly. Marlene moved the materia closer to her face and cupped her other hand around it. The pinkish light bathed her features, warmed her entirely, washed the pain of Chaos' spell away. It was like the divine luminescence of heaven, right there in her hands.

Suddenly she understood.

The name of the summon flooded into her mind, the word that would trigger the orb's immense magic and allow her to harness it in the name of her cause. Bugah was wrong, this wasn't an imperfect, functionless bauble. No, as a matter of fact, Marlene had never held such a powerful bit of the Planet before. She'd never felt so much concentrated mako so near. Her hands tingled against the flawless sides of the sphere, but then began to fade away once she'd spoken the name that triggered the summon. Her body zipped out and her mind washed over with darkness. Yet she felt totally at ease. No matter how much her reason was suddenly balking at this, she knew it was the right thing.

Reno heard the name of the summon and smiled, sure he was delirious. "Yes," he said to himself, "Couldn't pick a prettier day to die."

As Marlene's body faded away, the bright red materia orb hung suspended in the air. Power poured from it in quick waves of white and crimson and the very air shimmered about it like a fine silk curtain. Chaos looked around, lowering his upraised saber just a fraction. The blood red light was attractive to him, though he didn't understand just what it was forming. He stepped forward, staring at the glow, then reached a claw out as though to capture just a bit of it for himself. Vincent was nearly memorized by the powerful magic of the summon. He couldn't remember ever seeing anything so beautiful spring from the innards of a materia stone. He could understand the demon's fascination with it. If Vincent had been able to, he'd probably just have stood there and stared.

After only seconds, the light had formed into a very definite shape. A human figure, a man. The red glow throbbed away as the details of his body came into existence. Reno watched the display, his mouth hanging open. He could hear Reeve gibbering close by, he could hear some of the Shinra soldiers swearing lowly. Because the summon was now wholly formed. The spell's namesake stood there stoically, shining silver hair sliding over itself in the breeze. It was General Sephiroth.

"Fuck me. . ." Reno finally found the strength to move an arm. He used it to push himself just an inch or two back further away from the figure, "Marlene's summoned Sephiroth? Aw, fuck me, man, this just ain't happening. . ."

Sephiroth took a deep breath.

The air smelled of battle, of decay and things burning. It was a familiar stench but it sickened him now. Still, he took another breath. It felt good, indescribably amazing to be able to do such a thing. To be breathing, to be alive. Well, not alive, but close enough. He examined himself briefly, looking down with wide eyes at his new body. This shell was formed of the Planet's power and the thing had done a thorough job. He was all there, though his clothes were different. It seemed the Planet hadn't been too fond of his taste in apparel. Perhaps it saw fit that its chosen warrior should look more like a champion of good, and not one of evil. He wasn't too sure how successful it had been with the attempt. It had dressed him entirely in black, from head to toe, but given him a thick cloak of navy blue, the color of the sky just before a storm. His shoulder gear was gone, which disappointed him, he'd used the pads as an aid in his fighting technique, he'd have to revert back to basic methods in combat now. Not exactly a thought he relished. Not with the thing he'd been

summoned to destroy.

Chaos eyed the new enemy cautiously and Sephiroth returned the stare. He couldn't help but smirk, it just felt so good to be there, to be anywhere but trapped in that eternal hell of the LifeStream. He'd have to go back eventually but he didn't care. For now, for now he held Masamune in his gloved grasp. For now, there was an enemy waiting to try and tear him apart. For now, Sephiroth was in his element, was alive to fight again. And this time, there was no Jenova to influence him. He could fight his battles with a free mind, his death had purged that evil from his soul and body.

Chaos lunged and he sidestepped, moving so quickly that Reno's eyes had trouble following him. The ex-Turk grew steadily amazed as he watched the two begin to fight. Each movement that the demon attempted was either blocked or easily avoided by the master warrior. Every lunge of his claw, every kick of his leg, each time he brought a razor-edged wing swinging forward, Sephiroth suddenly whisked himself away, then brought Masamune into play. The silver sword hadn't lost a single ray of its glint after thirteen years. It flew now like a bird of prey, talons and beak compressed into a lone line of glowing steel. Hands comfortably clutching the wrapped hilt, a fist pressed tight against the tsuba, Sephiroth gave his orders to the weapon and it sang in compliance, dancing in and out of Chaos's leathery body. The demon screamed out in frustration as the blade pierced him, his cockiness now reduced to a desperate flurry of clumsy attacks. A mighty sweep of arcing silver knocked him suddenly back and Reno was amazed to see the giant of a monster actually fall to its knees. He hadn't thought anything could hurt it.

"I didn't know he could move like that. . . "

Reno looked around and saw Reeve gazing off at the battle. The Shinra president was propped up on his elbows, a few lines of red running down the side of his face from a gash. Reno shook his head.

"Neither did I," he answered, blinking hard, "Question is though, are we next after he takes care of that thing?"

"Man, I really hope not."

Sephiroth stood tall over Chaos' cowering form. The end of his sword was streaked crimson, blood caked the hem of his blue cloak. A light splattering stretched across his face and he smiled through the familiar warmth. Being a summon was rather interesting, he decided, he could grow to like it. Yet he couldn't forget his true purpose in reappearing now, nor his promise to the Planet. And to himself.

But that would have to wait.

Snarling bloody murder, Chaos threw himself at Sephiroth, catching the seasoned swordsman slightly off guard. In a whirlwind of movements that had the watching Reno and Reeve totally floored, the demon slammed a rock-hard fist into the man's gut and then knocked him to the dirt, pinning him there with one arm.

Sephiroth blinked twice, breathing hard. Hell, this thing was tougher than it looked. Or rather, as tough as it looked, which was pretty serious. He struggled to break free of its restraining arm but despite his training and agility, Chaos was just plain stronger. The demon raised a claw into the air and growled a spell. At its command, black clouds began to swirl above its horned head, a miniature electrical storm that spewed energy and fire in a concentrated blast right atop its target.

"Are you quite finished?"

Sephiroth shot upwards with two powerful legs and knocked the monster off of him, then rolled away, shaking off the blue voltage still crackling about his not quite solid summon form. Chaos landed messily on the ground, entangled in his own wings. He struggled to stand but fell back clumsily, his jaws snapping in a desire to feel something solid between them. Moving with speed humanly impossible, Sephiroth leapt forward, sword at the ready. The sliver of steel glimmered for an instant in the pure morning sun, then disappeared as he embedded Masamune straight through Chaos' chest. Sephiroth pushed the blade in until the tsuba struck skin, then instantly slid it out, flicking the singing katana about slightly to rid it of the glistening crimson. Chaos sat stunned for a moment, claws twitching, blinking slowly, then his head fell back and he was still.

The air buzzed with silence afterwards. Sephiroth stood and cleaned his sword on the clothes of one of the demon's victims. He was breathing hard and loving the fact. His muscles felt warm and comfortable after the exertion of the battle. It had been a good exercise to get the kinks of thirteen years of death out of his body. He told himself he would be even better when next summoned, he wouldn't allow himself to be surprised or pinned again. Cicadas buzzed in the distance, basking in the ever-warming sun of the day. Afternoon was approaching and the sky was growing bluer and bluer with each hour as the paling morning mist burned away. He took a deep, deep breath of the air, ignoring the smell of smoke and dust and searching for that scent of life. Midgar did smell of life now, he noticed with some pleasure. No longer just that sickly-sweet odor of human filth and pollution that had usually greeted his sensitive nose when he'd descended from the plate to visit the slums in the old days. This was a smell that pleased him, a smell he'd missed. He sheathed Masamune at

his back, glad to feel that reassuring, familiar weight, then turned his gaze down to the fallen demon.

But Chaos was changing.

His skin was paling, his features twisting around eerily, a sound of pain escaping his rapidly softening lips. The monster's wings curled close to its torso then disappeared altogether. After only a minute or two, Vincent Valentine lay sprawled in the dirt, covered in sweat and blood, and shivering violently. Sephiroth eyed him and crossed his arms.

"Are you all right?" he asked calmly, "I apologize for having to disable you."

Vincent raised a hand in front of his face, bending his fingers, squinting to see his flesh against the bright sky. His head was spinning, and his body burned until he could barely breathe, but he was human again. He felt like crying in relief.

Wrapping his arms around his chest, trying to ignore the gaping sword wound and the thousand and one other gashes crisscrossing his frame, Vincent slowly sat up, resting his forehead on his knees. He swallowed hard and shut his eyes, wondering what had triggered the transformation. He felt foolish to be questioning such a god-send, but he was a realist and wanted to know just how long this would last. Perhaps he could do something finally, perhaps he could take control of his own life for the first time in over a week. Through exhausted red eyes, he looked up at Sephiroth. Sephiroth. The last time he'd seen that noble face, those cool green eyes, they'd been turned upon him in mocking fury, and kicking the shit out of his ribs back in Lucrecia's cave. But no, he'd watched him torturing Cloud too, that morning in the alley. So who was this spectre now? He'd seen that brown-haired young woman use a summon materia and then the swordsman had materialized. But Sephiroth as a summon seemed an impossibility. That would mean that he was acting with mako, the power of the Planet. The Planet and Sephiroth were like oil and water, like day and night. There was no way they could now be allies.

"Why are you here?"

Vincent's voice came out in a rough croak. He cleared his throat and asked the question again, pushing hair out of his face with a trembling hand. Sephiroth paced.

"I am here to lend my assistance to your cause," he answered emotionlessly, "I have been chosen by the Planet to represent her in the battle against Jenova. After what happened in the Northern Crater thirteen years ago--"

"When we killed you, you mean."

Sephiroth paused, a slight frown at the corner of his lips. "Yes," he confirmed, "After what happened it was impossible for me to be of any use with my old body, it is long since dust. So the Planet has lent me her power and made for me a new one. Though I'm unfortunately tied to that summon materia."

Vincent stared down at the ground, shivering. The cold wind was harsh and unforgiving against his shirtless chest, the blood and sweat didn't help. "You're here to take the place of the mako beast then?" he asked, turning his head up ever so slightly.

"In a way."

"So is it also your mission to kill Cloud Strife and myself?"

Sephiroth was silent a moment. He looked out over the wreckage that Chaos had made with his spells. What had been a field of rubble and debris was now a field of rubble and debris on fire. His shimmering hair caught the firelight and he frowned, recalling that day so long ago when he'd walked among such flames and reveled in their destruction, feeling that their consuming appetite was his own. Remembering such things now gnawed at his soul. "The Planet has ordered me to kill the both of you," he finally answered, turning and looking Vincent coolly in the eyes, "But I have my own agenda. I know who truly must die in order for this world of yours to survive."

"Why are you doing this? Is it some sort of penance?"

Sephiroth nearly laughed at that one. As it was, an uncharacteristically large smile split across his face, green eyes snapping in mirth. "Do you honestly think there is a penance I can perform to wipe out my actions?" he asked through chuckles, though there was so much anguish behind the question that Vincent felt a twinge in his heart, "No, Mr. Valentine, I'm doing this for Lucrecia and you and the Strifes and the new Shinra, for Cosmo Canyon, for Aeris Gainsborough, for every man, woman and child who ever has or will be born. Out of necessity I will fight in the Planet's name, with her power, but I am here for humanity. That is all. The only thing I ask in return is the answer to a question, something I'll ask you when my mission is complete."

"Your mission. . ."

Both men turned around at the new voice. They saw that the group of people Chaos' magic had leveled had since recovered and now stood watching and listening to them, most with a look on their face as though they'd like to go find a rock to hide beneath. Vincent immediately turned away in shame. He'd inflicted so many of the wounds on those innocent

people. And the three dead men, two blameless citizens and one Shinra soldier, he himself had stolen their lives. The guilt tore at him.

It had been Reno who'd spoken. He stepped forward a little crookedly, leaning heavily on his right leg, supporting himself with Rude's shotgun. His gaze went from Vincent to Sephiroth and back again. "We appreciate the offer of help, General," he said tactfully, "But we humans can handle this fine on our own, thanks."

Sephiroth stared the red-haired man down. Then his green eyes darted over the broken group of people, lingering on Berk's crimson-coated face, Reeve's wounds, and the unconscious Bugah and barely alive Barret Wallace. He didn't even bother responding to Reno's words. Instead he turned back down to Vincent.

"Your time is short," he said softly, "You won't remain as you are for long. I'm sorry for what's happened to you, for what. . . my father has done. But Mr. Valentine, you can control your life. You can. You must find a way. And whatever happens, don't allow her to feed off your frustration or your anguish because then, before you know it, she'll have your soul. Keep a tight-fisted hold on your soul. It's one thing in life you cannot retrieve after someone's stolen it from you."

A far away look in his features, Vincent nodded slightly. He knew so well. Someone had already taken his soul from him and locked it safely away in a velvet-lined wooden box. And in nearly fifty years, he'd yet to really get it back.

Sephiroth turned suddenly to the others and addressed them, raising his voice. "You must leave this city," he said, "And you must leave now. There is only death here as you've seen with the destruction of Sector Three. Jenova wants Midgar and the Planet has decided to let her have it. The city's citizens aren't as important to it as the recovery of her lost land."

"That's as fair as shit," Berk snapped, leaning heavily against Reeve's shoulder. Sephiroth eyed him and shrugged.

"We humans scrabbling beneath the forces of Jenova and the Planet are truly helpless. The both of them are equally dangerous to us. Why it is we fight for the Planet and not for the other is a mystery. I suppose it's because she would have us dead right out whereas the Planet prefers to use us to her own measures. So we are either puppets or corpses. Such are our choices." Sephiroth frowned slightly, noticing that that his vision was beginning to fade, the world growing darker before his eyes. Terrifying green seeped in on the edges of the horizon. He closed his eyes, fighting down panic. He was returning to that tortuous realm, but he'd be back. He'd keep his promise.

"Sephiroth!"

Nanaki stepped forward, desiring to speak for a reason he didn't understand. "I. . . I saw you. In the LifeStream," he stuttered, "I heard you. Has. . . has the Planet granted your request then?"

Sephiroth only smiled. He closed his eyes and bowed low to the creature, arms rigid at his sides he bowed to them all. And then he vanished in a wisp of red.

For just the fraction of a second after he'd gone, the air was turned to sand, each grain, unshatterable silence. The people looked helplessly at the bit of ground where he'd stood with something like awe steeped with fear in their features. But then Marlene materialized out of thin air and fell forward onto her knees, blinking the black of oblivion away.

"What the hell did I summon??" was the first thing out of her mouth. After she was on her feet, "What the hell is going on??" was the second. She looked down at the perfectly normal piece of materia in her hand then shoved it gingerly away back in her jeans.

"You summoned the late great General Sephiroth, sweetheart," Reno stuck his hands in his slacks and whistled, tossing the woman an impressed look, "You gotta tell me where you get your materia from."

"Sephiroth?" she asked in disbelief, and would have fallen backwards if not for Nanaki shoving at her with his snout, "I heard the voice in my head. . . it said his name and it made sense at the time, but, but. . ."

"But this is extremely fucked up," Reeve finished, sighing.

"Or it's very fortunate," Nanaki added, trying to shake off the solemnity of the dead man's presence, "He said he was here to help and we could certainly use it."

"Help. . ." Reno scoffed, pacing nervously, running a hand through his hair, "That's a joke. If he hadn't screwed with everything years ago, Jenova wouldn't be around doing what she's doing now."

"How d'you figure?" Marlene asked, "If you want to start laying blame, you can point the finger at yourself. Shinra was the catalyst of all this. Their employees discovered, released, and triggered Jenova and her return. What happened thirteen years ago was simply all of that coming to a frightful head."

"Hey now, you're forgetting who you're workin' for now, missie. Why are you downing Shinra, eh?" Reno asked darkly. Marlene turned away, surveying her surroundings and scratching Nanaki behind the ear.

"My only loyalties are to the truth, Reno," she answered in bullet-proof composure, "I suppose that's why I'm a

scientist. Say, where'd that monster go?" She asked the question in a bit of alarm, suddenly realizing that Chaos had disappeared. Nanaki gestured to Vincent with a flick of his head and she gasped, unnerved by the sight of the crouching, bloodied man. He didn't turn around though he knew he was being watched. He struck Marlene as quite pitiful. So pale and broken crouching there in the morning sun.

"I don't understand. . . "she began, stepping towards him. Reno halted her advance with a firm, rude grip on her shoulder.

"Neither do I, "he said, "But ain't no one going near him. There're three less people in the world, probably more, because of that freak."

"Watch it, Reno, "Reeve said, anger at the edge of his voice, "You don't know what's going on."

"Yeah, we don't." Berk pushed himself off the Shinra president and stumbled to stand on his own at Marlene's side. She looked over at him uneasily. He was bleeding quite badly and the sight of his wounds was making her nauseous. "Why don't you fill us in, Mr. Chaos? Or would you rather just claw my face in again?"

All eyes were on Vincent. Yet he wouldn't turn his head to look at them. Instead he kept his tired gaze fixated on the snaking cracks of a shattered concrete wall. He was trying to keep himself calm, trying to ignore the relentless burnings of the sword wounds that'd sliced his body to shreds. Every movement was an exercise in pain. And every word of the ignorant people at his back made him want to scream out excuses, explain to them the truth of what was going on. Thing was though, he wasn't sure of the truth himself.

What did he know for sure? He knew he was cold, he knew he hurt. He knew he was tired of this constant struggle against forces so much more powerful than himself that each strike against them stole a little more of his life away. And those other lives he took down with him in the fight, they galled the interior walls of his heart so badly he could feel the shreds of his humanity tattering within, blowing ticklishly against that soul he insisted upon keeping a hold of. He wouldn't let Jenova win. He could not surrender. No matter how many lives were lost upon the way, he'd keep fighting, knowing that his failure to defeat her would result in the deaths of everyone, the death of the world. And if he wanted to keep his soul, his conscience, and his humanity, he couldn't allow the guilt of the Planet's death to ever fall upon his mind. Such a thing would crush his will and send him down to hell along with the rest of his race. Devil or not, he wouldn't go to hell, not ever.

"So how about it, Valentine?" Reno's voice was impatient, unforgiving, "What the hell went on up in that building? What's wrong with you and Cloud? And how was Hojo involved?"

Vincent finally swallowed hard, screwed his courage, and turned his head to meet the gaze of his accusers dead on. He didn't even bother trying to stand, the pain in his limbs let him know it would be a pointless attempt. "Cloud's mad, "he said simply, quickly, almost coldly, "And he's been infused with the power of eighteen materia, much like Sephiroth was. As such, he now has powers just as great, more impressive actually, since the number of materia within him is much larger. I think all of that has taken its toll on his mind, he can't control it. As for myself, I'm not exactly sure what Professor Hojo's done to me. I woke up as Chaos, that beast that fought you all. I have no control over it. I'm very sorry for what it did."

The group was silent, absorbing the information soberly. Vincent stared Reno dead in the face, sensing that if the ragtag bunch of people had a leader, it was probably him. However, it was Nanaki who finally approached. He did so almost timidly, his four feet padding against the rubble-strewn ground without a sound. For a moment, he stood only a foot or so away from the man, head cocked to one side, eyeing him quizzically. "I knew all the time it wasn't really you, Vincent, "he said finally, "I saw it in Chaos' eyes. Is Jenova controlling that thing?"

"Yes."

"And there's nothing you can do to stop her?"

Vincent shook his head, then winced as the action caused pain to shoot through him. Suddenly, he looked up and asked, "Where's Tifa?"

"Out looking for Cloud, "Reeve answered, finally stepping forward. Vincent's presence seemed to be intimidating everyone but he and Nanaki. But then, they were the only two who really knew the man, who'd fought with him and learned a bit of his dark past. Vincent looked up at the Shinra president and frowned.

"You must tell her I'm sorry, "he said softly.

"About what?"

"Her children."

"CJ and Ifalna?" Reeve clarified, raising a dark eyebrow and rubbing at his scratchy goatee, "What do you mean?" Like a kick in his ribs, the answer came to him and it was horrible. He suddenly realized the pain that the two men had been going through and it made the breath catch in his throat. Frowning, he knelt down and looked his friend in the eyes. "Vincent, did you think they weren't saved when they fell from the towers? "he asked softly, "It isn't true, man, they're fine."

The LifeStream came and saved them, took them home."

"What. . .?" Vincent shook his head, clenching his teeth though his eyes began to brighten. Reeve smiled at him and laughed lightly.

"They're alive, "he said, "They're fine. A little shaken up but perfectly alright. Unless Cid's crashed them all into the Eastern Ocean in which case they'll come back wet and whiny."

Vincent burst out into a strange laughter. The choking strains of everything he'd been repressing for over a week. He laughed until tears ran down his face and he stuck a hand up into his hair, threading black strands through his fingers and resting an elbow on his knee. Reeve laid a hand on his bare, bloody shoulder, concern in his face, but Vincent waved him off with his upraised claw. "Take that, Jenova, "he muttered, finally getting control of himself. He cleared his throat, still smiling and shut his eyes wearily, strands of hair jabbing into his sallow cheeks as though to draw blood.

"Cloud thinks they're dead, "Reno said suddenly, uncomfortable with the thought, "And I'm willing to wager that's half his problem."

"He thinks they're dead?" Marlene frowned, gritting her teeth behind her turned-down lips. She crossed her arms and watched her feet with troubled eyes, "God damn all of this, it isn't fair. We have to tell him different, tell him the truth. How can that thing do this to him? Make poor Cloud go through all this torture?"

"Because she doesn't care." Vincent said the words matter-of-fact. They were simple, but they were true. And he understood better than any of them. "You have to evacuate the city, "he added, "You all need to get out of here."

"What do you mean, blackie?" Reno asked irritably, "We just need t'go fill Cloud in, he'll straighten up, then we kick that virus's ass and life can go back to its normal, pleasant cycle. Piece o' pie, piece o' cake, piece o' strudel. Pick yer pastry."

Vincent smiled at Reno in a way that made the ex-Turk want to go up and kick him. "Didn't you listen to Sephiroth?" he asked, "Jenova wants Midgar. And the Planet's going to let her have it. Unless you all want to go down with this city, you'll leave."

"You expect us to trust Sephiroth? Or even you, for that matter? You could still be some fucked up little Jenova puppet just spouting what that bitch wants us to hear. We don't have to listen to this-- !"

"Vincent, how much time do we have?"

Reeve cut his employee off rather abruptly. He leaned back, resting an elbow on Nanaki's strong red shoulders, and looked his old friend straight on.

"I'm not sure, "Vincent answered uneasily, "Perhaps an hour. Two at the most. Jenova is getting impatient. She . . . she knows that the Planet is using Sephiroth, I think, and she's less than ecstatic about it, so she grows nervous. She wants her desires achieved soon. If you could only see what I've seen. She shows me her thoughts, every heartless one. Jenova will sow this Planet with our bones if she isn't stopped."

"You seem to know a lot, "Reeve mumbled, his voice neutral though it could've easily been accusing. Vincent began to shrug, remembered how much that hurt, and stopped.

"I can hear her, "he said lowly, staring off into space, "Everything she says, to myself, to Cloud, to Chaos, to Chieko, I can hear it. It never stops, actually." Vincent blinked a few times and looked down at his good hand, needing sudden reassurance. The sight of his own flesh was still quite pleasing to his eyes. It was even comforting to see his metallic claw still there, and not covered with that pitch-like pebbly skin. "They're alive?" he asked suddenly, his eyes shining with a hope he hadn't felt in the longest time. He needed confirmation, he needed to hear those beautiful words again. Reeve grinned wide and nodded.

"As alive and obnoxious as ever, "he answered cheerfully. "Jenova can't mess with those Strife kids."

Vincent stared off at nothing, his thoughts racing, a leaden veil lifted from his spirit. He didn't feel condemned anymore. The pardon had come and he had another chance. He wouldn't blow it this time, he wouldn't fail, he'd die himself before he allowed anyone else to be hurt by the dark creature controlling him. Wasn't that all that mattered? Didn't he tell himself that all the time? What use was Vincent Valentine compared to the lives of innocents, those untouched by sin or evil? Yes, those words still held true for him. That unspoiled flower he'd allowed to be shriveled so long ago, that fresh bud who'd been plucked and left to dry between the two rotting pages of time, she'd been purity that he'd failed, that he'd killed. And he'd thought the terrible mistake had been repeated with those two children. But no, they were alive. He wished he could see them, see the truth for himself. He wished Cloud could see that perhaps the Planet did give a damn after all

"Vincent!"

He looked up, realizing this was the third time Nanaki had called his name.

"Sorry."

"What can we do about all of this?" the creature asked earnestly, "If you can hear what Jenova's saying, do you know a weakness? A way to defeat her?"

"There's no way I know of. The things I hear are vengeful and insane. Only one objective is clear. One target that she repeats over and over."

Reeve crossed his arms nervously and frowned, a lump forming in his throat. "And what's that?" he asked, already knowing the answer. Vincent sighed softly and eyed the sky, glad to see it in its normal, beautiful blue tones as opposed to the horrid red of Chaos' vision. He hadn't looked upon it in so long that now it wouldn't let him look away. When he replied, his mind was really somewhere else, so his words came out somewhat wistfully.

"Destroy Midgar."

Silence reigned for a few moments. Reeve stood jerkily and began to pace, rubbing his hands together quickly so the others wouldn't see how violently they trembled. Marlene had since made her way to her father's side and was tending the serious wounds Chaos had inflicted upon him. She looked up at Vincent's words, her features drawn. Her voice was matter-of-fact.

"We have to stop her." Vincent smiled and shook his head.

"The only thing that could stop Jenova now would be the Planet. And Sephiroth has said it won't help us."

"But why won't it help?" Berk demanded in frustration, "Doesn't this stupid rock care what happens to us?"

"She cares more for the land," Reeve answered, black brows lowering, "Well screw her. She can have this stinking city. I'll just forget the fact that I've spent most of my life building it up from nothing, from a nameless outpost to the largest metropolis on the continent. Fuck it. I'll build a new Midgar, I'll build a better one. And we'll defeat Jenova now and then there'll be nothing to threaten it later. Let's see how this miserable Planet likes that."

"Get a hold of yerself, Reeve," Reno said irritably. He had his nightstick out and was slapping it against his shoulder, keeping a wary eye on Vincent as though fearing he'd revert to a monster if he looked away and start killing people again. Vincent felt the cyan eyes upon him but avoided his gaze and listened stoically to the conversation. "If this is how it's going to end, it's how it's going to end. You can plot your grand frigging revenge against the Planet later. For now, it seems, we need to concentrate on keeping ourselves and the god-forsaken people of this city alive."

"What's she gonna do?" Berk asked wearily, "Blow it up?"

Vincent shrugged, further angering the already aggravated group of people. Throwing him a dirty look, Reno snapped, "She'll probably just have flapping boy here knock a few spells around."

"Shut up, Reno," Reeve barked, reaching into the flap of his sports coat and pulling out his cellphone. He began making a string of phone calls to Ikari and the rest of Shinra's commanders. As Marlene, Berk and the rest looked on, he ordered a full evacuation. His voice was tense as he gave the orders, yet it never lost a degree of his presidential decorum. He figured if the city was going to go down, it would do so gracefully. He and the rest of the scabbling humans would retain a bit of their dignity even as the Planet they so trusted allowed them to be condemned to death.

The burning space was still as the President made his chain of calls. They were an official sort of closing to the city, more an execution than anything Jenova could do. He ordered what was left of Shinra's files and documents to be retrieved and then shipped to Kalm. He ordered the supervisors of each Sector to begin immediate, mandatory evacuations. He authorized the use of force towards those who wouldn't comply.

"If there's anyone too ignorant or too proud to run away, you make them, Ikari, do you understand?" he asked sternly, lips brushing the bottom of his cell phone, "I don't want that bitch to have any more lives than necessary."

"She's already taken so many, what's the fuckin' difference. . ." Reno muttered to himself. He threw his narrow frame against a wall and leaned there, eyeing the ground, watching a trail of disturbed ants winding its way along. His mind whirred with the events of the past ten minutes and the stress sent adrenaline into his veins. Yet there was nothing to fight anymore, just some stupid force too strong for him or any other pathetic little human to even touch. All he could do was flee with the rest of the city, and leave the fighting to a Planet that didn't even seem to care. Gods, it pissed him off. He slammed the butt of his nightstick against the wall, his fist closing tight around the grip, sending searing pain into the space where his two fingers used to be. But he didn't care. He squeezed harder, teeth clenching, until he could feel the warm blood trickling between his knuckles and down his hand. Damned, damned, DAMNED Jenova!

Reeve hung his phone up and dropped it in his pocket, giving his bulging jacket a little pat. He smiled pleasantly towards his comrades and sighed, a long shaky sigh of acceptance. "Well that's that. Let's head back to camp."

The next ten minutes were spent in a bustle of activity. After a bit of scouting around, Marlene found a few chocobos locked up in a shed and led them out, setting her father up on one of them. Barret grinned at her crookedly as he tried to keep himself from slipping off. Every minute he seemed to grow weaker, the gaping rip in his stomach was draining his life away. Still, Marlene was optimistic, he'd be alright after a few swipes with a restore materia. Barret watched his daughter fondly as she fidgeted with the straps of the chocobo's awkward saddle. There were tears in her eyes as she wiped his blood off her hands and moved his large booted feet into the stirrups, tying the warking bird up to another one who'd lead the way. Before she could walk off to help Berk clean up some of his own wounds, Barret stopped her with a heavy hand on her shoulder. She turned and looked up at him, smiling weakly, a tear slipping out of her right eye and creeping down her cheek.

"I'm sorry," was all he could manage to get out. But Marlene knew how much that meant coming from her father. She stuck a foot in one of the stirrups and lifted herself up, gently wrapping her arms around his neck. The chocobo chirped at the extra weight and paced about, snapping at its bit.

"I'm sorry too," Marlene murmured, still smiling. Barret half-laughed.

"What you got t'be sorry about?" he asked, "If you were any more of a perfect young woman, I think I'd hafta start gettin' suspicious that you was an angel, and not my little girl. I need ta trust you, is all. I'm gonna learn how t'do that, you just watch."

Marlene gave him a last squeeze, then the chocobo reared up, tired of the strain of two passengers, and knocked her to the dirt. She fell away with a cry, and Barret chuckled, wincing with each shake of his shoulders and patting the bird's downy neck to calm him.

From across the way, Berk gave a small sigh, watching Marlene and Barret's interaction without a word. Reno noticed the wistful way he was glancing at the young woman and then smirked.

"Forget about it."

"What?" Berk looked up, a perfectly innocent expression on his face. Reno snorted.

"Just forget about it," he repeated, "Nothing but heartache and aggravation over there, trust me. If it came down to it, she'd choose her daddy over you any day of the week, Berkie."

The young Turk flipped him the finger, slightly piqued that his thoughts had been so apparent on his face, then turned and huffed off towards Reeve. Reno watched his retreat soberly, too impatient with the woes of the world to bother with sympathy for a small case of unrequited love. Tucking his nightstick away in his jacket, he pulled the garment closer about his thin chest, shivering against the cold. There was something in the air that had him ready to snap. Something was waiting, something was watching with eyes that never shut or shed a tear at what they saw. And the thing was, Reno could name that something. It had a frigging name. Evil was supposed to be faceless, nameless, more an idea than an entity. But such wasn't the case here.

Not that that's all bad, he thought to himself bitterly, At least if I'm ever able to find her, confront the real her instead of the guys she's got under her proverbial thumb, I'll be able to look the thing in her eye and tell her what a little bitch she is. Thank the gods for small favors.

Vincent watched the people milling about. He saw they all were very careful to give him a wide berth. They were so frightened of him, it almost made him laugh. All but Nanaki and Reeve. The Shinra president, though on the phone again, stood nearby for some reason, while Nanaki was right as his side tending to Bugah, who still hadn't regained consciousness after being thrown against the wall. Why were they so concerned with staying near? He wanted to ask Red why he wasn't angry at him since Chaos had nearly killed his Elder. Why did the beast with the kind eyes, the flickering, fiery tail, why did he keep looking up and throwing him sad, but reassuring feline smiles? This attention was strange. It made him uneasy, made him want to try and get to his feet, flee the eyes.

Jenova was right, he thought suddenly, I do always hide from things. Or try to anyway.

Do you see, Vincent? You aren't meant to exist side by side with humans. Perhaps at one time it would have been possible, long ago, in Wutai maybe. Before Hojo made you into something else, gave that inhuman heart of yours an appropriate shell to reside in. You can't go back now. You are something else. And you must accept that fact. Inside and out.

Jenova's voice cut through his mind so sharp and clear that it startled him.

Suddenly, Chaos was there. The demon's claws ripped at the edges of his mind as the sword wounds in Vincent's body began to heal. He watched his flesh rippling with an uneasy sneer on his lips, an unhinged glint in his red eyes. He could hardly remember a time when that thing wasn't present somewhere in his subconscious. Chaos was simply a part of him, a dark side that was more tangible than most people's. But the way he roared within at that moment, it frightened Vincent

to realize how much more prominent that dark side now was. He wouldn't be able to stop it. He'd lose his humanity again and who knew when he'd regain it, if ever. He'd have to watch, caged and helpless, as a devil with his own eyes ripped through the world, ripped through people he cared about. He didn't want to be reduced to the lone spectator of such remorseless butchering again. But his wants meant nothing to her.

"Vincent, are you all right?"

He looked up and saw Nanaki staring at him. Vincent shook his head, sweat beading out on his brow.

"You all have to leave," he murmured.

"I know. Reeve's making the preparations now. Don't worry, we'll get outta here in time, no mat-"

"No, Red. . ." he shook his head, gritting his teeth so tightly together he could hear his jaw cracking in his ears, "You have to leave me. I'm going to become that thing again."

"No!" Nanaki looked suddenly angry, suddenly adamant. The others glanced towards him as he lowered his shaggy head closer to Vincent's, "You're one of us," he hissed, "We won't leave you alone, we're going to help you. You're going to come with us out of Midgar!"

"Don't be naive. I can't be helped, Red. You have to go now or I'll just kill you, hurt you further."

"I'll risk it," Nanaki nuzzled his shoulder like a loyal puppy, shutting his one eye. Vincent shoved him away, a growl at the edge of his voice.

"Nanaki!" he commanded, "I'm not playing around with you! I don't know how much longer I can hold Chaos off. He's too strong for me now, it's no great task for he and Jenova to overpower me."

"But--!"

"Red, he's right. C'mon." Nanaki jerked around and saw Reeve standing there. He looked over the beast's head and stared at Vincent, a queer expression on his face. Something passed between the two of them in that second. Reeve suddenly had the thought that perhaps the dark man of few words that his alter-ego'd fought beside years ago, he thought that perhaps that man was worth more than he'd first reckoned. And Vincent, much to his own surprise, saw that the guy behind the cat wasn't really a coward. There was a leader in there somewhere, a warrior with different sorts of weapons but a warrior nonetheless. The two heroes regarded each other, and were able to admire the different breeds of heroism that each possessed.

But that moment of mutual respect suddenly passed. Reeve broke the staring with a guilty shake of his head. There was so much he wished he could do. But their foe was too strong, and the situation too unfortunate. He'd have to leave this man to the hands of fate and the Planet. When all was said and done, they seemed the only ones with any real power over the future anymore. So much for shaping your own destiny.

Swearing softly to himself, the Shinra president gave Nanaki's mane a tug and walked quickly off towards the citizens of his condemned city, gesturing for them to move forward with a sweep of his arm. The group looked his way in curiosity but complied without question and began to move off, a passel of civilians, soldiers, Barret and Berk on chocobos, Marlene, Reno and Reeve on foot, leading the way. Nanaki glanced towards them, eyes hard. He gently flipped Bugah onto his back, then turned to Vincent.

"I'm going to help you," he growled, lowering his head, "I promise. I don't care what I have to do, I'll do it. We're going to get you and Cloud back."

Vincent tried to speak, to thank him for the concern, but the pain flooding his frame stuck the words in his throat. He nodded slowly, shutting his eyes, his forehead falling on his knees roughly. Nanaki frowned, guilt heavy in his heart, then ran off, turning just once to look back.

He sat there, a forlorn figure surrounded by pale flames and chunks of shattered masonry. He shivered with pain and cold. But he smiled at Nanaki and nodded his head in a gesture for him to leave, swallowing hard as his vision turned red. Without another word, Nanaki galloped after his friends and Vincent was alone. Or at least, he wished he was.

~*~

Chieko walked on muffled paws. She didn't quite know why.

Here she was, a magnificent beast, a creature who evoked fear with her fiery visage, her leathery wings, her slavering fangs and foot long claws; and she was tip-toeing.

Anonymous empty streets caught the sound of her footfalls, echoing them back louder than she would have liked. But

at least the streets were clear. She had a sudden dread of actually meeting anyone. Even with her father sprawled reassuringly upon her broad back, Chieko walked the streets of Midgar in fear. Though they were nice streets. Manicured lawns stretched to her left and right, pretty little houses with their shutters barred, their front doors bolted greeted her bright brown eyes. She'd never seen such cheerful, frightened homes, they made her want to approach them and give a knock, see what'd pop out.

"What is this place, father?" she asked softly, her attempt at a whisper coming out as a growl, "Do all people on the outside live like this? It's no wonder you were so bitter. To be trapped within the building like that, to miss out on all these human pleasures. The trees are so pretty, and the sky is bluer than it seemed from the lab. It suppose it's just because the tint of the windows on the building made it darker, but I think it's something else too. Mmm. . "

Hojo didn't answer and Chieko's brow wrinkled in frustration. Her father hadn't spoken a word since their plummet from the Shinra building. She figured he was hurt, badly hurt to be unconscious for so long. But there was nothing she could do, she'd have to trust Jenova to heal him whenever her mother found the time.

Shifting him around so he sat more comfortably upon her back, Chieko strutted forward cautiously, sensing movement nearby. She'd noticed many of the humans had fled. She'd seen large numbers at a distance, moving from their homes in a breakneck hurry, trying to cart as many of their possessions with them as they could. They always screamed in terror at her approach and she couldn't say she really blamed them. Her claws and jaws were caked with dried blood (she'd gotten hungry along with way). Chieko would've stopped to clean herself, being a fastidiously neat creature by nature, but a small voice in her mind told her not to dawdle, to tramp onward. Though she had no clue where she was going.

Her ribs still hurt. Though Jenova had healed the wounds from Reno's gun, the bullets were still in there, grating against bone when she moved a certain way. The thought of that red-headed human and his cockiness made her curl her lip up in displeasure. Next time they met, she'd finish what she started with his two fingers.

The movement she'd noticed a minute or so before now became more prominent. It came from a few feet away, behind a bunch of stubby bushes. Chieko still walked in that upper class neighborhood. She couldn't read but she knew she'd passed a sign that'd said some strange word, and then had a large "1" printed beneath it, still, that meant nothing to her. Fur standing up slightly on her shoulders, she approached the bush, her sheathed claws peeping ever so slightly out of her paws at the possible chance of danger. It was probably just a stupid squirrel again though, she thought impatiently, the little buggers had been getting on her nerves ever since she'd first discovered they existed an hour ago. Their tails got stuck in her teeth.

Narrowing her eyes just a bit, she arched her neck and peered over the top of the bush, eager to see what was shaking it so badly. Cait Sith peered back.

"BY ODINN'S BEARD!!"

Both creatures shot backwards upon seeing the other. Chieko sprawled on the cobblestone street, the robotic cat shot off his moogle and landed in the dewy grass, crimson cape covering his synthetically-furred little head. He immediately shot to all fours and scrambled for his mount, snatching his fallen megaphone from the grass as he went. Chieko eyed him as she picked herself up, slightly embarrassed at falling. She flipped Hojo onto her back again, wriggling her shoulders to keep him there. Cait Sith stared.

"That's Professor Hojo on your back, "he observed, now seated comfortably on mog again, his pink mouth hanging half open.

"My father, "Chieko replied with a sniff, "He's hurt."

Cait scratched at the back of his head, an action he was programmed to do when observations conflicted. "But I saw him die thirteen years ago, "he squeaked, "What's up?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, little thing. Why don't you have a scent?"

"I'm a robot, "Cait replied cheerily. He whispered a word or two to mog who scowled and stepped out from behind the bush and into the street. "Who are you? Ya look like--"

"I'm Chieko, "she blurted out before the cat could say the name she so despised, "I came from the Shinra building, little thing, and now I'm looking for my mother."

"You're Chieko?" Cait Sith asked, almost falling off his mog again, "You're the thing that hurt CJ and Ifalna? Ooh, I hate you, you know that? You tried to throw my two bestest friends outta building."

Chieko blinked twice, then stared the little robot down.

"So?"

The mechanical cat balled his white fists up, his black fur bristling, his tail shooting out. He wanted to lunge for the

thing's throat, or have have mog bash its brains into a pulp. "So. . . so. . ." he sputtered, gripping his megaphone, "So you're NOT A VERY NICE PERSON!"

Chieko grinned, scratching at one of her forelegs with a lazy claw. Let's see, what was that expression that she'd heard her father use so often? Oh yeah. . .

"Blow me."

Cait scowled, hunching his narrow shoulders up around his ears. He wasn't programmed to fight anymore, in fact, his programming parameters strictly forbid it, but he surely wished he could show this Chieko a thing or three about manners. Pushing his plastic party crown to one side and crossing his arms, he asked, "So what are you doing walkin' around Midgar pretty as ya please, huh? People all seem to be leaving, maybe you should too."

"And why would I?" she asked, shrugging, "I rather like this place. A meal on every corner, no more roaches, or rats for me."

"I don't know why they're all leaving," the cat sighed, looking suddenly dejected, "I asked our neighbors and they ignored me. And I don't know where Cloud'n Tifa'n the kids are. They left and haven't been back. I'm just the dumb babysitter, why should anyone tell me anythin'? Hmph. Then the Shinra building got that thing around it and then there was that explosion. And then it fell. I dunno what to do." The little robot felt so unneeded and abandoned that he couldn't help but sniffle. Chieko looked past him uneasily, unable to shake off the thought that he looked like a giant chew toy.

"Cloud's my brother," she remarked conversationally. Cait looked at her skeptically and raised an eyebrow.

"No, he's not, you stupid thing."

Chieko shrugged, running her tongue over dry lips. "Jenova says he is."

"Oh." Cait averted her eyes, nudging his moogle to get the thing to take a cautious step backwards. "Almost forgot who I was talking ta. Dang creepy li'l monkey."

"Creepy little monkey?" Chieko echoed, voice raising to almost a roar, "Where do you get off, little cat? If I wanted, I could take your head from your shoulders with a single swipe! I probably should, if you're a friend of that murderous Cloud Strife!" The monster paced in barely contained rage, claws clacking dangerously against the cobblestones with each step. She hadn't forgotten how Cloud had sent his magic hurtling towards her father. That was an insult and she'd see him pay for it. A breeze ruffled her furry neck and Cait thought she looked quite fearsome standing there and snorting, sorta like when Barret got mad that time Cid spray painted his gun-arm pink. "Why, if my father were awake, he'd have you on your knees, vermin, pleading for your life."

"I'm not alive."

"Whatever." Chieko snarled and began pacing down the street again, sick of being insulted by something she couldn't even kill.

"And I don't think your 'father's' gonna be saying too much of anything!" Cait called after her belligerently, "I'm pretty sure he's pretty dead!"

"Why do you say that?" Chieko asked, halting and turning around. Her father couldn't die, Jenova wouldn't let him. He'd always told her that, that he was as immortal as the power of evil, that they both were. And it was true, wasn't it? She thought so, she'd always believed everything he'd ever told her blindly, questioning any of it was too uncomfortable. Still, perhaps that inane little talking cat thing was right.

"Here," Cait Sith said, approaching suddenly and gesturing to the ground with one upraised paw, "Lay him here, I'll tell ya for sure."

Chieko was suspicious at the offer but tired of wondering. She very gently turned her neck and grasped Hojo by the torso, setting him on the ground as though the slightest movement would shatter him. Cait hopped off his moogle and approached the bloody scientist, pink nose wrinkling distastefully. He analyzed him for a moment, hovering over the body like a medically-inclined mosquito, and Chieko watched in nervous interest, her wings now folded neatly on her back. Suddenly Cait looked up and shrugged.

"Pretty dead," he confirmed. "My condolences."

"You're lying."

Cait shrugged again, throwing his paws up into the air. "I'm serious, you evil thing you, he's no longer in the land o' the living! Don't be difficult."

Chieko plopped down on her haunches, eyes rolling over blank. She guessed she'd known it all along. He couldn't look like that and still be alive. So still and butchered. But yet. . . Hojo was. . . dead? Her father was dead? It couldn't be possible. Who'd be there to tell her what to do next, to give her instructions, tell her who her enemies were, what the

purpose of her measly little existence was? Her guidance, her parent, her master. . . dead. The great creature narrowed her keen brown eyes and stared off at nothing.

"He was betrayed. . . "she murmured.

Cait looked up, picking a piece of lint off mog.

"What?"

"Betrayed. By Jenova. I didn't really understand what they were talking about before, but I guess I do now. I do now, knowing he's. . . gone. How could she do this to him? After he spent his life doing what she bid? After I was so loyal to her? How could she take him from me?"

"You're mourning over this loser?" Cait Sith asked, flinging a petulant paw towards the corpse in question. "Geez, don't worry about it. I was glad when we killed 'im years ago, and it's just creme in the bowl to know he's died again now. Besides, you're a bad guy, right? Act tough."

Chieko looked up at the cat, her mouth an uneven line. "You don't know what you're talking about, "she snapped, "He was a great man."

"Yeah, a great, crazy, sadistic, screwed-by-a-football-team-in-the-head man."

Cait leaned back on his moogles, then told the thing to start moving off. He wasn't going to hang around all day trying to convince some idiot monster that her father was a psycho. Chieko eyed him, at a loss, all purpose gone. She'd been wandering around Midgar looking for her mother. She'd planned to find her and make her heal Hojo and things could go back to how they should be, whatever that was. But if her beloved father was dead, where did that leave poor Chieko?

"Maybe I should leave the city, "she said softly, slowly getting to her feet. Cait shrugged carelessly, moving away.

"Go take a flying leap, ya furbag, "he called, "I'm gonna tell Tifa and the guys where you are and they're gonna come whoop up on ya."

Chieko ignored the robot's words. She looked down at her father, and it seemed Hojo looked right back, his yellow eyes yet open, staring at her in unblinking solemnity. What do you say? she asked him, Should I leave this place after just discovering it? There is a whole lot of world out there, you always told me so and you never lied to me, not once, right? Everything else I ever knew, well, the few things I ever knew, they all turned against me in the end. Even mother, now I don't know where she is, she only talks to those two men. Father, you're the only one who never betrayed me, who was honest with me. I wish you could still be here, and tell me what to do.

She sighed, an uncharacteristic air of melancholy settling over her muscled frame. The satchel strapped securely about her neck was chafing, she tried to scratch beneath it and ended up bruising herself. Suddenly, giving her poor dead father another glance, Chieko got slowly to her paws and stretched her spine, stretched her leathery wings, arching her long neck far back and letting the fleecy clouds above consume her vision. Once she turned her hoary head back to the earth, her eyes ran over Hojo again. He still watched her, curious as to what she'd do.

The faintest hint of a tear dampening a trail of fur down her cheek, Chieko ran her sheathed paws over his eyes, shutting them gently.

"Goodbye. . . "

Cait Sith heard something bounding towards him and he stopped his moogles, turning around to see. Chieko approached, galloping along like a great dane, her wings opened and reaching out to either side. The chilly breeze filled them and had the little robotic cat quite impressed.

"You're really big, "he squeaked, clenching his megaphone tighter. Chieko ignored the thing. She leapt over Cait's head and landed before him, barring his way.

"Take me to Cloud and Vincent, "she ordered imperially. The cat gibbered.

"I-- I don't know where they are! I haven't heard from Cloud in days!"

"I don't believe you, "Chieko hissed. She lowered her head and bared her glinting fangs, "You said you were friends with his children, so you're friends with him. Where is he?"

Cait's ticking little brain whirred in his head, emitting little popping noises as his thoughts bounced back and forth. He was about to toss out another defensive "I don't know", when his mechanical mind suddenly zapped a superior, alternative answer to his voice box.

"Okay, "he piped shrilly, "I'll take ya to him. Let's go."

"Really?" Chieko blinked once or twice, ridding herself of the attack stance. She sheathed her claws and straightened. "Okay. Is he far from here?"

"Nah," Cait said reassuringly, beginning to move off, "But he ain't in Midgar no more."

"He's left?"

"Oh, yeah, he's outtie. I toldja everyone was leavin'."

Chieko eyed Cait suspiciously, not relishing the thought that perhaps she was being made a fool of. Bright brown eyes narrowed, she galloped up to the retreating robot and plucked him off his moogles, holding his metal head firmly in her teeth.

"What's the big idea?? I'm takin' ya where ya wanted!"

"We'll fly there," she stated simply, slapping the back of Cait's head with her tongue. "I don't want you leading me into a trap, I want to be able to approach from the air. I'm not stupid." Chieko flipped her head back and let go and the mechanical cat landed squarely on her shoulders. He sat there for a moment in a daze, wiping saliva off his fur, then began shaking his little fist again, smacking Chieko upside the head.

"We can't leave my moogles here!" he shouted, trying to jump down but his captor kept him pinned between two sharp wings, "It isn't safe, something's gonna happen!"

"He's too big and awkward for me to carry. Besides, it's just a toy," Chieko growled, beginning to run down the street.

"No! No, it's my buddy! My pal! Mi amigo! Moogles!"

But Chieko was already spreading her wings and soaring into the skies over Midgar. Cait gripped her back fur for dear life as the ground shrank away and Mog watched his retreating master, a large stuffed hand waving slowly back and forth until the monster and her captive mechanical cat were just a speck in the sky.

~*~

1250 miles to the northeast of the silent metropolis of Midgar, the sky was exploding.

CJ Strife stood on tiptoes, his stomach in his throat, his eyes pale with misery and gazing out at the rain as it splattered against the glass of one of the Highwind's port windows. He really really wanted his mom and dad.

"Uh-oh, CJ's gonna puke again!"

Ifalna giggled, enjoying the hell out of herself. The airship rocked back and forth every minute or so, the decks sliding at sharp angles. The little girl sat on her knees, letting gravity carry her to starboard, port, and back again, up and down with the rocking motion of the ship in the storm. It was like a slide that reset itself without her ever having to climb a ladder.

"Wheeee!! Cid, make it rocket forward again!!"

Cid grinned and pumped the throttle. The Highwind shot into the dark chaos of the storm like a shining bulbous bullet, streaking blue fire from her jet engines. Ifalna shouted in joy as the momentum had her flying back and into a bulkhead, while CJ just gripped the rim of a window and paled.

"Yo! Ceej! You okay back there!" Cid hollered gleefully, "You sure you don't wanna try another puff of a cigarette!"

CJ shook his head violently and turned green. An hour before, he'd snuck into the pilot's stash and gone to town, attempting his best Joe Camel impression. That stupid stunt had made him sick enough. When Cid had walked in and berated the crap outta him, he'd nearly barfed on the pilot's boots if only to stop the flow of curse words. Once the Highwind had entered the remnants of the storm system that'd blown off of Midgar though, "nearly barfing" turned into barfing every five minutes. Getting sick off cigarettes and nauseous from an airship rocking in the rain had CJ wishing he could jump into the eastern ocean below and end it all.

"Do it again, Cid!!"

"Aye aye, Cap'n Ifalna!"

The old pilot's gloved hand slid the stick back and his airship plummeted sharply, then he maneuvered the wheel with expert precision and the Highwind executed a few barrel rolls on the way.

Once Ifalna stopped laughing and flipping head over heels backwards, she looked to her brother, made a face and exclaimed, "Ceej! We had that for dinner on Thursday! Eww! Cid, CJ's bein' gross!"

"I can't help it!"

The kid gripped his sides and slumped down, just as a streak of lightning illuminated the interior of the dark ship. Cid turned around from the control panel, looking momentarily serious, then grinned again, leveling the Highwind off into an

easy glide.

"Why don't you go into the engine room, boy?" he asked, chewing on his cigarette, "Yuffie and yer dad always said it was stablest in there. Ya weak-stomached types always confused the hell outta me, I just don't get how this stuff is anything else but fun!"

"Yeah!" Ifalna agreed, blowing her long blonde bangs from her face, "Do it again, Cid! Faster! Like the gondola at Gold Saucer! But better!"

CJ gathered his strength and kicked his sister square in the leg. In response, she stumbled to her feet and gave him a push over so that he fell onto his side. And promptly threw up whatever was left in his poor little stomach. Cid laughed and stuck a hand in the pocket of his flight jacket.

"That's the way, Eef! Brains not brawn and all that lovely crap. Hit him where it hurts!!"

CJ grimaced, so far in a pit of misery he'd almost come out the other side. Why? Why was this happening? Why was he in an airship with the meanest guy in the world? Why wasn't dad there to make him stop? Where was mom to wipe the sweat off his forehead and push his hair out of his face for him, to make everything okay and make the storm and the rain and the stupid shaking go away?

Frowning, he sat up slowly, spitting icky bile from his mouth and into the "Yuffie bucket" Cid had presented him with a while ago. Airships weren't cool. They sucked. And airship pilots sucked too, and little sisters, and monsters, and stupid stupid cages, and bullies and fighting and buildings and LifeStreams and . . .

The list went on. CJ rattled it all off in his head, shutting his eyes against the spinning of the room around him.

Cid ran his blue gaze over the kid, the faintest twinge of guilt tugging at his heart. Just the faintest though. CJ did rather deserve this, he'd specifically told him to stay out of his cigarettes. Not necessarily because he minded that the kid was only ten, but because they were Cid's cigarettes. Twenty gil a pack. Genuine ChocoMog Reds manufactured by a tiny company in Gongaga. They were his and some punk kid wasn't going to go and smoke 'em without paying something for it in return. Plus Cid knew he'd catch hell from Tifa if she found out. Tifa wasn't like Shera, Tifa got PISSED.

"Are we almost there yet, Cid?" Ifalna called out in a slight whine. The pilot glanced over his shoulder and saw her poking her brother's softly seething, violently nauseous little form.

"Soon enough, short stuff. Why don't you go back to counting the rivets in the walls, eh?"

"But that's boring. I can only go up ta twenty!"

"Good! That way it's harder to lose count!"

Ifalna sighed and plopped back down on the deck. The ship bucked again and thunder roared close by, trying to butt its broad head inside. CJ opened his eye just a slit, grateful that Cid had quit his stunts for a while, maybe he'd be able to find where his stomach had landed after it'd flown out his mouth. Thunder again, right on the tail of the last peal. Being in the air, he felt he was in the middle of a giant's throat, its voice roaring from all sides. And when the lightning came, it flash flooded everything with white, as though the giant were shining a flashlight upwards from its stomach.

"I hate storms. . ." CJ moaned, swallowing hard and trying to keep from heaving again. Every rock of the ship sent dizzy ripples into his tummy. Blegh.

"Rain's pretty," Ifalna disagreed, crossing her arms.

"Yeah, pretty stupid. It's dumb, man. What's the point? Buncha dumb water and dumb lightnin' and dumb noise."

"Hey, if noise was dumb, it wouldn't be noise," Cid called with a laugh.

"What the heck does that mean?" CJ asked impatiently.

"Never mind."

"This all sucks so bad I could spit. It's all your fault, Cid. You made me come with ya to Wutai, I could be back at Marlene's watchin' tv! 'Stead I'm here in this retarded airship that won't hold still in this damn storm and I think I'm gonna throw up again."

"Hey there! Watch yer friggin' mouth, little boy. And quit yer complainin'. You don't see your sister complaining."

CJ looked at Ifalna who threw him a stupid grin.

"She just doesn't know what's really going on!" he snapped back, "She's got the IQ of a can of baked beans!"

Ifalna tipped him over again and CJ barely kept from puking all over her. Cid sighed and licked his lips, a lazy hand on the controls. He needed to get away from these kids or he was gonna kill 'em. He didn't think his own were that bad. Were they? Nah, Cid had Terra and Amelia trained better than that, they jumped at his orders like a coupla rookie cadets. But CJ and Ifalna were mutinous little buggers, they obeyed him about as well as a pair of puppies. He heard them fighting behind

his back savagely, throwing punches and biting each other. Not even clean fighting, he thought in disgust, they're fighting dirty back there, like street punks.

The old pilot, cigarette gripped tightly in his knuckles, was about to turn around and roar curses in their direction, when there suddenly came a single vicious flash. White illuminated everything for just the fraction of a second, and then the world went dark as the Highwind's lights zapped out. A burst of thunder accompanied the lightening strike and Cid heard Ifalna shriek and start to whimper, though he couldn't see her in the awful blackness.

"Cid! What's goin' on?!"

He ignored CJ's frantic question and suddenly swore as his airship began to plummet. The Highwind's nose tipped towards the sea sharply, stern raising high in the air and mooning the storm-choked sky. Eyes wide, Cid looked out a port window and then back towards a sickeningly orange glow coming from the airship's tail. Flames spouted from one of the aft engines, licking up towards the heavens in spite.

"Yuffie'n Elena said ya shouldn't fly in the storm, you dork! Now we're gonna crash and burn and die!"

Cid sighed. "In that order too."

The maelstrom raged on, shooting blue lightening at anything that'd keep still long enough to become prominent in its sights. But the Highwind fell too fast for that. Lady Luck kept grinning as her vessel kept plummeting, rain flashing off her sleek silver sides. Thunder rolled over itself, snapping at the heels of the crippled ship, making CJ Strife's ears buzz. Gritting his teeth and cursing at the sweat that dripped into his eyes, Cid yanked desperately back on the flight stick, jabbing flashing buttons and flicking unnamed switches to the left and right. There was only one thing aboard that could save them all. But it lay twenty feet or so behind him. And the guy that usually pulled it was on fucking vacation.

"CJ!!" the pilot roared, a little purple vein sticking out and throbbing on the side of his head. "There's a big silver lever next to the parachutes over there! Pull the hell out of it!"

CJ could barely breathe the way his sister had her pudgy little arms wrapped around his chest. Trying to squirm her off and stand, he called, "Why don't you?"

"If I let go a' this stick, we're all royally screwed! Turn around and do what the hell I toldja!"

"But ya told me and Eef t'never touch anything on your ship again or you'd give us blowtorch tans!"

Cid swore as a small shudder wracked the Highwind, as though his baby were scared of the big blue body of water frothing only a few hundred feet below. From the expansive fore window, Cid had a wickedly terrific view of the approaching ocean. The lightening illuminated the breaking waves, the frothing white, with sadistic thoroughness. "Don't try and be cute with me, kid! Pull that lever now!"

Attempting to ignore the pounding of the storm, CJ pried Ifalna's terrified fingers from his ribs and shoved her away, at the same time darting towards the gleaming switch. His hand was already wrapping around it when a sly smile absorbed his features and he paused, eyes narrowing evilly.

"What the hell's the hold up?!" Cid called in desperation, unable to tear his eyes from the hungry ocean below. After a moment or two of lip biting though, he snapped his blonde head around in time for CJ to give him a wink. The kid had one hand on the lever and one arm wrapped around his cart-wheeling stomach. "Are you nuts, ya little psycho? Pull it!"

"No! Only if ya promise not to do those dumb tricks again!"

"What?!"

"I'll only pull it if ya promise not to make this thing roll over and flip and crap! It makes me hurl!"

"Are you giving me an ultimatum, ya little prick? In the middle of alla this, you're giving me a threat? I'll make hamburger outta you, I swear I'll shiskybob you on the end a Venus Gospel, I'll feed ya to a Midgar Zolem, I'll reach my hand down your throat, turn ya inside out, and fling ya into a bucket of lemon juice--!"

"Promise you won't do anymore dumb tricks, Cid!"

The pilot bit the inside of his mouth to try and shock some self-control into his brain, then nodded his head and snapped, "What the hell ever, ya punk! I'm gonna remember this! No one blackmails Cid Highwind and gets away with it!"

"Promise!"

"Yeah! I frigging promise! Now pull it or we'll all die anyways!"

"Do it, CJ!"

Gulping, the boy pulled down hard on the switch, his stomach in his throat as the airship fell towards the seas like a pelican diving for a fish. As the lever smacked roughly against the bottom of its slot, the ship gave a lurch and there was a violent hissing from outside.

"That's it, baby, blow out the candles!"

Jaw clenched, Cid glared out the port window towards the torched tail of his airship and saw sudden bursts of super-cooled carbon dioxide shooting from amidst the flames. In seconds, the gas had smothered the fires and Cid instantly grinned, temper dissolving as quickly as the blaze. He jammed a few buttons on the control panel, switching auxiliary power to the damaged engine and the Highwind's decent immediately slowed. Pulling gently back on the stick, Cid heard his massive ship then gave a groan and cursed gratefully as it began to level slowly out. "C'mon. . . "he breathed, eyeing the looming ocean, "Pull up. . . !"

As CJ and Ifalna looked on, eyes wide and gaping, the airship skimmed just over the top of the breakers, seawater lapping at her hull, and began to ascend. The kids cheered as Cid breathed a quick sigh of relief and took a puff from his forgotten cigarette.

"Yikes, that was close, eh, Cid?" CJ asked hesitantly. The pilot kept his back to him, shoulders hunched as he let his eyes rove over the storm-ridden heavens on the other side of the front window.

"Wouldn't have been so close if you hadn't gotten cocky back there, shortie. The next time I tell ya t'do something, I want ya ta jump. Clear?"

CJ squirmed, walked up to Ifalna and plopped down besides her. He nodded.

"Yeah."

"Hmph. Damn straight."

Scratching at the itchy bangs beneath his flight goggles, Cid kept his eyes pasted on the brewing weather around his ship, wincing now at each sizzle of lightning. Another couple hours and they'd be seeing the Shinra towers on the horizon. He never thought he'd so look forward to that sight as he did now. He couldn't wait to get back to Midgar, leaving his friends alone for so long had him uneasy. And being taken out of the fight and made into an errand boy had him pissed. Cid wanted all this over. Soon. Hauling around experimental weaponry and taking crap from the Strife kids was far from decisive fighting. He needed to be out there cleaning up on little Miss Jenova so life could go back to normal. Then his far from restful vacation could end, the crew would come back, and he'd get to go see Shera and his own neglected family at last. Gods, it just had to work out like that, this little airship stunt had made him worry. How much luck could one pilot have?

Leaning heavily on the control panel, Cid heard CJ and Ifalna pick up on their bickering. He almost got angry again but suddenly stifled it. In fact, something made him smile. That kid's shrill voice, threatening him when not doing what the pilot had commanded would've killed them all. Pretty stupid, but something else too. The something that was making him grin now.

"Hey, CJ, "he called.

The boy grimaced, pulling his hand back. He'd been ready to give one of Ifalna's pigtails a solid yank. He looked up guiltily. "What?"

"You got balls, kid. Just wanted ya to know."

CJ beamed. And pulled his sister's hair so hard she socked him.

~*~

Tifa had never heard Midgar in such silence before.

The streets echoed her footsteps back to her, amplifying them. The soft, simple treads of her boots bounced about in the wreckage of the Shinra building, played in the flames of the electrical fires, and twirled amidst the dust of destruction, finally returning to her ears so loud and wicked that it made her shiver. Everything was transformed, the buildings, the shops, the homes, the trees, torn apart and blanketed with the debris of the empire that had begat it all.

And through everything, her footsteps. Through it all, the hiss of the November breeze, the dying sobs of the November storms. White clouds scuttled above her head, snatching the sky from the darker, blacker thunderheads way way off on the horizon. The sun bounced through the beauty of the fleece, the rain, and greeted her rust-colored eyes in halos of prismatic color. Tifa took a deep breath, loving that post-rain scent, though in the streets of Midgar now, it was tainted with the smell of ruin. Smoke curled on the edges of anything pure anymore. That clean smell of the anointing rain was blackened. It was almost as though the city could never be anything but that smoke, that destruction, this fallen, shattered building. Tifa kicked a few random rocks as she ambled along. They rolled away in front of her, fleeing the next jab of her boots.

Her feet hurt. She'd been walking for hours. Up and down Sector Three, winding through the shattered shells of old offices, stepping over the crushed marble of Shinra's old reception hall. Tifa'd even managed to find the remnants of Cloud's office amidst the rubble. She'd stayed there for a long time, perched on his splintered desk, digging through debris and trying to find the pictures she knew he always kept there of them. Of her and the kids. But they'd gone off somewhere, buried in the hundred feet of collapsed concrete wall, she supposed, the delicate glass of the frames they'd sat in smashed to sand, the photos themselves were probably little more than shredded paper. But she'd dug for a long time, uncomfortable with the thought of those pictures laying in the wet ground as though buried, as though entombed in the desolate though magnificent casket of the Shinra building.

Because so much else was dead in there. This tomb held so many corpses who'd been dear to her and now that it was gone, that symbol of humanity's folly, she didn't want to know that it held images of her children, of her husband, inside its yet imperialistic walls. But she'd had to stop digging after awhile. She'd had to leave Cloud's office with hands bloodied from the effort. It would keep the remains of her old life, it would hold them close in its cold, dead embrace.

"Clooouuuudd!!!"

Her strong voice released the name into the air. But as her footsteps had, the sound of it seemed to become poisoned by the smoke and the fire and the dust and it echoed back like a sob. But it wasn't a sob because Tifa wasn't crying. She was presenting the world a cold, stony front, she was being strong for him.

"Cloud!! Where are you!!!"

The streets of Sector Three seemed even quieter compared with her shout. Lots of empty space for the word to bounce around in.

"Cloud!!!"

Maybe he wouldn't be answering to that name anymore, she thought suddenly. Maybe that'd changed too. Why not? Everything else about him had; his eyes, his voice, his face, his limitations. Exactly what was she searching for? Because it probably didn't even exist anymore.

Would she have become the same thing after seeing her two babies die before her eyes? Tifa didn't think so. She probably would have put a quick bullet into her head but that would have been all, she knew she wouldn't take anyone else down in her despair. But her Cloud didn't play life like that. Everything had a cause, and, being a hero, he saw it as his place to destroy anything that had done him wrong. Whether it'd been a madman who'd destroyed his home or an entire Planet that he was convinced had killed his children.

But they're not gone, love, they're alive and they want you back. They want us both back. CJ and Ifalna won't care what you've done or about that presence inside of you, because you're their dad, you're a god in their eyes. Where are you, Cloud? Where are you so I can tell you that?

The words were so passionate inside her head, Tifa was half surprised he didn't hear them and leap out at her from amidst the wreckage. She paused for a moment, almost expecting such a thing, then laughed bitterly at herself and moved onward when no one came.

Thirteen years. . .

They'd had thirteen years of happiness after Shinra and Sephiroth's madness. Tifa felt suddenly selfish, unable to understand why it hadn't been able to last. There were so many people who had so much less than she and Cloud had had. Entire lifetimes of depravity and they'd had thirteen years of love and peace and normalcy. And here she was, wanting more. Wanting the reason for those years of happiness to return to her, whole and unchanged by Jenova's cruelty and Hojo's insanity. It was horribly, wickedly selfish of her, she was convinced of it. But if not she, then Cloud deserved it, he deserved a lifetime of joy after the first twenty-one years of his life had amounted to shit. She wanted him to have it, more than anything, she wanted it for Cloud, CJ, and Ifalna. And, though it made her feel horrible, she wanted it for herself.

"CLOUD!!! Where did you go? Where are you?!!!"

He wouldn't answer her. Jenova wouldn't let him, Tifa was sure of it. That wedge in their love was more a threat than Aeris' pretty eyes or pink skirt had ever been, Jenova would pay any price to have her blonde-haired warrior all to herself. She had him trapped, just as she had years before. Wrapped in a cobweb maze of uncertainty, grief, and self-loathing. Her Cloud was an amazing swordsman, there was hardly a man alive who could touch him on a field of combat, but in the battlefield of the mind, Cloud's armor was full of gaps and chinks and soft places. That was where, Tifa knew, Jenova had targeted her arrows.

"Cloud!! Damn you, Jenova, where are you keep-- ?!"

"Geez, lady, pipe down!"

Tifa whipped about, fists raised, brows lowered over her snapping eyes. She was ready to fight, she wanted it.

"Ya know Mr. Cloud?"

There was a kid standing there, a black-haired, black-eyed little rogue with his pinky finger hooking out the corner of his mouth. Tifa thought he looked like a fish on the end of some unlucky guy's line. The kid hovered off the edge of the clearing the woman now found herself in, and stared at her intently. She stared right back, a strange feeling in her stomach.

"Do you know where he is, little guy?" she asked gently. Tifa took a step forward and the kid took a step back, unblinking. He nodded.

"Can you take me to him?"

Eyeing her in unconcealed suspicion, his black eyes beady, the boy asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm his wife," she answered forthright, "I've been looking everywhere for him. I don't wanna hurt him, I want to help, I want to take him home."

"He said I should be lookout, let him know when anyone's comin'. You sure you're cool? You sounded mad when you were screamin'."

"I was mad, but only because I want to find him so badly," Tifa answered, shrugging helplessly. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to explain herself to this kid. Apparently satisfied with her answer though, he nodded and threw a dark hand up, walking away and gesturing for her to follow. Tifa did so, but didn't lower her guard. Something didn't smell right about all of this, she couldn't quite explain it.

The boy led her from the clearing and into the thickest of the rubble. Tifa swore as the ends of a lot of jagged steel rods bit through her jeans and scratched up her legs. The ground was unstable beneath her feet, chunks of masonry rolling away and defying any possibility of firm footing. Yet she crossed it all with grim determination, sure that at last, something was smiling upon her. She'd find her lover shattered amidst all this destruction and she'd build him up again, repair the damage.

The kid didn't look back as he led her forward, he only skipped along, one arm out wide to help keep his balance, the other in his mouth as he sucked his pinky finger with a fiery intensity. "What's your name?" Tifa asked him, trying to sound friendly. The dark-eyed kid shrugged and leapt from the top of one upturned rock to the top of another, nimble as a cat.

"Jeek," he replied carelessly.

"That's a nice name. Where are your parents, Jeek?"

"I dunno, my mum's out helping people I guess. I been with Mr. Cloud since he fell outta the sky. Cool guy."

"Yeah," Tifa frowned, struggling to keep up. This kid was giving her the creeps. But why? He was a normal enough little kid, probably scared being all by himself away from his mom out here in the middle of a desolated Sector. The two of them passed random mute corpses on their way over the debris. Tifa noticed grimly that the kid didn't say a word as they tread past them. He plodded along, humming a little song, chewing on his fingernail. Each shattered life that blurred by her vision as she hurried forward stuck needles in her own heart though. Because he'd done that. Her Cloud. And Tifa had no idea in the world what to do about the fact.

"Jeek," she called suddenly, "You'd understand if your mom had to leave you for a while to help your dad, wouldn't you? If your dad really needed a hand? You wouldn't be mad at her, would you?"

"I don't have a dad."

"But if you did. . ."

"Oh. Well, 'course I'd be mad," he replied viciously, "Who'd take care of me if my mom left?"

"Yeah. . ." Tifa scratched at her eye, pulling strands of her glistening hair away, "You're right. Even if your dad really needed her though?"

"Dads can take care of themselves I think. It's mom's jobs to take care of the kids. Everyone knows that, geez." Jeek almost fell but caught himself, landing amidst a lot of gravel and kicking up dust. "Mr. Cloud said he didn't have any kids though, maybe he'd let me be his. I always wanted a dad. 'Specially a cool dad who blows stuff up and's got glowing hands. Mebbe we could be on tv. . ."

"Is he all right, Jeek?" Tifa suddenly asked, feeling a red-hot panic beginning to seep into her heart. There was a tear in her right eye, her first in a while. She'd thought the supply gone and hadn't realized they were impossible to run out of. "Is he all right?"

Jeek shrugged, stopping suddenly and turning around. His features were cool, his eyes stoic and unblinking. He raised a hand and pointed towards a shivering figure suddenly only fifty feet or so before them. "Ask 'im yerself, lady."

Before she thought twice about it, hell, before she thought at all, Tifa found herself racing forward. Cloud lay on his

side at the base of a black-streaked wall of shattered cinder blocks, his legs pulled up to his chest, his arms wrapped around his head. All of him trembled. His shivering became Tifa's as she wrapped her strong arms around him, pushing his hair out of his face.

"Tifa. . .?"

"Shh, baby, it's all right. Sshhh. . ." She stooped there in the dirt and let her hair, her arms, her body cover him, as though offering her entire being as his shelter against it all. He could have her, Cloud could have her if it would only keep him safe, free from pain. Tears in his eyes, he turned his face to look up at her, to see what he thought was a dream. It was his angel's face, his savior, his love.

"I'm so sorry. I really am."

"Stop apologizing, Cloud, you haven't done anything." It was a lie, he'd really done everything, but Tifa didn't care. She felt how cold his skin was, how chilled and wet his cheek felt beneath her own. She pressed herself tighter to him and whispered into his ear.

"Everyone's looking for you, spike, we've been scouting the city. Everyone wants you to come back. CJ misses his dad, Ifalna wants a piggy-back ride. Barret and Reno, Reeve and Red, even Cait Sith said the house was too quiet without you stomping around. I've missed you so much, so so much." Gritting her teeth, Tifa covered his face with her lips, drinking his tears away. But still he shivered beneath her hands. "Do you hear me, Cloud Strife? I wanted to tell you how much I love you. I don't think you really know. You went and saved my baby girl and boy for me. You gave me my children back. Now I just need you, you. You, Cloud. And then it can all go back as it should be. We'll leave Midgar, we'll go somewhere new, someplace better. The four of us. Because nothing else matters. Nothing, just us. Please answer me, Cloud, c'mon!"

Tifa pulled her face from his, brows lowering, stomach fluttering at his silence. Swallowing hard, she looked past the green in his eyes and looked for things that shouldn't be there, just as she always did. Just as she always searched for when he'd come back to her from Shinra, Tifa looked for sorrow, or anger, or frustration, things that shouldn't have a place in the man she loved. But there wasn't anything to see. Just pain. So much pain that a sob tore through her throat. Cloud shut his eyes suddenly, and his hands gripped his hair tighter. He turned his head and Tifa saw the J carved into his face. It was just a scar now, a reddish-white line of upraised tissue. Fingers trembling, Tifa brushed against it gently. She thought it felt hot to the touch. She wondered if it burned him.

"Did she do this to you?" the woman asked softly. There was menace in her voice as she traced over the brand with her forefinger. "Is this your mark, Jenova? Well, I--"

As that evil's name left her lips, Cloud's eyes snapped open.

"Jenova. . ." he breathed, trying to tear himself from her arms, "You have to go, Tifa, you gotta go!!" Limbs flailing violently, he shot from the ground, shedding her embrace. Tifa stood slowly, fists clenched as her lover backed off a bit, bent over nearly double, one hand to his head, one arm wrapped around his side.

"Sshhh, Cloud," she whispered, "What is it? C'mon, baby, snap out of this, come back with me!"

"I can't--!"

He shut his eyes so hard, mashed his teeth so firmly together that Tifa thought she could hear them cracking in his mouth. Stumbling backwards, almost falling, he cried out in pain and the woman tried to run to him, to push away the demons clawing with merciless fury at his mind. But Cloud shoved her back and to the dirt. She lay there for a moment, trembling in rage, then jumped to her feet.

"You see this, Jenova?!" she screamed furiously, holding her left hand up, "Do you see this ring? Cloud already bears his mark of ownership, it's around his finger! You can wipe that fucking J off of him, you can vacate the god damned premises, because he'll never be yours! He won't be your murderer! Now leave us alone! Go back to wherever you've been these past thirteen years, and stop jabbing your claws into us, into everyone in this city! You're not going to win!"

"Geez, lady. . ."

Tifa heard the small voice, almost a snarled squeak, come from behind her. Glancing quickly to Cloud, she whipped about and saw the dark-eyed kid standing there. He leaned against a pillar that used to hold up part of the wall of the Shinra commissary. His finger in his mouth, he glared at her.

". . . pipe down."

"Pipe down?" She looked the kid over, moving unconsciously closer to Cloud as she did so. The boy stuck his free hand in the pocket of his bluejeans and grinned. It made her shiver. "Who are you?"

"Man, I toldja. M'name's Jeek."

"No, who are you really? Why are you here with him? What're you doing?"

The kid laughed, a bubbly little giggle that poured over his lips like red wine. He shrugged.

"Givin' the dude what he wants."

"What?"

Jeek held a strip of fingernail between his teeth. He pulled the top of it away from his pinky in a long, half-moon sliver and spat it on the ground. "Mr. Cloud wanted kids but he ended up offing his own. So I showed up. T'keep 'im company, ya know?"

"You're Jenova. . . "Tifa hissed, raising a fist and stepping forward, "You stay away from him, do you hear me? CJ and Ifalna were never killed! The Planet, it may be a lot of things, but I'll never mention any of them aloud again, because it came through for us. It saved them when that monster threw them from the building."

Jeek shrugged, flinging a few strands of thin black hair from his eyes. "Then or later, don't matter, lady. You're all gonna die. Jenova's neat. Smart, ya know, I think she's cool. She's gonna kill y'all real soon. She's gonna kill those kids of yours, oh yeah, she don't care. A billion million zillion itty bugs on this Planet and she's got plans to start squishin'. Yer kids is just gnats, lady, and Jenova's got good aim with her swatter, and kills real--"

With a snarl of rage, Tifa lunged. But little Jeek was quicker than he looked.

"-- And kills really good!" he finished, leaping out of the way and landing a few feet off in a crouch. Tifa stared after him, panting with the intensity of her loathing.

"You do what you want," she spat, "You're some invincible element, Red's sure of it. But you leave Cloud out it!! He's given enough of his life to you and to wretched bastards like you and now it's his time! Our time! Leave us alone!"

Jeek blinked hard, as though shocked by the intensity of her words. But then, with a small, wan smile, he plucked the finger from his mouth, stuck both hands in his pockets, and gave a final, parting bow. The spectre-child's departure was nothing fancy. He was there one moment and when Tifa blinked, he was gone.

Running an agitated hand through her hair, Tifa turned back around to Cloud. He stood hunched over, hunched in on himself with his eyes closed, as though he were listening very carefully to something far away. Tifa laid a hand on his cold shoulder, pulling him close and holding him tight, squeezing him in hopes that he'd never slip through her fingers again.

"I think she's gone," she whispered, "I think maybe she listened to me." The words were naive but they were a comforting delusion. Whether Cloud believed them or not, he stayed silent, trembling slightly in her arms. Tifa pushed him gently to the ground, alarmed at how tense his limbs were. She couldn't get him to unbend his elbows or knees, or untense the straining muscles of his arms. For a moment, she simply knelt beside him, fixing his hair again, straightening the jacket covering his bare chest, humming a soft song into his ear and calling his name in vain. But then, sitting slowly down next to him, almost on top of him, she pulled a PHS from her jeans pocket and punched a quick number in.

"Reeve."

"Reeve, it's Tifa, I've found him."

"What?! How is he?" The Shinra president sounded nervous as hell, excited and relieved all at once. "Where are you?"

"Sector Three but I can't be too much more specific, nothing looks familiar. Reeve, I'm not sure how he is, he won't answer me. He needs a doctor."

"Um, damn, of course. Oh, gods, well, we found Marlene, Barret and the others too, they're okay. What? Yeah, Reno, Tifa found Cloud. Yeah, okay."

"What did he say?"

"Just being a dick. He said don't turn your back on him."

"Bastard. . . "

"Yeah. But honey, are you sure he's alright?"

"I told you, he needs a doctor-- "

"No, that's not what I mean."

Tifa lowered the phone from her face and frowned, turning back around to look at Cloud. His eyes were still closed, sweat poured from his forehead and he shivered in the cold breeze. She moved closer beside him, pressed her shoulder against his to share her warmth. "Cloud," she whispered in his ear, blowing the delicate strands of blonde there, "Cloud, where are you?"

"Tifa, are you there?"

"Yeah," she replied, moving the PHS back up to her mouth, "Yeah, I'm here."

"I'm going to try and find a chopper to send out there ASAP. We're a little short right now, I've commandeered the entire fleet for use in evacuating Midgar."

"What?!"

"Er, there's been some strange shit going on while you've been wandering around, I'll fill you in when I see you. Let's just say I've been informed by two very knowledgeable sources that there's a good chance Jenova's going to strike out at the city. Strike out hard."

"When?"

"Vincent said an hour or two and that was ninety minutes ago. Needless to say, we're all shaking in our shoes here in Kalm."

"You're in Kalm? Reeve, what the hell's going on?"

"Reno insisted the President not be in danger. I may have to give him a raise if I don't go bankrupt first. Listen, Tifa, I'm not sure what's going on atop this fucked up little Planet right now, all right? I'm just doing my best to keep as many people alive as possible for as long as I can. Anything I manage to do or learn along the way is mere icing on the cake. This could all be a false alarm, a hyperactive precaution, but I can't take the risk, I had to act."

Tifa looked up, surveying her wrecked surroundings soberly. She suddenly understood why the city'd been so blissfully silent, so peaceful. It was empty. "Okay, Reeve," she answered, her voice almost a whisper, "Cloud's always trusted you, so I'll follow his example."

"Thanks, Tifa. Oh, Cid called, the kids are fine, they're on their way here. He wasn't too thrilled to learn we won't be needing Dragon Weapon after all but he'll adjust. I told him how lucky he was to have missed out on all of this garbage. Then he told me he expected to be compensated for his time. Everyone wants a piece of me, you know that?"

"Yeah, I know. The gods hate you."

"Yeah, yeah, quit it. I'll bitch to you in person soon, I'm going to call Ikari and get him over there, all right?"

"All right."

"Tifa, you be damned careful, do you hear me? You were in that chopper and saw exactly what I saw. I know that you think you know Cloud better than anyone else, and you probably do, but you don't know what he's been through these past few days. No one does but him, Vincent, and Hojo. And Hojo ain't talking anymore. I'm sure you'd rather bathe in hot oil than take advice from Reno, but he's right. Don't turn your back on him."

"No worries, Reeve. I'm actually starting to think I was wrong when we talked last night in the rain. I've never wanted to be more wrong in my life."

The Shinra President's voice smiled back at her over the gravelly connection. "That's the Tifa I know, optimistic to a fault. We're going to bring him back. We're going to fix Vincent up. And we're going to put all of this unpleasant shit behind us. Right?"

"If you say so, Mr. President. But don't tell me that I don't know Cloud. Cloud Strife would never hurt anyone. It's that other thing, that Jenova, that's the cause of all this and I swear by my own life that I'll get her to leave us a--"

"TIFA!!"

The PHS flew from her hand and smashed to plastic and wires against the ground near her foot. Blinking in surprise, Tifa lifted a hand up and touched her cheek. A smudge of warm red came off on her fingers from a small cut there.

"Ya swear by your own life, lady? Man, that's just askin' for it."

Jeek had returned. The kid was straight across from she and Cloud, sitting languidly on a mound of dirt. He threw Tifa an arrogant wink, his finger hanging from one corner of his mouth.

"Sorry to bail out on ya. Had t'go get my mum."

Before Tifa could utter a single strangled cry, she felt sharp claws slowly wrapping themselves around her ribs. She felt them up against her skin, sharp as honed razors, cold as marble. All at once it became hard to breathe and hard to think and the world began to fade dark before her eyes.

"TIFA!! No!!"

And then it stopped. And all she saw was Cloud.

"Leave her alone! You've never just left her out of it! Why?!"

On instinct, Tifa rolled back and away, then quickly pushed herself up on her elbows. Cloud was wrestling around on the ground and fighting some invisible foe, revealed to her only by quick silver flashes that raked across his skin and left a bloody trail that almost instantly healed. He was fighting with the intensity of a man who'd been pushed too far.

"Leave her alone, Jenova! Leave her alone!"

He repeated the words over and over through clenched teeth. Tifa ran forward fists raised, determined to help him, but the battle was over before she had the chance. Without a word, Cloud's unseen opponent vanished, leaving him alone and bloody there in the dirt. The man lay there, breathing hard, then let his head fall back with a tired sound.

"Cloud! Are you all right?"

Tifa threw herself at his side, inspecting the bloody gashes but found the wounds gone when she smeared the red away. She was too relieved to ask why and too glad that he was finally showing some consciousness to care. He looked up at her suddenly and she swallowed hard, grinning weakly, a lump in her throat. "I was so scared," she admitted, laughing softly to herself though she didn't know why, "I found you, then thought I'd lost you again. . . "

Cloud looked straight into her misty eyes for just a moment, just a breath of time. Tifa put a hand out to rub the roughness of his unshaven cheek, uncomfortable with the look of hollow sadness in his gaze. "I know what you mean. . . " he finally whispered, then turned his head away, frowning deeply. He pushed himself to a sitting position, wrapping his arms around his knees and looking away stubbornly. Tifa tried to pull his face back to hers but he wouldn't move, only closing his eyes and tensing his jaw.

The inside of Cloud's head was a mass of twisted confusion. The last thing he remembered, he'd been walking along with that little kid, marveling at the extent of the damage caused by the mysteriously collapsed Shinra building. He'd seen that black horned demon creature flying overhead, then with a sickened feeling in his stomach, he'd felt a buzzing pain beginning in his skull. It'd escalated until he'd blacked out. And then. . . and then he'd woken up here, thinking he was dead, an angel staring down at him, but Cloud knew he didn't deserve heaven, not a man such as he. He'd put himself through hell, he deserved it. This pain, this humming, these voices throbbing in his sore head. Fit penance.

Warm hands moving gently down the collar of his jacket suddenly, rubbing at his back and shoulders. It felt so good, so like something he needed, but he flung them off, standing and stalking away.

"What's the matter, Cloud?" he heard Tifa call to his back. Her voice sounded anxious, but frustrated too. He tried to answer her, but words wouldn't come. The world was turning red before his eyes, her voice as faint as a faraway whisper as the power built up in him again. He watched his hands, watched them trembling, then balled them into fists and looked away, flinging them irritably out to his sides.

"Your hands, baby, what's wrong with them? Please talk to me. . . "

"This happened before."

"What?"

But Tifa knew what he meant. When he'd been in the mako room, when he'd been in the sky. When he'd released that power into the building.

"I think I was the one who did this. . . " Cloud whispered. It was coming back to him now, that destruction. It had felt so good, it had made some of the pain go away. Why had the pain returned? Hadn't all those lives he'd taken been enough to satisfy it?

"No, it wasn't you. It was Jenova."

"Don't delude yourself, Tifa," he snapped, not turning around, "It was me, and everyone in this god damned city knows it. The corpses all over, they know it. But why? Why did I? I-- I wasn't thinking straight, I was so mad. . . just like when I charged Sephiroth in the reactor so long ago. My anger worked then, it saved my life, but here, it's only, it's only. . . done this. . . "

Again Tifa tried to hold him, to touch him, to give Cloud something solid to cling to. But again, he shoved it off.

"Why were you so mad?" she asked softly.

"You know why." "What?"

"CJ and Ifalna, luv. They're perfectly, wonderfully all right. Don't you feel them? They're alive, our children are fine. The LifeStream saved them and they're fine."

"The LifeStream saved them. . . " Cloud repeated with a mocking laugh. Tifa saw his hands were a little looser at his sides. Then she saw the green lacing each finger and dark fear sat thick in her throat. "You might have tried a more original lie, Tifa. That one's been done."

"What? Cloud, listen, why--?"

"Stealing from thirteen years ago. I would've expected better from you, sweets."

"I--"

"Of course, I don't blame you for a moment. No better way to stop a fire than to take away the sticks feeding the flames, eh? But we can't lie to ourselves, Tifa. If there are any two people in the world who should be honest to each other, it's you and I. They're gone. And if we don't accept the fact, their spirits will never rest. And they. . . they deserve peace. I can give that to 'em, if nothing else."

"I'm not lying!! Listen to me, dammit!! They're on the Highwind right now!"

Cloud moaned to himself, shoulders bent, a hand to his head, fingers threading through his hair. Gods, that buzzing made everything into a whirlpool. If there was only something to hold on to as the rest of the world swirled away. . . but everything crumbled beneath his trembling glowing hands. It all melted to nothing.

Cloud suddenly jerked his head up, sensing something foreign. Jenova was there, he could feel her. Snarling quietly to himself, he darted towards Tifa, shielding her with his body. "You stay away," he growled into the empty air, "You leave her alone, you won't hurt her."

Tifa ran a hand through her hair, watching Cloud's back, letting her eyes rove the length of his form. She noticed with a start that his feet weren't quite hitting the ground. They hovered, just barely, half an inch off it. She again tried to put a hand on his shoulder but this time was more forcefully deterred. With a sharp snap of almost electrical energy, green leapt out at her from his skin, stinging her fingers harshly. What have you done to him Hojo? Jenova, where have you hidden him?

"I'm not playing around with you, Jenova. Tifa has nothing to do with this and you won't touch her. Back off."

Apparently Jenova was listening. Cloud eased just a fraction suddenly, then allowed himself to slip to his knees and clutch his head, surrendering to the pain and confusion. Tifa did her best to keep him with her but it was like grasping at straws, he slipped right through her fingers, moaning and cursing and holding his sides.

"This is my punishment, isn't it?" he asked no one in particular, "Well, fuck you. And fuck me too, dammit. Ya couldn't've let me die with 'em, could you? Too easy. Yeah. Too easy."

"Cloud!! They're alive, stop saying that, stop believing that awful crap that she's feeding you! They're alive and well and waiting for us. That's the only truth."

The man suddenly looked up at her, green eyes glistening with tears and hopelessness. "Tifa," he asked, his voice half a choke, "Why? Why are you doing this to me?"

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" she countered, suddenly crying herself, "But it isn't you, is it? It's her and Hojo, Shinra and the Planet."

"Just let it be. You just forget about it, Tifa. Go. Go now."

"Why don't you believe me? Jenova, please, please, leave him alone." Tifa felt like a child begging for scraps from a rich man's table. On her knees and whimpering to some unseen creature of the dark. But her Cloud was hurting. There had to be a way to stop it.

"This Planet. Oh, Tifa, how could it betray me like that? After I gave it so much? I feel like a god damned match, used then flung out, usefulness burnt away."

"They're not gone, the Planet did nothing to CJ and Ifalna but save them. Listen to me. . . "

"The Planet really is heartless, just like so many people always told me." Cloud's own voice consumed his ears suddenly. He wasn't sure if the words were even his, they came so hurriedly from his lips. He listened closely, no longer able to hear Tifa, just those words in his own voice that didn't really seem his. "People like to think that the Planet really cares, that it worries about us all like a mother. But that's a lie. It only cares about itself. And the people, they only care about themselves too. They don't mesh. They can never mesh and there's only ever going to be one result that comes with the attempt to: Destruction. It all ends in death, it has to. The Planet or us. Someone's gotta give eventually. The war can't go on forever. So many people have died in the conflict. Why. . . why should anyone else? Would it really be better if-- I just don't know. Maybe."

Tifa called Cloud's name a dozen times, stamping the ground in fury when she realized he couldn't hear her. He seemed talking to someone else, something she couldn't hear and argue with. She would have grabbed his broad shoulders and given a solid shake but Tifa was afraid to go too near him, she felt heat and dangerous power throbbing from his body like lethal radiation. Her lover was buried amidst all that alien energy. If only she could dig him free of it.

But no, that brilliant power was his casket. It held him just as the damp debris of the Shinra building held those lost photographs and those old memories. Tifa could bloody her hands all she wanted with futile digging, but it wouldn't do anything but sting her fingers.

"Who the fuck are you, eh?!"

Tifa looked up, breath catching in her throat at the sound of Cloud's voice. He was on his feet, hollering at the sky. "Who the fuck do you think you are?? Taking and giving life, thinking you were god! Are you the equivalent of god, Planet? Is that how it is? Taking and giving and taking again, and we should just accept it! Give them back to me! Give them back or I'll make you!"

"But they're alive!!"

He whipped around suddenly, snarling with rage, and backhanded Tifa across the face. The woman took it stoically, never flinching. As red throbbled on her cheek, she kept looking up, looking for that man she couldn't find. But there was nothing there behind all that green. Nightmare images only, old, bad memories of those other green eyes, the ones that had nearly killed her and taken everything away. How could she associate something as evil as Sephiroth with something as pure as Cloud? The contradiction gnawed at her mind, just as that slap gnawed at her face. His beautiful eyes glimmered with insanity. He let it blast from his soul, glad to feel it all drain away. If he let it go, he found the pain was much more bearable. If he let the rage consume him, the pain burned to ash.

"Shut up," he growled, almost whispered, "Tifa, if you're not going to accept it, that's not my problem. I know what this fucking Planet has done and I'm gonna do something about it. I don't care what it costs me, I won't let it get away with this. Go, Tifa, if you're going to be this way about it, you can just go."

A hand to his head, steps disjointed and slow, Cloud stalked away. Tifa felt the very air humming around her body, it burnt against her skin and stung her eyes like poisonous mist until she could barely see Cloud standing there, shoulders bowed.

What. What will you do, Cloud? You can't get them back, it can't return them to you. You're not ignorant, you know that. So what'll it be? What'll you do to show this wretched rock that its actions were cruel? How will you make it pay?

"Vengeance. . ."

Cloud whispered the word, coming to the conclusion with a painful snap. "Is that all it's about in the end? Making something hurt just as badly as I do?" He watched his hands idly, trying to think past the buzzing and the voices. He could feel anything that was left falling away in layers like onion skins. Why hold on to it. . . ? It didn't matter anyway.

"It doesn't matter, Tifa." He smiled weakly and shook his head, looking up and taking it all in; the burnt, smashed carnage of Sector Three and the ruined immortality of the Shinra towers. The air smelled good, like chaos, death and blood. It matched what was inside. "It doesn't matter."

Tifa stood, awed by his tone of voice. So solemn, sad, and crazy that it made her want to hide from him. The air was getting harder to breathe. She wasn't sure why. Cloud was getting harder to see and that was a mystery too. Just so much power pulsing everywhere; in the wreckage, the sky, the ground. It ran up through the soles of her boots, up her calves and into her spine until her head began to throb with the gushes of energy coursing through it. This was Jenova and this was the Planet. This was the divinity of two contrasting forces made tangible and functional. And they were in Cloud's hands. And Cloud, he was in Jenova's.

"Cloud. . ."

She called his name faintly, wishing to god that he'd turn around and say hers again, say it in that stupid way he had when he was feeling romantic. That sensual purr that always made her feel nothing could ever be wrong in the world again. But he wouldn't turn around. He only eyed the sky, listening to something she couldn't hear, nor would she ever want to be able to. He was listening to Jenova, listening to the screams of a Planet that he himself was hurting. He was loving those screams because they drowned out his children's cries from his mind. They pushed it all away.

He would hurt this Planet.

It'd stolen from him. He'd steal it back.

Cloud could be a thief too, right? It wasn't hard. He could give and take life too.

He could feel Hojo's gifts to him running a mad marathon in his veins, coming out his very pores. Mako. Jenova. Anger. The third was the professor's most effective blessing, he now realized. Jenova realized it too.

Tearing his eyes from the heavens, Cloud balled his fists at his sides. He looked down at Tifa, sorry for the red mark on her beautiful face. How many times he'd rubbed his calloused fingers over her unmarred skin and blessed whatever stars had been watching out for him thirteen years ago to allow such a thing to happen, such a love to ever exist. But that was over. That was gone. He'd never touch anything again or allow anything else to ever lay a comforting hand upon his own face. Cloud Strife just didn't deserve it.

Smiling sadly, he gazed down at his wife, wanting to capture her perfection in his mind so he could cherish it forever. Then, a cold lonely tear snaking down from his eye, dripping softly to the dust, Cloud whispered one word and the world turned white.

"Super Nova."

~*~

Kalm tended to make Reno nervous. It was just too damn. . . calm. Calm Kalm. A stupid joke that only added to his irritation. The red-headed ex-Turk sprawled lazily against the lumpiness of a stone wall, shifting every now and then to settle more comfortable amidst the rolling boulders at its base. Calmness pushed in on him. The calmness, more like the flaming ignorance of everyone in the damn town. People went on with their lives, miners worked and drank in the taverns, women chatted as they passed him, life spun on in endless circles. But over there, over the horizon, Reno knew life would never spin on again in Midgar. Or at least, it would spin in broken rings, or ovals. Never in the perfection of a circle.

"Ikari!!"

Reeve's voice broke the annoying blue stillness of the air and Reno jumped, smacking his head back against the wall. The Shinra president ran forward out of a tavern suddenly and into the street, desperation in his eyes, his face like a damp tomato. Reno distractedly thought he was going to give himself a stroke if he kept it up.

"Ikari!! God dammit, where is that useless excuse for a commander?! Reno, get me a chopper!"

"What's goin' on?"

The red-headed ex-Turk got stiffly to his feet, a hand to the small of his back. Reeve ran up, smacked him in the shoulder, then turned around and began walking in circles, a cellphone in hand. Reno repeated himself. He hated repeating himself.

"What's happening, Reeve? Hullo? Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuu. . ."

"Tifa!" he spat, turning around and smacking Reno again, "Something's happening, I was on the phone with her and suddenly there was this yelling and then BAM! the line went dead. I need a chopper!!" \tab "You need a sedative. Calm down, man, I'll find Ikari. Dammit, didn't you tell her I said for her not to turn her back on him?" Reno groaned, darted past his president, got smacked in the shoulder again, and made his way to Kalm's lone inn. Reeve's brown eyes followed him the whole way, unblinking, then he swiveled his gaze about and eyed the horizon, rubbing the plastic sides of his cellphone as though hoping it would start spouting answers.

Leaning back heavily against the plank side of a house, Reeve squinted suddenly, not sure if he could even trust his pessimistic eyes. He distantly heard Nanaki approaching, paws hitting the ground with silent slaps, and he put his hand down to give the beast's mane a tug.

"Look over there," he whispered. Nanaki fixed his keen vision on the skies over distant Midgar. Usually you could just barely see the top of the Shinra towers from the borders of Kalm, but with the building gone, the horizon was a void of blue.

"Yeah," Nanaki said, turning away, "I'm sorry about your building, Reeve. You can't see it from here anymore."

"No, no, no," the man spat, kneeling and taking Nanaki's shaggy head in his trembling hands, pointing him back towards Midgar, "Look at the skies, Red! What is that?"

The creature ran his black slit of an eye over the heavens, growling softly in the back of his throat. The clouds had broken apart. Red light burst from behind them and drops of fire fell from above. Nanaki frowned, his fangs just barely popping out from behind his lips.

"That, Reeve," he began softly, "That would be Super Nova."

"What??" The Shinra president fell backwards onto his ass, nearly smacking into Reno and Marlene as they ran up from the inn. "What did you say, Red? Tell me it wasn't what I thought. What was it?"

"Super Nova. One doesn't easily forget what it looks like after seeing it in action. Even after thirteen years."

Reeve repeated the word to himself, paling and dropping his phone. "Midgar. . ." he muttered, "Tifa. . ."

The four of them stood looking off as a roar began in the air, the roar of a magic uncaged after thirteen years. The ball of electrical flames, when it came, struck at the heart of the city and though nearly two hundred miles away, they all felt the shock of impact. It knocked them to the dirt and made an old item shop collapse in on itself. The destruction lasted for a half hour, a half hour of roaring flames, shooting stars, and explosions. The city burst apart. Eight Sectors. The remnants of an empire. Lives. Memories. Homes. President Reeve, much to his shame, cried during most of it. Reno just swore a lot.

~*~

"North."

"What?"

Cait Sith looked up, his white-gloved little paws gripping Chieko's rusty-colored mane as the both of them swooped low over the smoking debris of Midgar. The robotic cat was two fizzes away from a complete overload of his circuitry after watching the destruction from the sky. His beady eyes looked nearly anxious, if that was possible.

"What did you say, Chieko?"

Cait tore his vision off the black rubble of Midgar and poked the monster in the back of her head. She gave a growl and repeated, "North. We're all to go North."

"We? Geez, that doesn't sound good."

"Do not fear, little thing. We'll find Cloud and Vincent there at last. Seems I won't be needing you after all."

"You're not gonna dump me, are ya?" Cait gripped Chieko's mane fiercely, huddling his small body closer to her back. He felt her shaking her head.

"No. You could prove useful. Father always told me to never pass up an opportunity thrown right into your lap. He always said the gifts of fate were usually the most useful."

"Yeah, well, your father also thought he looked good half-bald with a ponytail but everyone can't always be right now, can they?"

Chieko snarled softly, adjusting her course and gliding quickly away from the destruction. Mountains loomed huge in the distance. And over them? Chieko couldn't wait to find out.

"Watch your tone," she warned Cait as she gained altitude and her red body broke into the blue of the sky like a rogue enemy plane. "You'll be safe, but only because of me. So respect me. And Hojo's memory."

Cait snorted, gritting his little plastic teeth as the fiery beast soared through the clouds. "Whatever you say, Cheeko," he mumbled, "But the minute I see any creepy little tattooed guys in black robes, I'm bailing."

~*~

Onward to Part Eight: Tolling the Iron Bell

Believe it or not, we're in the homestretch here. Three more chapters and that'll be all she wrote so expect some drastic stuff very soon (as though blowing up Midgar isn't drastic) ^_^ I seriously never expected this sucker to get this huge but in case ya haven't noticed, I'm damned long-winded.

Anyways, email me with comments, crits, suggestions, whatever. I just love to hear that people are actually reading this. Makes me feel all warm, squishy, and redeemed as a fic writer ~_^