

# FFVII Too Much In The Sun by Glass Shard

## Part Eight: TOLLING THE IRON BELL



Note: This chapter is dark and sad and dark. Um, you've been warned ^\_^

Now, that was a familiar white.

It reminded her of something. Something more than a color; a body of something so much bigger than herself that with each second she stared it down, she felt smaller and smaller, like an insect burning to dust beneath a colorless beam.

That white was warm. It blew everything with any degree of solidarity away. It could dissolve a diamond in its brilliancy. But by the grace of the gods, it was so beautiful. . .

Blinded by soft tears, Tifa reached a trembling hand up into the void of featureless white. It almost played in her fingers. Thick, curling gorgeousness of foamy energy. It warmed the flesh of her forearm but never quite touched her. She wanted to feel it, feel that heaven against her body. If it lapped her up, drank away her being, tore her soul apart, that was all okay, all welcome. The heat was desired after Cloud had left her in such bitter coldness. Her small body trembled, wracked by the assaults of the warm white. Chaos could eat her alive, oblivion could swallow her soul. Hell itself could wrap her shoulders in its evil embrace if only she got to feel some warmth.

"Cloud!!"

She called the name, suddenly terrified of the white. It was burning the world away and her small form was a panicking island in the middle of the wreckage. Why wouldn't it take her too? What cruelty was denying her the white heat?

"Cloud!!"

No answer though. He'd gone. He'd spoken his last words to her and they still roared, personified by this power. This lethal, gorgeous power, searing the cruelty of the world with its fire. It blinded her, baked her, sucked the air from her lungs. And left her trembling, by herself, in the cold.

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Midgar smouldered. Reno thought it looked like an old campfire ground to embers beneath an uncaring prick's shoes. He listened for noises beyond the incessant humming of the chopper engines and came up with nothing. Crackling sounds,

the roar of flames, distant explosions but not what he so wanted to hear. His sober aquamarine eyes took in the damage below apathetically. Something was keeping it from sinking in. Something was keeping it from screwing with his mind and giving him a breakdown. Reno hoped that whatever it was kept it up.

"I never thought I'd see anything like this. . . "

Reno turned around and ran his eyes over Bugah. The old man sat looking feeble and worn on the floor of the chopper, his bent back against the bulkhead, a bandage on his forehead. "If I'd died before today, I could've gone happy. Why? Why did I have to live long enough to see the end of the world?"

The ex-Turk shrugged, raising an arm and leaning it against the open doorway of the chopper. He laid his forehead against the soft fold of his jacket sleeve and sighed, loose red hair caught by the wind and whipping his neck.

". . . Yes. Yes, that's right, Ikari. I understand. No, you needn't worry over it, just call Wynn and tell him I said so. Yes. Alright."

Reeve hung his cellphone up, the hand unit silencing with a cold beep. He dropped it in the tattered pocket of his blazer, then went to stand beside Reno and survey the wreckage of his kingdom. Plumes of smoke polluted the skies and reflected in Reeve's own dark eyes mockingly. The red of the flames below made his features garish.

"Any sign of anyone?" he asked quietly. Reno stared for a moment, then shook his head.

"The losses aren't that bad all told. We were lucky to have been forewarned, or. . . or I don't know. Or we'd all be dead right now."

"Tifa called me. Right before. . . "

"I know."

The words had been unnecessary, the thought was on both men's minds. Tifa had called from Midgar only minutes before the entire sprawling city had been decimated by a fireball from the cosmos. They'd been flying over the remains for nearly fifteen minutes and had yet to hear a single cry for help, see a single sign of life from anywhere in the city. Much less any indications that a lone woman who'd been at the very heart of the blast might still be alive.

"Do you think Cloud. . .?" Reeve's voice trailed off and he crossed his arms, leaning against the other side of the open doorway.

"Do I think what?"

"Do you think he did this?"

"Yes I do."

"How can you--"

"Because I don't know of anyone else with the power to summon Super Nova, do you? Or anyone else, for that matter, who'd have the desire to."

Reeve frowned, staring outside intently. "Do you think it killed him?"

Reno whipped his eyes away from the wreckage of Midgar and stepped further inside the helicopter. Huffing and muttering, he threw himself into the co-pilot's seat besides Mannik and glared out the fore window.

"I hope so. . . " he finally answered, "For his own sake."

The Shinra president hunched his narrow shoulders up over his ears and clenched his teeth, forcing himself to scour the smoking mess below. The chopper's erratic shadow darted over the terrain of destruction, getting larger, then shrinking away as it slid over depressions in the land. Reeve watched it with glistening eyes. The silence of the group behind him pressed at his back while the deathly quiet of his ruined city assaulted his front. He felt totally pressed between two unforgiving flat hands. His responsibility towards his company and towards his friends held him in a stifling embrace that barely left room for his chest to rise and fall with his breaths. Why were they clashing now? Again? His loyalty towards Cloud and his loyalty towards Shinra. One was killing the other. Now, Reeve knew of two choices: he could either pursue Cloud Strife and destroy him to save the Planet, or he could say to hell with the Planet and try to save Cloud Strife.

"What's our next move, Mr. President?"

Reno couldn't have asked a worse question. Reeve sighed deeply, wishing the sun would set and wipe out the light flooding over the wasteland below.

"What's the status of our party?" he asked, desperate to stall. Reno lowered red brows over his eyes, seeing right through the tactic. But he answered promptly anyway, it was his job.

"There's you, me, Berk, Marlene, Wallace, Red, and Ikari. If Highwind ever gets back, we can count him in too. There're about a hundred'n fifty troops crammed into Kalm but they're severely short of ammo and equipment. It's all lying below

us in a million pieces. Garrisons in Junon, garrisons in Costa del Sol. I'm not putting too much stock in numbers now though, Reeve. We don't need the backing of an army, we need the backing of our Planet."

"Yeah. . ."

Reno puckered his lips, examining the inside of his eyelids for a moment.

"We need to go after Cloud and Vincent," he finally said lowly, "We have to stop this before it goes any farther than it already has."

"What do you mean, 'Go after them'?"

"He means kill them," Bugah answered, massaging the headache tearing through his skull. He looked up at the Shinra president with a sour expression. "The same thing you and your group did thirteen years ago with the last madman that threatened our lives."

"But they're our friends," Reeve hissed, getting angry, "That would be blatant betrayal. They need help, not enemies."

Bugah didn't answer, momentarily startled by the man's fury. Reeve turned away from him and pouted, looking outside again. Reno could almost hear the conflict within him. The same conflict roared inside his own mind, making the ex-Turk buck in unease. It couldn't it ever be simple? Why couldn't it ever be a simple matter of, there's the bad guy, there's the good guy. Good guy kills bad guy, world lives happily ever after. Finito.

No. Things had a tendency to smear. Good blended with evil and formed something even more deadly. Evil harnessed purity and twisted it around into a weapon. Reno didn't think it fair that evil should have such unfair advantages. Living was hard enough without having to deal with fuzzy lines all the time.

"Reno, you said we needed the backing of our Planet," Reeve said suddenly, turning his head up to eye his employee, "Didn't, er. . . Sephiroth say he was going to ah. . . represent the Planet?"

"You've got to be kidding me." Reno smirked unattractively, jabbing his hands in his pockets, "I don't want to hear that name again. We're lucky Marlene's little stunt didn't get us all killed. Sephiroth summon, that's fuckin' rich."

"You saw it the same as I," Reeve protested, "He was there, he used the power of the Planet and zapped right out of a materia stone. Like it or not, he's aligned with it. Ask Bugah over there, he'll tell ya."

Reno looked towards the little old man who gave him a shrug, crossing his arms. "It would appear that's the case," he answered, "But Hades himself can use mako to appear. And I wouldn't go about trusting Hades, now would you?"

"I might if I ran out of other options," Reeve muttered darkly, "But don't exaggerate the situation, Elder Bugah. Does Sephiroth really compare to Hades?"

The old man grinned weakly at the question, looking over the President's shoulder towards the gray sky outside the jerking chopper. "I don't think I want to get into that debate right now, sir," he answered, "But I could name quite a few corpses who might say he does. Or did, in any event."

"Well, I guess it's a moot point anyways," Reeve answered snappishly, "There's no way I can allow that materia to be used again. That little hunk of red glass is a ticking time bomb harboring a megalomaniacal murderous madman. Who died thirteen years ago yet seems just as lethal with that damned sword of his as ever. He made ribbons out of Chaos, didn't he?"

"Yeah," Reno said impatiently, "And Chaos made ribbons outta poor Berkie and Barret Wallace. We're dealin' with a couple very lethal creatures. I really wish Jenova'd stayed wherever she's been and not introduced me to 'em." Reno slumped down in the chopper seat, his untucked stained shirt sliding up and covering his chin as his dark shades fell over his eyes. "This blows. . . this blows so horribly bad. Do you think the insurance company's gonna pay for my house?"

"Since the insurance company got blown up, I doubt it."

"Damn it. I don't suppose I could get compensation from Shinra, eh?"

Reeve shut his eyes and shook his head, sighing. "Don't you start bleeding me dry too, Reno."

"Heh. Sorry."

"President Reeve!"

"Hm?"

Mannik, the young helicopter pilot's firm voice darted into the back space of the hovering chopper. Reeve, Reno, and Bugah all looked up.

"Sir, we're approaching Sector Three, where the impact was centered."

"So we are, Lieutenant."

The Shinra President approached Reno in the co-pilot's seat and jerked his thumb in a gesture for the guy to get the hell out of his way. Groaning, Reno rose and Reeve plopped down on the worn leather, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. Swallowing hard, he gazed out the large, dirty fore window of the chopper where Mannik was pointing.

"Yeah, that's the black heart of alla this all right. . . "

A three square mile stretch of flattened, burnt land met Reeve's unenthusiastic vision. Featureless, dull, it spread away, smouldering orange and red in some places, sending lone smoke signals into the skies; forlorn gray wisps spelling despair, spelling ruin. As far as he could see, this shroud grasped, choking the land and making it hard to believe that a healthy productive neighborhood had once thrived there, that children had played in the streets and people had walked down the sidewalks, watching the stars.

"One day, this will all be green. . . "

Bugah's soft, wavering voice floated to the two men's ears. "Green. Life will reclaim this land and restore the soil and make something better than what was there. In hundreds of years, maybe a thousand, this will all be beautiful, a paradise of life thriving off the death of this destruction. The dead will feed the living and the living will thrive. Survival, change, renewal. That is the Planet."

"Spare me the ecology lecture please, Bugah, "Reeve moaned, frowning deeply in anguish, "I don't think I can properly appreciate it right now. I won't be alive to enjoy the Planet's precious renewal. I was alive only to build up the city that it so carelessly allowed to be destroyed. Oh, gods. . . Midgar didn't deserve this. My people didn't deserve this. It isn't fair. All with one god damned spell, one stupid word and a lifetime of work turns to shit and ash. It's a waste. A waste!" The Shinra president pounded a fist into the chopper bulkhead, furiously grinding his teeth. It WAS a horrible waste, such a thoughtless act that it made him want to scream. Why hadn't the LifeStream shown up to do something about it? Didn't anything care?

"We're on our own, "he muttered, shaking his head slowly, "Humanity's on its own." He looked to Reno who tossed him a shrug, helpless.

"Fuck it, "he said easily, "Whatever happens, happens."

Reeve almost snapped at him, almost popped him a good one in the shoulder. But something stayed his hand. "Fuck it, "he echoed, "Yeah, the shortest prayer there is. Heh. The Planet can get bent. We'll deal with this on our own."

"Yeah." Reno smiled, leaning his elbows on the headrest of the co-pilot's chair. Amazing how two little words could so easily clear the air. But they weren't the most effective healing words ever. No, those came next.

"I see something down there. . . "

"What?"

Reeve shot forward in his seat, almost chinning himself on the chopper control console. Mannik repeated himself, adjusting his course slightly. "On the horizon, sir. Something. . . golden?"

Reno shoved his president out of the way and pressed his face against the fore window glass as Bugah called eager questions to his back. The red-headed ex-Turk whistled to himself in disbelief.

"I'll be damned."

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Tifa had awoken from the vision of blinding white with a single throbbing ache in her head. The light of destruction had been so intense it'd nearly blinded her. As it was, things seemed a little too dark before her eyes and she hoped it wasn't permanent.

Why wasn't she dead?

The mystery echoed in her mind. Around her stretched complete and utter desolation, a leveled city, and she'd been in the middle of the blast. Yet she was unharmed. Her green jacket, her bluejeans, her white sweater, they all had been singed and blackened. The damaged fabric rubbed against her skin until it burned, but Tifa was alive.

What had happened? This question disturbed her most. It had all been a terrifying chain of events. Jenova's dark plot to turn her husband into a murderer, into the tool she'd use to conquer a Planet that had wronged her. The evil had dragged her children into it, her friends, herself, an old scientist, old fears, old terrors, and now, it seemed, Jenova was winning, despite their best efforts.

Midgar was dead.

Tifa knelt in the ash for a long time with this realization raging in her head. She remembered her life in the city, the happy times and the sad times, the murders and the births. Nothing but memories now. Tifa suddenly found herself crying. She wept for her lost home, her lost shop, lost hopes. . . but. . . most bitterly, she wept for her lost lover. It all was gone. Armageddon had come and stolen her life away, leaving her cruelly alive and sadistically alone. The hole in her heart was consuming. Tifa fed it with tear after tear but the thirst was remorseless and wouldn't be satisfied.

That power had come. Super Nova. Cloud's power. She'd been plastered to the ground beneath it, staring up at the white as it came to do its work, to burn and destroy. But Cloud had stood over her. She remembered gazing up at his divinely lit form, a pillar of raging strength against the white. He'd sheltered her from the blast. She'd lain being baked beneath what had gotten past his barrier and when it all had been over, when she'd lain stricken, he'd carried her away to here. To here.

Sector One.

Their home.

The pretty white house was a collection of burnt, brittle beams. It all crumbled beneath her boots. She stumbled around the perimeter of the home, blinded by grief and disbelief, and then found Cloud's gift to her. Yunata.

"Yunata. . ."

The word had felt good to say, a normal word to push the horrible strangeness away. Vincent's gold chocobo, still locked in their stable, warking frantically and half-maddened after suffering through the blast. Cloud's power had kept him alive, he'd kept her alive for reasons Tifa couldn't understand. A final favor to Vincent, perhaps? Out of memory for his children? No, Tifa knew the real reason. He'd done it for her, so she'd have something warm, living, and breathing to be there when she awoke. He'd been so right in his actions, Tifa thought to herself, stroking the cooing chocobo's soft neck, he knew her so well.

He kept me alive, and he kept Yunata alive. It's true then. This isn't Jenova. Not entirely. Cloud's sane enough to make his own decisions. He chose death and he chose life. He dished it out as he saw fit.

As Tifa swung herself onto Yunata's warm, broad back, this thought slipped into her mind, jabbing at the walls of her skull with unfeeling ferocity. She knew she couldn't entirely blame Jenova anymore. That beast had been the catalyst of all of this, she was the reason Cloud thought CJ and Ifalna had been stolen from him, but Cloud was now acting with his own will. Or at least, Tifa thought rebelliously, he is to some extent. But not wholly, she knew him too well to ever believe that. This just couldn't be placed solely on Cloud. It just couldn't be.

The city was so silent.

Cold winds blew with moaning cries through the desolation. They had Tifa shivering against Yunata's blind comfort. She huddled closer to the bird's neck, gripping her sides tight with her knees, weaving her fingers through the soft feathers. As she let Yunata carried her wherever the chocobo wanted, Tifa thought only of the destruction of her life. Of Midgar. Black ash smeared her limbs and covered her vibrant cheeks with murderous dark. Tifa only hoped to god that the soot didn't creep inside and muss her soul with its destruction. She'd need all of her spirit to get him back.

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By the time the chopper had landed, she was unconscious.

"She's all right, right? Tell me she's all right!!"

Reeve circled Yunata with frantic steps and the bird bucked in unease at the all attention, at the panicking humans and the huge buzzing metal insect only a few feet away. Warking, she tried to throw Tifa from her back but Reno stepped forward and caught her in time, giving her reins a solid jerk.

"Whoa there, ya overgrown game hen. Precious cargo." Frowning, Reno patted Yunata soothingly, then lifted Tifa's limp form in his two strong arms. She gave a little moan, then her head slumped against the ex-Turk's narrow chest and she shivered. Reno looked decidedly uneasy. So did Reeve.

"She's not going to be happy if she wakes up in your arms," The Shinra President muttered.

"Yeah, well, I'm not happy having her here. C'mon." He made his way briskly for the chopper, where Bugah had his curious gray head peeping out, wispy thin hairs blowing in the breeze. Reeve thought that Reno was carrying Tifa awfully gently for someone who disliked her so much. He stood there for a moment, watching the two of them and sighing in relief.

Then Yunata's sharp beak pecked him in the small of his back and he winced, whipping around and grabbing her reins.

"You do this, birdie?" he asked thoughtfully, scratching the golden creature at the base of her beak, "Did you keep her alive through this?" Yunata didn't answer, only scratched impatiently in the scorched dirt and Reeve smiled weakly, throwing a hand in the pocket of his jacket. It was cold out. The sun seemed to have given up on them all.

"Cloud saved her, didn't he, birdie? Yeah, he saved her. I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or worse. Terribly selfish of him, don't you think? Taking the entire city away, all these people, but sparing his own love. Since when does Cloud Strife decide who gets to live and who gets to die?" Reeve eyed the sky, looking past the smoke for the perfect fleece of the scuttling clouds. He needed to see something beautiful and real beyond all this decay. He needed some hope.

Yunata pecked him in the back again, as though rebuking him for his dark question and the Shinra president turned and cuffed her soundly in the side. "What is there to fight for, eh?" he whispered, "Everything I had is dust beneath my feet. All my presidential power, even when it did exist, wasn't enough to keep Berk, Barret, Tifa, all of them from being hurt. Shinra was nothing. It hadn't been anything even when it'd still been in existence. That power, that control was meaningless if I couldn't use it to conquer the demon wrecking their lives. Can you tell me what I can use to keep fighting, birdie? Can you tell me a reason to bother? If this is the end, struggling is a waste, isn't it? Oh, gods. . . there's got to be something I can do, some way to give everyone their lives back. . . "

President Reeve saw now he was surrounded by lives he could never return. Despite his evacuation, there'd been so many caught in Super Nova's blast. He could feel the combined weight of a thousand lives pressing their cold hands on his shoulders. And they wouldn't let up their grip. They crushed him, and threatened to push him down, make him part of the ground they'd all been smashed into. Would he be able to look Cloud in the eye again? Ever?

"Vengeance."

Yeah, he could fight for that, if nothing else. The desire was there, the anger; A solid enough reason to keep going. Avenging these lost lives and his lost empire. But who, in the end, would he really be forced to wreak that vengeance on? Jenova. . . or Cloud and Vincent? Who was really wielding the sword?

As he led Yunata to the chopper, Reeve had no answers to his questions. Only doubt. And a certainty that when that doubt was soon replaced with the inevitable truth, it would hurt everyone there to see it.

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"Man, is this all we got?"

Berk looked down unenthusiastically at the small bowl of oatmeal cupped in his hands. He wasn't even sure if it was oatmeal. "Ack! Part of it moved!" He tipped the bowl to one side, and the gray sludge slid a bit, but slowly, with a sucking noise. "It's winking at me. . . I think this oatmeal knows something I don't."

"Stop acting like a child, Mr. Berk." Marlene looked up with a frown and handed a bowl of hot gray stuff to Barret who accepted it with a sniff.

"Thanks. I think."

He jabbed at it with a plastic spoon.

"Hey, it's fightin' back."

"What?!" Marlene crossed her arms and sat down at the edge of her father's cot, peering over at the oatmeal. It looked fine to her. "You two are such children," she sighed, leaning back on her hands, the soft cot sinking under her weight. "Do you want seven course steak dinners? Well, it isn't going to happen. Kalm is so inundated with Midgar refugees it isn't even funny. There's hardly a thing left in the shops, you're lucky the Shinra had MREs in storage. Otherwise there'd be a lot of very hungry people in this city."

"Better hungry than poisoned by this crap. But MREs aren't bad," Berk said defensively, "They're really pretty good. Just not Shinra's two year old oatmeal. I think I'd rather starve than suffer though this. This shit's dangerous. Hey though, we're Shinra employees, don't we get meal priority?"

Marlene shook her head, scowling. "Our being employees is actually working against us. Reeve's desperate to appease Midgar's citizenry. He'll see us suffer as long as it makes him look better to the civilians."

"Well, damn." Berk began shoveling down the oatmeal, grimacing in undisguised displeasure. His chest and back still stung from the wounds Chaos had seen fit to give him, but he felt a hell of a lot better than he had a few hours ago. He'd been ready to cut his own throat before, it'd stung so bad. Of course, he hadn't complained. Not when Barret had been in

the cot next to him, insane with delirium.

It'd been push and go for a while. Even with materia, it'd been too risky to attempt too many spells all at once on the butchered man, it could have sent him into shock, or stopped his heart. It had gotten really dangerous for about a half an hour. Berk had been sure Marlene would go crazy with worry, the way she'd practically screamed at Barret not to die. It had unnerved him, she'd yelled at her father as though he were a misbehaving child, trying to get back at her somehow by pulling off a naughty prank. Few pranks worse than dying just to prove a point. She'd sure seen it that way, knowing Barret would do anything to convince her that Shinra was evil, was wrong and corrupt.

But she'd managed to make him stop.

Berk looked over and gave Barret a once over with uncharacteristically sober eyes. The large white bandage around his stomach had him sitting awkwardly in the cot, but he seemed so much better now, it really amazed him. Marlene too. Barret's recovery had zapped the life and the fight right back into her.

"What're you lookin' at?" the guy snapped suddenly, catching the young Turk staring at him. Berk grinned and shrugged his shoulders, swirling his oatmeal around.

"Nothing. Just rather cool, is all."

"What is?"

Berk shook his head, still smiling.

"Nothin'. Is President Reeve back yet?"

Marlene blinked and looked up through a curtain of loose bangs. "No," she answered, taking Barret's now empty bowl out of his hand, "But it's only been forty-five minutes, I wouldn't worry."

"Hey, I ain't worried about too much of any of this anymore," Berk said cockily, "Not after watching you summon Sephiroth. Man, with him on our side we're unbeatable."

"You really are jes' a kid, ain't ya?" Barret asked, a petulant hand rubbing at his midsection, "Blinded by the pretty lights, the big ass sword, the bad ass attitude. Marlene won't be usin' that materia again. I could kill Bugah for ever givin' it to her. We're so lucky we're all still alive after that."

"But he could be such a powerful ally," Berk protested, sitting further up in his cot, "I mean, it's General Sephiroth! Born and bred for combat. And already dead, so what's he got to fear! Man, what a warrior. He was wicked against Chaos. Even better than the stories I'd heard, or the old footage of him in battle. His sword technique. . . gods, if I could fight like that I wouldn't be taking orders from Rude, that's for damned sure."

"You fence?" Marlene asked in honest curiosity. "I just thought you were a marksman."

"Both," the Turk replied with a shrug, "The best at both in the department. Well, aside from Rude, Mr. Strife and Reno. But someday. . ." Berk smiled to himself, picturing when he'd be leader of the Turks. Midgar or no, the organization would continue, Berk would see to that himself.

"Humble too, I see," said Marlene with a frown. "Admirable."

"Hey, why go around in false modesty? I know I'm good, might as well admit it to people when they ask, right?"

Marlene rolled her eyes.

"Right."

"The next time I see Chaos," Berk said, raising an imaginary gun and aiming it in the air, "I'm gonna admit that to him right off. . . I owe that freaky monster. I hope he takes checks from the First National Bank of Royal Ass-Whoop."

Barret glared at the guy, then fell back against his pillow with a sigh. Marlene looked towards him anxiously but he waved her off with a thick hand. "I'm fine," he said, "I just want out of here is all. I want to go back to Cosmo Canyon." He truly meant the words. He'd never meant for any of this to happen. He'd never expected to get caught up in a war for the Planet again, to see Marlene in danger because of him. He wanted their normal lives back and he wanted her safe. Blinking softly, Barret watched his daughter's face as she busied herself fixing his bed and carrying their dishes off to the volunteers working the food line. He thought distractedly that she'd really grown up that past month. She'd gone from a little girl giddy about getting to live her dream of working for the largest corporation in the world, to a real heroine, a real scientist, just as she'd always wanted. His heart swelled with emotion when he remembered the way she'd fearlessly approached Chaos, intent on saving him though she hadn't had a weapon besides her nails, her fists and her own bravery. Barret had rebuked her for it later, but he'd really been proud. Marlene was a regular little AVALANCE warrior now. And Barret would've been glad to fight alongside of her.

"I need to teach you how to shoot," he said softly. Marlene looked over and gave him a low-key scowl.

"Dad, I'm a scientist. I don't need to know about that stuff."

"Shinra scientists need to be able to defend themselves," Berk cut in, "Even Neto knew how to load a gun. It's a dangerous career, what, with all the rivalry between us and other companies."

"I'm not worried. Besides, sometimes I think I believe I may become a pacifist. That's what Bugenhagen was."

"What did you say?" Barret stared at his daughter as though she were a stranger. "No child of mine is gonna turn into some hippie pacifist weirdo. Someone punches you, you punch back. Honor, honey, pride. You gotta defend 'em."

"But why turn into what you hate in order to stop what's attacking you?" Marlene asked, "Violence begets violence. Someone has to break the chain or it'll build up, link after link, for an eternity!"

"Aw, man, let's not argue about this," Berk cut in, "This is something no one'll win. Say, anyone hear from Neto, speaking of the ratty little guy?"

Marlene stuck her tongue out at her father then turned away to address the young Turk. Barret shoved her in the shoulder in mock-anger and she fell off the cot.

"Last I heard, he was on his way to Icicle Inn, "the woman snapped, picking herself up, "He told President Reeve that he quit, then said he was off to find some sanity. Good luck to him. Why he chose Icicle Inn though, I don't know. But it's fine by me really, Dr. Neto rather annoyed me."

"Yeah." Berk smiled to himself and crossed his arms gently over his wounded chest. "He was always hitting on you, wasn't he?"

"What?" Barret looked up as though a bloodhound picking up a dangerous scent, "Neto? That's the guy that wanted you to get ice cream with him? Who wouldn't stop pesterin' you?"

"Hush, dad." Marlene reddened slightly, wishing the wounded in the cots beyond Berk and Barret's would stop looking over at her and listening with eagerness to their conversation. She didn't feel her love life, or rather, lack of one, was the business of everyone in Kalm. "That's the guy. But he's gone now and you don't need to worry about it, all right? I told you I wouldn't get involved with him and I didn't. It never went beyond him following me down the WDD hallway with goo-goo eyes. The little mouse. . ." She pushed a ticklish strand of hair back with the rest and eyed Berk, who was staring at her and trying to suppress laughs. "What?"

"Aw, nothin'. Rather feel bad for the guy is all. Guess he never had a chance with you. Heh. Why though?"

"What? I don't see how that's any of your business." Marlene stood and tapped her foot, getting angry. She did not like this topic of conversation.

"Aw, c'mon, Marlene, why didn't you like Neto? 'Cause he was smarter than you? 'Cause he was stupid? Was he too ugly, too much of a pantywaist?"

"Shut up. . ."

Berk shook his head, eyes narrowing, fury beginning to suddenly build in his chest for unknown reasons. "Couldn't live up to your high standards. The frigging crown jewel of the Weapons Development Department had to have the proper setting to be embedded in, eh? Neto was too tarnished, too ridiculous. Not enough of a shining knight for ya. . ."

Marlene clenched her jaw and turned away. Barret saw her discomfort and, with a small growl, he reached across the short space between his cot and Berk's and grabbed the young guy's collar roughly, pulling him right out of his sheets.

"You watch your mouth, Turk," he snarled lowly, wrenching him right up into his face, "You watch the way you talk to her."

"Heh. . ." Berk twitched uncomfortably in Barret's iron grip, his dark green eyes fixed on Marlene's averted face. "Sorry to upset the princess," he muttered, "Don't wanna see the genius cry. Heh. Get your fuckin' hands offa me, Mr. Wallace."

Barret harrumphed, dropping him roughly and Berk toppled into a heap on the ground, the nurses, volunteers, and other wounded watching, the medical tent suddenly silent. With as much dignity as he could, he picked himself up, one arm wrapped around his stinging chest. They'd removed the cast from his healed arm but it still galled him, especially after just being dropped on it. He held it awkwardly as he stared at Marlene's back, ignoring the questioning eyes of the patients around him. The woman began to walk off towards the exit but he stopped her with a violent hand on her shoulder.

"Allow me," he said with a curl of his lip, a tone of viciousness in his voice that he couldn't ever remember summoning before, "You stay here with your daddy. The big bad man'll leave."

Each step a furious kick, Berk stalked from the medical tent. The flap of the exit smacked him on the rear as he stepped outside and the cold breeze blew past the thin cotton of his dress shirt, chilling his sore flesh.

What's wrong with me? he asked himself impatiently. Why did I yell at her? Fuck me and all this emotional shit in my veins, it's making me a raving lunatic. Screw her and her old man.

Walking with agitated steps, Berk wandered aimlessly about the main square of Kalm. The streets were flooded with people. Their roars, their whispers, shouts and conversations drifted to him. He would've loved to be one of them, concerned only with living another day, finding shelter after Midgar's destruction. Not concerned with Marlene Wallace. Or with the fate of his company and his Planet. The young Turk sighed deeply to himself, absently rubbing his bandaged chest as he walked. How much easier it would've been to be a lamb, and not one of the god-damned shepherds.

After a bit of pointless ambling, Berk found himself at the edge of the city. A worn stone wall barred his path further, as well as a mob of milling people, scurrying about like ants from a disturbed nest. They were snapping pictures, running movie cameras, writing notes, because here, at Kalm's westernmost edge, the wreckage of Midgar was most apparent. It loomed off on the rim of the horizon, a permanently settled black cloud. The press was recording it and broadcasting the carnage, the scoop of the decade, all around the world. The civilians were making records of it all for posterity. Photos to show their grand kids, movies to play for their friends. One day, their children's children's children would speak in hushed tones of the day that Midgar died. They'd pass old faded pictures around over coffee. They'd make their kids watch the documentaries on TV.

"Damn. . ." Berk muttered beneath his breath. The sight of the destroyed metropolis finally struck at him, finally made him shiver. "Just how serious is all this. . .?"

"Probably just as serious as you think, Mr. Berk."

Berk looked around for the owner of the gravelly voice, then looked down. Nanaki stood there, one eye pasted on the horizon, lit tail flickering thoughtfully. "I'd like to think it isn't so, but I'm afraid the ruins in the distance are only a precursor to what will consume every city, every inch of the Planet soon. This is only the beginning. We must see past this shock and prevent further death. We must."

Berk didn't answer, only combed his dark hair down with his fingers, pushing it out of his eyes. Nanaki stared for a while longer, taking long deep breaths, uneasy at the smell of decay in the distance, then turned up to the young human, a fresh thought in his yellow eye. "I wanted to thank you for helping Marlene and I out back there," he began, "That was pretty brave of you."

"What? Jumping on Chaos' back? Nah, it was pretty stupid of me." Berk rubbed at his chest, frowning. "Mr. Reno chewed me out for it."

"That's only because he was worried about you," Nanaki said matter-of-fact, "He's unhinged as it is with Rude injured. When he showed up and saw you bleeding on the ground, I'm sure it had him panicked."

Berk cocked his head to one side, staring at the clouds, then shrugged, jamming a hand in his pocket. "You sound like you know a lot about Mr. Reno," he said in a neutral voice.

"Not really. Just a good bit about you humans. And how loyal you are to each other. How much you worry about each other. Common observations like that."

"Guess so. . ." Berk carefully adjusted his arm so he could cross it with his uninjured one, trying to make himself comfortable as the people around the both of them struck out with rude elbows and arms, jostling them as they fought for better views of the decimated city. One of them shoved a little too hard and Berk lashed out, knocking the guy to the dirt. When he jumped furiously to his feet, fists raised, Berk gestured to the Magnum tucked in his pants and the man moved off, bowing apologetically.

"So whatta ya think about General Sephiroth," Berk asked suddenly, giving Nanaki a glance, eager to change the subject.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what do you think about all this summon business?"

Nanaki shut his eye, and suddenly there was the image of that shivering lone figure in the LifeStream, the lonely soul of a man who wouldn't let himself rest. It had troubled him greatly that day in Cosmo Canyon, as he and Bugah had stood on the dark platform of the old machine, looking up through a doorway into a place that was supposed to be like a paradise. Why had that image of blissful oblivion, of green nothingness, left him with such soured vision? Sephiroth deserved the torture, didn't he? Fit penance for a man egotistical enough to try and be a god.

"I think. . ." Nanaki's voice was a slow whisper, almost a purr, "I hope that Cloud is given such a chance for redemption, some day."

Before Berk could snap out an irritated reply, there was a roaring in the distance, the familiar hum of the Shinra presidential chopper. The young Turk jerked his head up and around, peering beyond the huddled heads of the masses and

towards the section of town that the soldiers had roped off for company use. Just as he expected, the sleek but dirtied silver form of a helicopter was rapidly descending, sending a field of dust and debris out in a circle around it. Berk shielded his eyes with an upraised arm and Nanaki crouched at his side.

"Is that them?" he asked irritably, unable to see past the people before him.

"Yeah, I see the President, Mr. Reno too, and the old guy. And. . . oh my god, they have Tifa!"

"What?! What? You're lying!"

Nanaki's words stuttered over themselves and he muttered a few uncharacteristic curses as Berk ignored him and shot through the crowd, pushing people unceremoniously to the ground. The people pushed back, also attempting to move towards the newly arrived chopper, many wanting to voice their opinions of Shinra and their involvement in the destruction of their city. Berk burst from the edge of the crowd and stumbled towards the helicopter, seeing Reno hop out from the doorway, then turn to assist Mannik with an unconscious Tifa. He tried to approach but was halted by a Shinra soldier, third class, a young punk who thought the world should stop just because he was carting around a rifle. Looking about, Berk saw a ring of such soldiers surrounding the chopper, each with weapons raised and grim determination on their faces. He dug around for his ID card, flashed it smugly in the young guard's face, and snapped, "What's with the security all of a sudden?"

The soldier gibbered for a moment, caught off guard, then threw up a quick salute to the higher ranking Turk and stepped to the side, clearing the way for him. "My apologies, sir, Mr. Reno has requested that we escort the President. He fears assassins, sir. The citizens are restless and growing hostile."

"I believe that," Berk muttered, turning to watch the people pushing belligerently against the wall of soldiers. They seemed ready to take their aggravation out on something, someone. Their city had been obliterated and they needed a scapegoat. They needed a reason, unable to accept the fact that Midgar had been nothing but a nuisance, an easily shattered barrier in Jenova's way. The young Turk shook his head and stepped past the guard, jamming his ID card and wallet back in the pocket of his slacks, then giving his gun a reassuring smack. He really didn't know what to think about any of it.

"Mr. Reno, sir!" he called, approaching his superior.

"Berkie!"

The cranky co-head of Shinra security turned brusquely about and gave Berk a glare from beneath lowered red brows. "You should be resting up, kid. Materia or no, a wound's a wound."

"Yes, sir." Berk stepped up and gave Reno a hand with Tifa, who was struggling slightly, eyes shut, as though caught in a bad dream. The two of them slid her carefully from the floor of the chopper and Reno took her up in his arms again. Then came Mannik, soberly leading a loud warking chocobo from the innards of the chopper and finally Berk gave a quick salute as Reeve hopped out. The Shinra president ignored him and trailed behind Reno as the ex-Turk led the way to the medical tent. Reeve was on his cellphone again, deep in a frustrating conversation. In french this time.

The group of soldiers stubbornly accompanied them during the short walk from the landing pad to the tent and the young guy with the gun's words had Berk on edge. Assassins, he'd said. Probably an exaggeration. Berk knew Reno never missed an opportunity to put Reeve into a panic, fanning his worries of rebellion was probably just his idea of a joke. Still, the young Turk kept his hand hovering near his gun as they went, his eyes roving around them, senses as sharp as he could make them with as tired as he was.

"She looks surprisingly well."

"What?"

Berk looked down and saw Nanaki again. He tread easily at his side.

"Tifa. Considering where she's been, she looks quite good."

"I suppose so."

Berk looked back towards the smoke rising from distant Midgar. The bottom edges of it were still stained red with the blood of the fires yet raging in parts of the city. Reno and Reeve had just pulled Tifa from all of that mess. It didn't seem possible. Yet. . . yet it made sense that his boss, that Cloud would take such special care to protect her from his own rage. Cloud adored her to a fault. Berk had seen it, every time he'd ever watched the two of them together, he'd watched the relationship they had and wondered idly if he could ever have something like that. Even now, it defied the touch of Jenova, the burn of hellish flames, the coldness of a consuming insanity. Cloud had seen fit to keep her safe.

"Ya know, Red," Berk began, eyes glued to the distant destruction, "If anyone can help him, it's Tifa. She'll tell us what t'do to stop him. She was there, she was there with him when he did all this. She'll know."

Nanaki listened to the young human's words, so bright and sure of themselves that it made him wince. He couldn't share that optimism. His own about the entire situation had died alongside the city two hundred miles away. The only thing he hoped for now was speed. He didn't want the Planet's death to be a slow and tortuous one.

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Sea air.

A freshening breeze, soaked in a pleasing chill.

The grit of sand beneath his fingers, oozing up and gently scratching the palms of his hands.

Sensual ticking at the nape of his neck, his infinite thin hairs stroking his skin with a lover's touch, eager to cool the fever raging below.

The observations were pleasing. They were physical and easy to interpret. He welcomed them into his mind. They shoved the less tangible things away.

An unmoving statue, Cloud sat on the coast of the Eastern Continent; a single black figure marring a perfect stretch of white sand. Before him, a line of blue soldiers rolled away into infinity. It was the army of the Northern sea, dashing off in sprays of white foam to do battle with the shore of the Northern Continent hundreds of miles away. The white sun overhead glared down upon him, baked his hair, reddened his bare chest. Breathing deeply, Cloud lay back in the sand, stretching his limbs until his joints popped. The waves roared on in his ears, the whistle of the fleeting winds. He closed his eyes, able to believe, for a while, that nothing else in the world existed.

And maybe nothing else did.

A sudden shadow fell over him as he lay there, blackening the reddish hue that'd consumed his vision as he'd stared up at the sun with closed eyes. He opened them and saw the black silhouette of a boy standing over him.

"Hey, CJ," he whispered, squinting against the white light, "Bring me a soda from the cooler, will ya? I'm thirsty as heck out here."

Sure, dad. . .

The figure moved off and Cloud was free to eye the brilliant blue of the skies. Birds, way way away, glided on paper thin wings. They darted in the breeze like a lot of notebook paper airplanes, perfectly white against the blue. He reached a heavy arm upwards to grab at them, to pull one down and then toss it back up again himself, make it fly higher than the rest, make it soar. He'd do that a lot when he was a kid. He'd have contests with himself to try and beat his own paper airplane records. He'd use up whole packs of paper, then steal the neighbor's phone books when he ran out. His mom had gotten so mad and Tifa had walked in on him once, they'd both just been kids, and he'd been sitting in his back yard, surrounded by ruined fliers, wet with dew, sprawled in the grass. She laughed at him, then tore a piece of paper from one of his stolen phone books and made a plane that'd flown further than any of his own attempts. It'd flown from his own yard and over the short wooden fence separating it from Tifa's, and they'd searched for an hour but had never found it. She'd promised to show him how to make them her way. She'd promised to show him how to fly. . .

The gulls glided off, growing smaller and smaller in the distance, until they were nothing but specks of white lost in the massive forms of cumulus clouds far away. Cloud's eyes grew sore from staring off at the misty horizon. He sat up, resting his chin on his hard knees, and half-lowered his gaze, eyelids heavy, the smell of the salt on the wind like a gentle sedative to his senses. He raised a hand and ran it absently through his tangled hair, rubbing soft strands of blonde between his bare fingers.

"People used to believe that the sea was a god. . . he had a wife, children, and ruled underneath the water. Sailors would be scared of him, and make sacrifices before setting out on a long trip, scared that the sea-god would get angry and send a storm to wreck their boats."

"Yeah? That's dumb though. How could the sea-god breathe underwater?"

"He's a sea-god, Ifalna, he breathes like a fish, I'd guess. I dunno. You asked who Neptune was, don't question the answers I give ya. Mythology is interesting, just not very practical. But I haven't found too many things that manage to be beautiful and practical at the same time."

Cloud looked towards the northern horizon again, the sounds of the gulls coming at him suddenly, as though bidding a sad farewell. He squinted to see them again, that flash of wing against sky, but their forms were lost in the distant azure. The mist was so thick to the north. The sky seemed anxious to conceal some secret there, it sent curtains of violet clouds, of deeply blue atmosphere to hide whatever lay in the distance. How wonderful it would be to be able to swipe a hand

through all that obscurity, push the mists aside, and part the sky, look upwards for answers, look to the distance for a reason. But there were those clouds, blocking his way, making his bright eyes tear with their attempts to pierce past their broad white foreheads. The brain, the soul, the intellect beyond the fronts would have to stay hidden, because Cloud just didn't have the strength to destroy that barrier. His hand fell back to the sand with a thud, even as a shadow fell over him, cutting off the white sun. This shadow was firmer. Darker. Larger.

Cloud turned his head. Chaos stood near him, large claws dripping bright red onto the cool white sands of the northern coast. The blood ran in streams and stained the beach, spread out from around the demon as though to consume the Planet with its crimson death. Cloud blinked slowly, gazing upon Chaos in sober curiosity, amazed at how anything could be so black. So black and immense against the blue of the perfect afternoon sky. The monster looked away, and stared off in idle curiosity at the same horizon Cloud had been observing. Its red eyes, their helplessness such a sharp contrast against the demon's garish, devilish features that Cloud was amazed by it, scanned the distant heavens sadly.

I can tell it's a beautiful day. Something about the way the air smells, I suppose. Or maybe it's just the sea, I don't know. It's so soft there in the distance, so gorgeous, though I know what lies there, waiting for us. Why it is that the Planet can still conceal it in such perfect mists is beyond me. It dresses its murderer in gold. Why? Why, Cloud? Hm. I certainly don't understand it. But then, humans aren't meant to, are we?

Everything's red, everything's bloody. But still, I can tell it's a beautiful day. These demon eyes can't hide that from me. You see it too, I know you do. And they see it. That sky is something everyone shares, no matter where they are. It's always there, changing for us every second, always different and always beautiful. You know, I've never seen a sky I didn't find beautiful? And the most amazing of all are the skies before storms. That blue. . . that blue of a sky promising thunder. Everyone shares the skies, they're our link. Sometimes, I'll sit, staring out a window, watching the clouds, and I'll know that wherever she is, Lucrecia is watching them with me. I know that my old friends, my old family, dead or alive, they have that same sky above them. Or below them. Maybe it's black with rain, maybe it's blue with sun, it doesn't matter. It's the same sky. Because it's always beautiful. That's the link. The beauty that everyone shares. And there's not a damned thing Jenova can do to take that away. There can't be. I won't believe there is.

Cloud listened to the soft words and didn't question them, didn't listen to them, only appreciated their wistful quality, their insistence, and left it at that. Sighing softly, he watched the horizon and marveled at the halos of rainbow light that the white sun burnt through the mists way off in the distance. The prismatic colors danced in the foam off the waves, glowed brighter as he squinted his eyes.

". . . it is. . . beautiful. . ." he whispered, a muffled catch in his voice.

Vincent smiled. He was glad that if nothing else, the sky could be their link. He was looking at it too now. And despite the red, he knew it must be gorgeous.

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CJ played with his fingernails, clicking them together absently, picking at a scab on his knuckle. He could feel his mom's scrutinizing gaze upon him, waiting for him to give some sign that he'd understood all she'd told him in the past ten minutes. Though it was a lie, he nodded his head, hoping that if he acted as though it all was okay, it'd make her feel better. The look in her eyes made the kid want to cry.

"But why. . ." he stuttered, not looking up, "But why didn't he believe you when ya told him we were okay?"

"There's something that just won't let him believe. And he won't let himself believe either. All he knows anymore is what he saw with his own two eyes. He won't let anything or anyone tell him what he saw was a lie. So many things have been shouting at your dad, a million voices, a million different things, people, trying to get him to believe. . . and as much as he would've liked to think you and Ifalna were fine, he wouldn't let himself. He only believes his eyes. Other things lie to him."

"But not you, mom! Dad knows that!"

Tifa shook her head sadly, squeezing CJ and giving him a peck on the cheek. "Not even me, Ceej. He won't trust anyone anymore."

Tifa sat on the edge of a cot in one of the busy Shinra-funded medical tents. She'd showered, changed clothes, and forced a bowl of gray gruel down. A doctor had looked her over, a freckly kid in a bad polo shirt, and told her that aside from a few cuts, a burn or two, she was fine. Tifa didn't feel fine. Although having her son sitting on her lap helped her emotions just a bit.

"Were there a lot of. . . people there when he did it?" CJ squirmed, still playing with his fingers.

"Reeve was able to get a lot of people out," Tifa answered softly, "But there were still some there. I don't know how many, they haven't done any kind of a census yet."

"Will dad and Vincent go to jail?"

CJ asked the question with deadly seriousness in his voice and Tifa couldn't help but crack a smile. She held him tighter and he looked confused at her expression.

"What? Won't they go to jail? I mean, you guys always tell me you can't go around fightin' and killin' people!"

Tifa nudged CJ off her knee and he sat beside her on the edge of the soft cot, watching the ground. "They won't go to jail."

"But people go to jail when they kill people. . ."

"Normal people do. But what your dad and Vincent are doing. . . it's not really them. Not really." Tifa wracked her brain for a better explanation and came up with nil. "Do you understand?" she asked in slight desperation, "I know it's hard, but do you?"

CJ kept playing with his hands and staring the tent floor into submission. But he wouldn't nod this time, even though mom had that look on her face again. "I don't get it, mom," he said sadly, "I want our house. And school and Seventh Heaven. I just wanna go home."

Tifa put her arm around the boy, hating the helplessness, hating the things that had put the fear and the confusion in his violet eyes. "Me too."

"Me three."

Tifa looked up, taking her hand from CJ's shoulder, and turned towards the medical tent entrance. A shaft of white light broke the darkness as the flapped entrance blew open and Reno and Berk walked in. They sauntered down the main aisle of the place, cots to either side, ignoring the hateful mutters of the patients as they caught sight of the Shinra employees. Berk didn't understand their hostility. Shinra was providing all of this aid to Midgar's stricken citizens. . . why weren't the buggers more grateful?

"Hey, kid, how was your ride on the Highwind? I heard you and the pilot had words."

After stopping for a brief moment at the side of Rude's bed, Reno approached CJ and ruffled the kid's blonde hair, then messed with it till it all stood on end. A weak smile on his lips, he examined his face, well aware of what he and his mother had been discussing. Tifa had asked for a few minutes alone with the kid to explain what was going on. Reno wasn't sure how he'd feel if someone came up and told him his dad was out to ruin the world and that he'd started with his hometown. What would it be like to know your father was the most feared man on the Planet?

CJ looked up at his dad's partner and grinned half-heartedly.

"Cid was bein' a jerk," he answered, "So I made him quit it."

"C'mon now, Ceej, don't call him a jerk. He was nice enough to take you and Ifalna to Wutai with him. It was a much safer place to be than here. With me." Tifa plucked at the cuffs of the over sized sweatshirt she was wearing. The stupid thing was three times too big and the sleeves wouldn't stop falling over her hands. It was making her nuts.

"A jerk's a jerk's a jerk," CJ said with a sniff, "I shoulda puked on him."

"Well, ya feelin' better now?" Reno asked, crossing his arms and looking Cloud's son over with cool eyes. The kid shrugged and Reno didn't press him. "How 'bout you, lady?"

Tifa threw the man a squinty glare, then turned and shut her eyes. "Yeah, Reno," she muttered, "I'm just fantastic."

"Hey, you're alive. I'll bet it's more than you thought you'd be a few hours ago. You survived the destruction of an entire city. You should be feeling pretty good about yourself."

"It wasn't me." Tifa sighed, "I had nothing to do with it. . . you know why I'm still here. He spared me."

"Spared you. . ." Reno leaned against one of the support beams of the tent casually, "That's a fine way to think of love."

"Love? You think he didn't let me die with Midgar because he loves me? You're a frigging fool."

CJ elbowed his mom, uncomfortable with the hostility he could feel between her and Reno. He wished the two of them would stop it, he hated watching other people fight with words. He could understand fistfights, solid punches, but the word stuff made him uneasy.

"Why should I have been so special, different than any of the other corpses lying buried in soot two hundred miles away? I'm not any more important than them. Why'd he have to let me live? Now there's just. . ."

"Damned guilt?" Reno finished with an upraised red eyebrow, "Quit with the self-pity, sweetheart. It gets a little old after a while. Cloud spared ya because as fucked up as he is in the head right now, he remembers that ya mean the world to him. It's that simple. Don't feel guilty cause of that. Feel glad that there's enough of him left for such a thing. That's what we're gonna save. Right CJ?"

"Huh?" the kid looked up and Reno grinned huge at him, stepping on his right sneaker. He nodded. "Yeah. Don't worry, mom, it's all good. We're gonna go save the world. Killer."

The air was suddenly quiet, or at least, as quiet as it could get inside the bustling, busy medical tent. Tifa kept her gaze on the ground, thoughts whirring in her head. CJ leaned against her, softly sighing. He imagined his dad as he'd been last time he'd seen him, he remembered when he'd burst into the backroom of the Shinra lab and CJ'd been so glad, so sure it was all over, that he, Eef, and Vincent would all get to go home. But that'd only been the beginning. And he hadn't gotten to go home since. Now there wasn't even a home to go home to. His bedroom, all of his stuff, everything was toast. A lump formed in his throat as he kept thinking about it. But he wouldn't cry, crying was for girls and wusses and he wasn't going to start any of that crap, it'd just make his mom feel worse.

Reno cleared his throat, breaking the tension. Tifa looked up at him, desolation in her eyes. "When you're ready to do something about everything, when you're ready to get Cloud back, everyone's waiting in the inn for us."

She stared at Reno dead on, looking for something in his face, wondering if his words were a trick, or a joke meant to hurt her. The ex-Turk fairly squirmed. He missed his shades. It made him uneasy as hell to know that someone was looking him in the eye, he always felt as though they were snatching pieces of his soul away. He didn't understand how people could possibly not see every hidden secret he had there, plain in his aqua-marine eyes. He needed those dark glasses, a barrier, to keep the violators at bay.

"So what d'you say, Tifa?" he asked, blinking slowly, "You ready to get serious?"

The woman sighed quietly, and then told herself that would be her last. Her last sigh. The tears she'd shed as she'd wandered Midgar, those would be her last too. No more of this wretched helplessness. She'd be the same strength now to Cloud as she'd been thirteen years before in Mideel. She'd get him back. For CJ, for Ifalna. And for herself.

"Let's go."

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The afternoon light outside was bright as hell after the dimness of the musty tent. The blue roofs of Kalm glared down in stern reproach as Tifa stepped away from the thing, the canvas flap smacking her in the legs when she let it drop.

"Geez. . ."

Squinting against the sun, she glanced down to CJ who was eyeing their surroundings now in discomfort. Kalm was packed. The cobblestone streets were jammed full of chattering, squirming Midgar refugees. They flooded the place, spewed in and out of the stores and businesses like rabbits smoked out of their holes. Their shouts tumbled roughly in the air, and their elbows were unfriendly as Tifa pushed past them, CJ's hand tight in her own. Everywhere, people milled about, unsure what to do, who to complain to, who to see about the destruction of their city. They were waiting for Shinra to come, for Reeve to dictate their lives to them, but President Reeve was busy. They'd have to take care of themselves for a while.

"Why don't all these losers just go home?" CJ growled, voice muffled, his face pressed between a lady's soft stomach and a guy's wide butt. He struggled for air as Tifa yanked him forward. She was fighting to keep Berk's blue suit jacket in view ahead of her. And losing the battle.

What are all of these people going to do? she thought to herself as she trudged along, Where will they go? Tifa wished she could offer aid to them all, make up for what Cloud had done in his rage. These people all seemed so lost, so confused, so frightened. Guilt gnawed at her heart as she shoved through them, gripping her son's hand so tight he cried out. But Tifa figured the only thing she could do was keep it from happening again, to another city, to other innocent people. She'd stop Jenova's dark purposes once and for all.

"Tifa! Over here!"

Reno sounded just as irritated as CJ. Tifa spied him a few feet off, pressed against the side of a very familiar building. Pulling her son close, she pushed past a family just ahead of her and then ducked into the doorway of the place. She absently looked towards the sign on the door to see if the old Kalm Inn had any vacancies. Some idiot had written "In your dreams" on the paper there. Hmph.

Berk held the door open for her as she entered the quaint old inn, then followed her and CJ in, locking up behind them. The place was just as Tifa remembered it inside. The warm muted colors of country decor, soft wooden floors, an old fashioned cash register on the counter. The very walls emanated calmness and order. It was a stark, startling contrast to the confusion and insanity of the streets outside. Her ears buzzed with the sudden silence.

"Gives me deja vu, "she muttered to no one in particular.

"Me too, "a familiar voice called to her back and Tifa turned, seeing Nanaki standing at the base of a set of stairs leading up to the rooms. She smiled at him in fond recognition. "It was quite a drastic change from the fierce battles with Shinra in Midgar thirteen years ago. We all met here and heard quite a story. All that talk of pain and death inside such comforting, maternal walls. I wonder if this place remembers us."

Tifa approached her friend, CJ on her heels, and the three of them exchanged greetings, the kid immediately taking off Nanaki's headdress and fiddling with it.

"It probably does remember us, Red. It's probably scared that we're here." Tifa gave Nanaki's mane a friendly tug and he nuzzled the palm of her hand. He almost couldn't believe that she was standing there in front of him. He'd been so certain he'd never see her again.

"What're you AVALANCE freaks muttering about? C'mon already, let's get this show on the road." Reno came forward from a side room, running his fingers through his hair, the innkeeper shouting curses to his back. "You'll get your money, man. I'm good for it, don't worry, "he called to the guy, "Damn, isn't Shinra credit good enough for ya?"

"When there was a Midgar, when there was a Shinra, yeah, it was good enough!"

"Hmph."

Reno tugged at the cuff of Berk's jacket and gestured for the guy to head upstairs. The young Turk nodded and took off, limping a little with his wounded chest. Tifa watched him and after a moment asked, "What happened?"

"Berkie got a lesson in Chaos Mathematics, "Reno answered with a smile, "One demon plus one Turk equals a big ouch." Nanaki eyed him darkly as the man fixed his jacket, trying to make himself look a little nicer after three days without a change of clothes or a shower. He didn't do a very good job.

"Ha ha, "Nanaki growled, "I hardly think that's something to joke about, Reno."

"You kiddin'? I've yet to come across any situation that ya can't eventually joke about, kitty cat. Everything's funny in the end."

"Not everything. . . "Tifa murmured. She blinked hard, surveying the empty inn lobby, then asked, "But what're you talking about? What about Chaos?"

"Oh, that's right, you were out wandering the town. . . "Reno sighed, leaning against the banister, crossing his lanky arms, "Your buddy Valentine is sorta in the opposite position as your hubby. Cloud's got his body but not his head. Valentine's got his sanity but not his body. Or at least, I guess he's as sane as he ever was, but it isn't getting him anywhere. As near as Nanaki can figger out, he's-- "

"Maybe I should attempt to explain, Reno, "Nanaki cut in, tail flickering in orange bursts of irritation. The ex-Turk shrugged and waved a hand carelessly.

"The floor's yours."

"Hmph. Thank you. Really, Tifa, it isn't very complicated. Those few days Vincent spent with Cloud in Professor Hojo's laboratory, the old man must have taken his mutations to a further level. He heightened his Chaos mutation, increased his powers drastically, and unleashed Chaos' personality, giving it free reign over the body it shares with Vincent. So now--"

"Wait, wait, "Tifa shook her head, scratching her nose, "You're telling me that Chaos is in charge now?"

"I believe so." Nanaki nodded soberly. "Vincent can't keep it caged. Jenova controls him by controlling that. . . monster."

"I guess that makes sense, "Tifa said lowly, "I swore that I saw Chaos, or something like it, this morning in the lab. Heh. Nobody's getting a break here, are they?"

"I wanna see Vincent as a monster!" CJ broke in, "I'll bet he looks wicked cool!"

"Not really, kid. "Reno shook his head, remembering that thing that'd stood over Barret Wallace with bloody claws, razor wings, and solemn eyes, "Not really. I still haven't decided who's worse off. Him or Cloud. At least Cloud's convinced what he's doing is just. Valentine's stuck murdering when I'm sure he'd rather not be. Trapped in the body of a demon. Hell, is Jenova heartless or what? She's tearing two guys up without a qualm. Without a second thought. If that isn't evil, I don't know what is. Heh. Have you decided if "evil" is the proper word yet, kitty?"

Nanaki scowled, tired of being addressed so mockingly, but answered, "I won't use such an unscientific word. Marlene would kill me. Though I do understand very well what you mean, Reno."

The lobby was silent a moment as the four of them became lost in their thoughts. CJ wandered off and stared out the front window, still amazed at the throngs of people in the streets. Hundreds of voices filtered through the walls, drifting to his ears soft and muffled. He did think it felt kind of cool, kind of exclusive, to be in the Inn, the Shinra Inn, as though he was special or something. Definitely better than fighting the crowds outside. He absently wondered where Brittany and Sliver, his two buddies from school, were and whether they were camped in Kalm somewhere or not. He wondered where stupid Ash was, that damned bully. He hoped his house in Sector One was still burning. He hoped his dad had smashed it good.

"So, who's upstairs and what's the deal with this inn?" he heard his mom ask suddenly. CJ turned and strolled back to the group, unwilling to miss out on any of the conversation, though he didn't understand half of it.

"Reeve secured the place when we first arrived," Reno answered briskly, "He knew we'd need a place to plan and somewhere half-dignified for the Shinra heads to bunk. No matter how low the company's plunged the past few days, we have to keep our heads up and some degree of pride. Be grateful, most of the people out there'll be stuck sleeping on rocks in the fields tonight. I've already got soldiers out clearing away some of the more dangerous wildlife, to give the civilians space to spread their sheets."

"Thoughtful of you," Tifa muttered.

"Hey, what do you want from me, blood? I'm doing my best ya know. . . damn."

Tifa shook her head and put a hand to her brow, a finger rubbing one of her weary red eyes. "You're right," she apologized, "I'm just on edge. Ignore me."

"Marlene's upstairs," Nanaki interrupted, eager to change the subject and avoid a fight. He could sense the delicate balance between Tifa and Reno. There was a damned lot of hostility there, he could feel it in the back of his teeth, "Elder Bugah too. Cid's talking to Shera on his video phone but he said he'd be here by five, and then there's Berk, you, me, and Reno."

"What about Barret? And Reeve?"

"Wallace is off wandering the city," Reno snapped, "Marlene won't go back with him to Cosmo Canyon and he won't leave without her, so he's at an impasse. I'm not sure what the hell his problem is but I don't have the patience to deal with his stubbornness, to be honest with ya. He just keeps saying he never meant to get involved in this. Well neither did I, neither did you, neither did puss-in-boots here. He needs to deal. As for Reeve, he's busy keeping Shinra in one piece. And raising his blood pressure to new heights. All the Department Heads are here and he's in a meeting with 'em downstairs. Suit convention, ya know? I think he feels he's appeased his obligation to his friends by going to hunt you down. Now he's got an obligation to his company to deal with. Typical Reeve logic."

Tifa laughed softly to herself. "Efficient task management," she added, "I think he lives his life out of a pocket organizer."

"Suppose he had "12:15pm-12:45pm :Rescue Tifa from a fiery death" written down there?" Reno asked, grinning. Tifa shrugged, grabbed the stair railing and began trudging up to the second floor. The ex-Turk watched her and sighed, shoving CJ before him up the stairs, then making sure Nanaki padded up there too, before ascending himself. He could hear the innkeeper still muttering things beneath his breath from the next room, cursing Shinra, cursing Reno, cursing the smouldering hole in the distance that used to be Midgar. Reno had been in that same frame of mind a few hours before. But he was through with the impotent cursing. He was ready to take control.

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The fields around Kalm that evening seemed like a refugee camp. Tents dotted the grassy stretches in a rainbow of colors. Sleeping bags lay in the dirt like curled worms, lonely lines of smoke from the campfires weren't really so lonely, not with hundreds of others besides to share the skies. The red glow of battery-operated heaters lit people up in garish hues, made faces frightening, made the atmosphere surreal.

Lenny walked the edges of the massive camp, his hands in his pockets, missing his bar. It was a Sunday night, ladies night. At least, it would've been. The barkeep ambled along with heavy steps, head turned to pick out the red-lit faces in the distance as people hunched over their heaters to fight the November cold. He blew his breath up, warm white against the sky-blue chill. He watched it rising, just as he had that morning, in the dark, as the Shinra towers had been struck

down. He'd watched that beam from the sky and figured it was a messenger from heaven, a final judgment on a city that could never redeem itself, no matter how hard it tried. He'd watched the shadow stretch behind the building as it'd fallen, heard it crash, seen the dust, and then he'd fled and left the city of his birth to God. He could do whatever the hell He saw fit with it, it wasn't as though Lenny's small voice of protest made any difference. He knew that.

Eyes still on the sky, Lenny noticed the roofs of Kalm suddenly jut into his vision as he entered the small town. It was a pretty place, he thought, he'd always wanted to visit, had even considered retiring there, he just wished his dream had been realized under better circumstances. Blinking wearily, the barkeep wandered into the center of the village, stepping over the people sleeping in the streets, careful to keep his footsteps light, unwilling to wake them, especially the children, after such a strange day. He spied a bare wall in the distance, just a few feet of uninhabited space, and made for it eagerly. The warm rock was soothing against his back as he set his body against it, the upraised stones of the wall were almost like hands rubbing at his spine and they made him sleepy. Eyes half-closed, he watched the buildings across the street and saw that the upper story windows of the Inn were still lit up. Rectangles of soft yellow against the blackish-blue sky and the muted brown of the building. He knew who was inside and had a good idea what they were discussing, what they'd been holed up in there talking about since that afternoon. People had been muttering of it all evening; Shinra and AVALANCE were working together. They were working to save the Planet. Their presence and the knowledge of their efforts hadn't really done much to alleviate the people's fears that day though. Nearly everyone that Lenny had talked to was convinced the jig was up for the human race. They doubted there was much the screwed-up heroes of thirteen years before and the failing remnants of the Shinra Electric Company could do now to stop it. Prolong the inevitable a bit, draw out the torture perhaps, but that was all. Lenny himself wasn't so sure. As he lay there, tired mind wandering aimlessly, eyes running over those lit windows of the inn, there was a small ray of hope in his heart. It was nothing more than a pale flashlight in the void of space, but it was there.

It'll all work out, he told himself sleepily, The Planet'll get saved, the good guys'll come through, Shinra will build a new Midgar, and I'll open a new bar. I'll be there to get the survivors drunk during the victory party. I'm sure the heroes'll be needing a few stiff ones after takin' down whatever that thing was that totaled the city. Yeah. . . Lenny would be there to remind everyone how great a thing it was that they'd all survived. Heh.

The barkeep fell asleep with a smile on his face, pouring drinks in his dreams.

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Eyes dark, Reno scowled, sitting in the blackest corner on the second floor of the Kalm Inn, watching the others in unease. Every few minutes he brought a bottle up to his lips and sucked at it. He wished Rude was there. He wished he had someone to exchange looks with as these assholes around him spouted their garbage to each other. Reno wished he was a Turk again.

"We cannot trust Sephiroth!"

Tifa fairly shouted the words, clenching her fists and sitting forward in her chair.

"You don't have to tell us that, Tifa," Nanaki said in a soothing purr, "We're all well aware of what he was, what he is, and what he's capable of. But we're debating options and as ludicrous as it may sound, that Sephiroth summon is an option."

"Option my ass," Reno muttered from the corner, "We should smash that summon materia to dust right now, it'd make me feel a lot better."

"No!" Marlene's hand shot to the pocket of her jeans protectively, "No, that'd be rash," she added, trying to keep her voice even. She felt somehow protective of the little materia, "If the Planet has seen fit to bless us with a protector, I don't think we should go and "smash him to dust", do you? Even if we don't have any intentions of using him."

"You didn't look too rational when you summoned him this morning," Reno said darkly, "Are you sure you can keep possession of yourself enough not to repeat what ya did later on? Maybe we shouldn't let you hang on to that thing."

Marlene scowled and huffily crossed her arms, sitting back against the headboard of the bed she'd claimed. She could feel the materia orb in her pocket, cutting into her hip. "It's mine," she nearly hissed, "Elder Bugah gave it to me, he said the Planet finished it the day I arrived in Cosmo Canyon. It's mine. "

"Okay then," Reno said with a mirthless chuckle, "When you call the prick next time and he decides to kill all of us along with whatever he was summoned to take out, I'll be very forgiving. Hell, I'll even open my shirt up for him so he can get a clean stab at my heart."

"That's enough, Mr. Reno," Bugah called from across the room, "Marlene knows better than that, she won't summon him again. Right, Marlene?"

"Yes, Elder. . ."

"You knew how dangerous unidentified summons are, yet you used it today without a qualm," Bugah rebuked, "But that's all right, you were lucky today. You saved us all. But never again, child, understood?"

Marlene nodded her head, muttering things under her breath. Tifa gave her hand a pat and winked reassuringly. "From what I heard, you saved their asses," she whispered, "The guys just don't want to admit it."

Marlene laughed softly and threw Reno a vicious glare.

"I know."

"But I do think, after these past hours of discussion--"

"Pointless discussion," Reno cut in. "But discussion nonetheless," Bugah returned, "I think after hearing what each of us has to say, we agree that we cannot possibly use that materia again. Am I right?"

There were nods from around the room. Those who'd seen Sephiroth that afternoon had been awed by him. But their fear of him far outweighed their amazement. Even Marlene and Berk weren't putting up any fuss about that.

"Well, so that leaves us where we were," Nanaki said calmly, "On our own."

"And clueless," Reno added bitterly.

There was silence for a few minutes as each of them went over the facts in their weary minds. They'd been shut up in that room for hours, committed to coming up with a new plan of action, searching for answers amidst the tangled web of facts and speculations that each of them were aware of.

"The plain simple fact of the matter is we need to figure out where Cloud and Vincent have gone to. That is, before we get a wire saying they've taken out Junon or something." Reno rubbed his rough chin in his bandaged right hand, swinging his whiskey bottle around by the neck in his other. Swish, swish. "They may very well go systematically from city to city. We could probably follow the trail of bodies till it brings us to 'em. But I'd rather not do that, how 'bout you guys?"

"No, sir. . ." Berk said softly, remembering the crushed forms he'd seen beneath the rubble of the Shinra building as he'd wandered the streets. They'd left grisly images in his young mind.

"Where do you think Jenova would want to strike next?" Tifa asked thoughtfully. She wrapped an arm around her pulled-up legs and rested her chin on her knees, eyes distant. "Would she truly want to go about the destruction of us all in such a piecemeal fashion?"

"Nah," Reno said, leaning back, scratching at his hairline, "Unless she figures it's more painful to us that way. Bitch."

"She lacks the patience," Nanaki disagreed, "Remember what Vincent said? She knows the Planet is using Sephiroth. He said she knew and wanted her aims achieved as quickly as possible."

"Well, fine, how d'you think she'll do that?"

Nanaki shrugged as best as he was able, and laid his head atop his paws, staring at a mouse hole in the opposite wall. He felt a gloved hand suddenly grab at him from behind, hold his tail firmly between two fingers, and then let go. With a growl, he turned around and eyed Cid Highwind, who'd just finished lighting his cigarette off the end of his tail. The pilot took a thoughtful puff and rested his elbows on his up-drawn knees, trying to get comfortable in his seat.

"Don't do that, Cid. You know I hate when you do that. Where's that zippo I bought you for your birthday?"

"I gave it to Shera when I forgot our anniversary. Sorry."

"Hmph."

"You're being awful quiet, Cid," Tifa called from the bed, "Is everything okay? Ya walked in here a while ago and haven't said a word."

"No, I'm fine," the pilot said defensively, "You know how it is though, I leave this shit up to you guys. I'm just the flyboy. Tell me where ya wanna go, tell me who to stick Venus Gospel into, and I'll oblige."

"Safer that way, eh?" Nanaki smirked, "That way you don't get blamed if the plan doesn't work, correct?"

Cid winked at him and puffed away on his cigarette, half-shutting his eyes.

"Ya know me too well, Red."

"You don't think she'd have them summon Meteor again, do you?"

The group looked up to Berk, who'd paled with the thought that'd suddenly popped into his mind. Tifa shook her head.

"No Black Materia, thank god, "she reassured, "I don't see that happening."

"And Cloud certainly doesn't have the power to call Super Nova on a scale large enough to engulf the Planet, "Bugah added, answering Berk's next question before the guy could even get it out.

"But just what kinda power does he have. . ?"Reno mused. No one could give him an answer and the question only caused an uneasy silence to fall over the room.

"We need to find him. . . we need to find them both."

"Easier said than done, Elder Bugah, "Berk mumbled, "There've been no reports from anywhere of anyone seeing them. They could've both gone on holiday in Costa Del Sol for all we know."

Silence again. Berk picked at his fingernails, stealing occasional glances at Marlene who eyed her own hands, deep in thought. She didn't look at all disturbed after the young Turk had snapped at her that afternoon. Hell, Berk thought bitterly, she's probably forgotten all about it. Why should anything I say stay with her? I don't mean crap, I may as well not even exist as far as she's concerned.

"Why don't we just start flying around, scoutin' around, "Cid suggested suddenly, "I mean, we gotta come up with something eventually. They have to eventually make their move, right?"

"You just want to get in the sky, Highwind, "Reno called, "We know all about you."

Cid shrugged, adjusting his flight goggles with one hand. "Yeah, "he admitted carelessly, "The sky's got the best vantage point, no better place to be when you're lookin' for shit. Besides, if we don't do something soon, I'm gonna go insane. I want this garbage dealt with so I can get back to Rocket Town. I have mayoral responsibilities I gotta deal with. Not ta mention marital ones."

"Would be hard t'be mayor of a town that's been blasted to shit though, wouldn't it?" Reno asked with a grin.

"Yeah, I'd guess so. That's why I'm still hanging around here with y'all. To keep that from happening. Now, do we take to the skies and start searching or what?"

Crossing her arms, Tifa looked towards her friend and winked. "If we do, "she said, "It'll be your plan. And your fault if we don't come up with anything."

Cid stood from his seat and stretched magnificently, reaching towards the ceiling. He grabbed Venus Gospel and leaned on it, twirling the glittering pike in the dimness of the room, casting reflections of light onto the wooden walls. "I'll take the risk, "he said, "Besides, I get the feelin' that Cloud and Vince'll be lettin' us know where they are real soon."

"But that's the thing, Cid, "Nanaki growled, "We want to find them before they've attacked again. We have to save Cloud and Vincent before there's nothing left to save."

"What do you mean?"

Nanaki shook his heavy head, strands of his mane falling into his eye. "I don't know, "he muttered, "But how much longer can Vincent last trapped in that horrible bloody monster? How much longer can Cloud go on thinking that his children are, are. . . I can't even say it. They're both suffering and it makes me uneasy to know it. It makes me fear for both of them. Makes me. . . think we'll never really get our friends back."

Marlene reached her hand down and scratched Nanaki's ear, trying to comfort him. She wasn't very successful. "Maybe we should start thinking about our aims differently, "he continued, "Are we going out to save our comrades or to save the Planet and everyone living on it?"

"Both, "Tifa answered quickly.

"But. . . " Marlene lifted her head, looking at her friend with suddenly saddened eyes. She was seeing Nanaki's point. "But what if it comes down to a choice? I mean, it's a terrible thing to think of, but. . . so much of this has been terrible and it'll only get worse if we're not realistic about it. Tifa. . . "

Reno jerked his gaze up, dropping his empty bottle on the floor. He saw Tifa struggling to answer the young woman's question and swallowed hard. "It ain't gonna come down to a choice, "he insisted, making them all look to him with startled eyes, "You hear me? We're gonna stop it before it has to come down to a choice. I don't want to hear any of you saying otherwise. Not a single fuckin' one of you, I won't have it!" He stood quickly and crouched there in the darkness of the corner, just daring one of them to disagree, to say another word about it, to toss more doom and gloom his way. No one would take the challenge. Reno ran a shaky hand through his tangled hair and sighed. He waved their stares off with his bandaged hand. "Now let's get airborne, "he muttered, heading towards the door. He caught Tifa's eye as he went and she threw him a grateful smile. After considering it for a moment, he smiled back. The door to the stairs closed behind him with a bang.

"Bossy bastard, isn't he?" Cid commented, tapping the shaft of his weapon against his boot impatiently.

Tifa stood, planting two firm, but weary booted feet on the floor. She looked to Cid with an expression that the old pilot couldn't interpret. "Leave him alone, Cid," she said softly, "He's just as frustrated as the rest of us, is all."

"I suppose so. Damn, anyone given any thought to just what we're gonna do when we catch up with our two little psychopaths? We keep talking about how to find them, but what's up when we do?"

Marlene stood from the bed and tucked stray strands of auburn hair back behind her ears. She shrugged. "Isn't it obvious? We'll prove to Uncle Cloud that CJ and Ifalna are fine. He'll snap out of it, Jenova will lose the advantage she has over his will, and that'll be that."

"Sounds pretty simple," Cid commented skeptically.

"Who says things have to be complex? Sometimes the most painful things are the simplest. That's the sort of problem Cloud has right now. And it takes a simple solution to clear it up."

"Yeah. . ."

"But we must be very careful," Nanaki warned, rising to his four feet, "I don't doubt that Jenova is anticipating our interference. She'll do all she can to keep Cloud and Vincent close to her, under her control. We can't underestimate her."

"Yeah, if nothin' else, I learned that from Star Wars," Cid said with a laugh, "Never underestimate the power of the dark side. Heh. George Lucas is a profound man."

"Cid. . ." Tifa gave her friend a glare, "Don't start."

Cid punched her chummily in the shoulder and made for the door, whistling the Cantina theme, doing a little light saber twirl with Venus Gospel. Marlene watched him go, scratching her head.

"Is he some sort of Star Wars nerd or something?" she asked and Tifa shrugged, laughing a little.

"Shera told me his first plane was named Millennium Falcon. Go figure. C'mon and help me load the kids into the Highwind. They're sleeping downstairs with Barret and I'd rather not wake them up. They haven't gotten enough sleep lately."

"No one has," Berk mumbled before he was out the door after Reno. Marlene shot him an evil look but he was gone before it could smack into him. Sighing from the depths of her being, she followed Tifa and Nanaki as they made their way down the rickety wooden staircase of the inn, half-tempted to go find Barret and make him take her home. Things outside of Cosmo Canyon were just too damned confusing. And unscientific.

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The moon was grinning like a cocky kid excited over a fresh prank. A crescent of pale white, it hung suspended over the ocean, watching its wavering reflection in the water smiling back.

Chieko eyed it, unblinking.

Cold as ice, sea-air bit at her flesh through her fur, the wind blasted it in her sensitive brown eyes but she kept staring out at the white moon, fixated on its glow, her tail swishing back and forth like a thoughtful cat's. She was waiting for that eye in the sky to blink. She was convinced it had to eventually. She wouldn't let her own eyes close until it did, fearful of missing it.

"I'm bored, Chieko."

Cait Sith sprawled in the sand, picking bits of grass out of his synthetic fur. The both of them were nestled into a depression in a rock wall, something almost like a cave but it only went five or so feet in. The solid stone wall it resided in was nothing more than a cliff stretching nearly three hundred feet skywards. Cait could feel the height pressing against his small body as he leaned against it. All three hundred feet glared at him. He would have glared back but he was concentrating on other things.

Drawing his furry little knees up under his chin, the robotic cat sighed, trying to look sincerely bored. He couldn't really get bored, he was a robot with emotions dictated to him through delicate sensors and lines of programming code, but he tried his damndest anyways. He needed a convincing front to keep Chieko from getting too nosy. He couldn't let the great beast look at him too closely. He had a foot long antennae reaching out of the top of his head.

"So, Chieko. . ." he piped, voice loud against the dead stillness of the air, "Er, tell me about yourself. Or something."

"Shut up, little thing. Don't talk to me."

"Oh. Ah. Okay."

Chieko growled softly to herself, a reverberating hum deep in her throat, and Cait backed off a little, huddling against the base of the cliffs. Placing his little gloved paws in his lap, he swiveled his head to look up and down the length of the white beach spread before them. The sands glimmered like sugar under the pale moonlight, it all looked like new snow. But it was too empty. It made the little cat nervous. Where were Cloud and Vincent? Chieko had told him when they'd arrived at this beach that it was a meeting place, a place where they'd all regroup. Where were his friends then? He didn't care that Chieko told him they weren't his friends anymore, Cait still wanted to see them. He needed reassurance that someone was still alive on the Planet. After watching Midgar get turned into Texas toast, the little cat wasn't so sure about anybody. Maybe he'd been the only one of the old group to escape the city alive. He surely hoped that wasn't the case. Not being programmed to fight anymore, he knew he wouldn't be much good at saving the Planet. He needed help to fight this Chieko monster. To fight the Jenova that she was always muttering about.

He surveyed the beach again. Nothin'. Just sand, water, and the stupid, grinning moon. Tail flickering, Cait backed up closer to the wall and raised his antennae just an inch more, so it was totally stretched from the socket. He was starting to get desperate now. Why wouldn't he answer?

"I didn't know this was here. . ."

"What?"

Cait looked up at the sound of Chieko's raspy voice. The beast was still glaring out over the ocean.

"All of. . . this. This beauty."

"What d'ya mean, furbag?"

"Nothing." Chieko finally turned from the moon and watched her paws with tired brown eyes, trying to blink her weariness, her doubts, away. Why did Jenova want to destroy something so beautiful? She just didn't understand. But Chieko could lose herself in that one fact: she didn't understand. Jenova knew more than she did, Hojo had known more than she did and that was why Chieko always did as they told her. They knew more. Who was she to argue against Jenova's infinite wisdom? If she said all of this, this shimmering water, and salty air, all of this opalescent light, the smiling moon. . . if Jenova said it needed to be obliterated, Chieko would blow it all away without a qualm. She would. She told herself she would.

"There must be worse things, bad things that I haven't seen that outweigh all of this prettiness," she muttered, "I just don't know about it while she does, that's all. It's the humans on the Planet, they're what make all of this not worth it. It has to go because of them. Maybe it's sort of like, like, cutting our nose to spite our face but. . . but how can we stay here among the filth that is the human race? Regardless of the beauty we surround ourselves in? It just isn't worth it. I understand that, mother. The beauty isn't worth the pain. So we'll destroy it all in one go and spare the entire Planet and everything alive on it, that pain. I understand."

"Well I don't," Cait snapped, sitting up a little, trying to expose the sliver of his antenna to more of the open space, praying that his signal was getting through, "What're you babblin' 'bout?"

The little cat eyed his captor impatiently as she turned her heavy head away from the sky and huddled further into the small cave. Cait thought the fur around her eyes looked a little damp, but it could've very well been from the sea spray and he didn't take it seriously. Bad guys don't cry, he told himself. Tears from Chieko just wouldn't compute.

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"And that, gentlemen, Mr. President, is the situation."

Sloan, Shinra's head of budget and finances, sat down. He laid his folder on the smooth surface of the conference table in front of him, then rested his hands on the top of the files, weaving his thin, white fingers together. An uncomfortable pause was now following his thorough report of Shinra's monetary situation. You could cut the unease in the air with a knife.

"The reserves. . ."

"Spent," Sloan answered.

"The stocks we have on the oil in Mideel. . ."

"We sell now and perhaps we can make it until the end of the month before we have to file."

"The. . . the taxes from our land to the south, how--"

"Pennies we can toss into the pool, sir, but that's all."

Reeve looked at Sloan with wide eyes, his knuckles pressed tight against his mouth.

"Shit."

"Yes, sir, that about sums it up."

President Reeve took his hand from his lips and laid it on the table, staring at his fingernails, picking at his cuticles. The room seemed suddenly very cold. He wished the innkeeper would turn the damned heat up. "So we're bankrupt, is what you're telling me, Mr. Sloan. Well, I suppose that was to be expected. The city and the taxes that were the bulk of our income are no longer in existence, and the building that housed our development labs, our technology, well, it isn't around anymore either."

"Not to mention the lawsuits. . ." Nevilleson, Shinra head of the Legal Department added.

"Yes, we can't go and forget the lawsuits now, can we?" Reeve asked with a maniacal grin, "The god damned fire on the friggin baked Alaska, they are! Well!"

The room was silent as Reeve sat in his expansive leather chair, frowning and smiling erratically. He was losing it. He looked to the faces of each of his Department Heads. Nine men seated at the table before him, their eyes looking anywhere but towards his. Sloan finally spoke up.

"Sir, we need orders. Do I begin to file for bankruptcy? Shall I wait? We'll have to stop services to Junon and Kalm, sir. We need to act."

"Yes, Mr. Sloan, I'm aware. And god knows you can't act without me."

"You are the President, er, Mr. President."

Reeve gave Sloan a dirty look at those words, hating him for pointing the fact out. Unable to help himself, he slammed his two bony elbows on the table and laid his head in his hands, fingers curling up and weaving his wild black hair between them. He hated to look so unhinged in front of his employees, it went against what his frigging title stood for, but Reeve just couldn't help it anymore. Everything was gone, or on its way out the door. He didn't have anything left but the consequences of another man's actions. He heard the people around him calling his name, calling that mocking title out to him, hoping he'd respond to it, but the plain fact of the matter was, Reeve didn't want to answer to "Mr. President" anymore. He just didn't want to deal with it.

With a groan, he made himself look up and face the questioning glances. Taking a deep breath, he looked Sloan right in the eye and the accountant returned the stare, expecting some amazing revelation to spring from his employer's mouth.

"We're going to follow the advice of Mr. Reno," he said calmly, "Head of Security in lieu of Mr. Strife's absence. Mr. Reno has turned out to be quite efficient at problem solving."

"Oh." Sloan blinked in surprise, unaware that the cocky, loud-mouthed, fiery-haired Security Head was so influential. "What advice would that be, Mr. President?"

Reeve stood from his chair and jabbed his hands in his pockets. "Fuck it."

Sloan sat there blinking harder as Reeve headed for the door, shoulders up around his ears. "But seriously," he called as he retreated, "I recommend you all get good lawyers. And lay low for a while. We'll resurface after the immediate threat is taken care of."

"And where will you be, sir?" called Visbotwich, Electrical Head.

"I'll be taking care of the immediate threat, of course. Meeting adjourned."

Reeve slammed the basement door shut behind him and climbed the short flight of stairs up to the lobby of the inn quickly. He was surprised to see the lights off upstairs. A glance at his wristwatch told him just how long he'd been down there chewing the fat with his moronic employees. The darkness of ten pm stretched around him, sapped at his energy though it wasn't anything near his bedtime.

But stress'll do that to ya, he thought blankly. Yeah, a week of having the gods shit down your neck will definitely do that to ya. Crossing the lobby with heavy steps, Reeve ran a hand up over his face and rubbed at his chin, rubbed at his eyes, brushed his hair out of his vision. It was so quiet, but that was making him nervous. It let him hear his own thoughts much too clearly.

After all that nonsense with the company, Reeve decided he needed to spend an hour or two with Reno. Reno's nonsense was fun. And he'd definitely have some form of alcohol on him. Reeve needed a drink. A big one. Shinra's final plummet into utter bankruptcy called for a few bottles of Chocobo Billy's moonshine. He'd mark the occasion in style.

"Hey there."

Reeve jumped a foot in the air as a soft voice halloed him from the till. He looked over and saw Tifa perched on the

counter, her knees pulled up to her chin. He gave her a smile and stepped towards her, glad to hear a friendly voice break the stillness of the air.

"Hey, how ya feelin'?"

"Better, thanks. How did your meeting go?"

"I don't want to talk about it. But thanks for asking."

"That bad?" Tifa cocked her head to one side, trying to smile. What she wound up with was more like a grimace. But Reeve appreciated the effort.

"It'll turn out okay," he said reassuringly, "It can only go up from here, I'm pretty sure we've hit rock bottom."

"Until the bottom falls out and we discover a black hole," Tifa corrected.

"Heh. True." Reeve leaned back against the counter beside her and crossed his arms, eyes straying towards the stars outside the Inn's front window, "You guys come up with anything productive during your pow-wow upstairs?"

"Somewhat. We'll be leaving in the morning to begin searching for Cloud and Vincent. There's a short, or something, something stupid with one of the engines in the Highwind and Cid's looking at it now or we'd've left already."

"Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"With what?" Tifa eyed him quizzically, expression cool. He shrugged.

"I don't know what I mean, really," he answered softly, "You just seem so well composed all of a sudden. You're not forcing it on yourself, are you? You can be a raving lunatic if you want to, don't let us stop ya. You have every right."

"No, it's all right. I won't be pulling any more guns on you, or running off into any more buildings, I promise. Heh. I think. . . I think I've finally accepted that the only way I'm going to repair all of this, is with my own two hands. I'm ready to take up the challenge, Reeve. I won't cry anymore, I won't sit in the rain and cry out the futility of everything we try. I want to be the one to free Cloud from, from her. I want to be there when he realizes it's all going to be okay." Tifa smiled to herself, staring off into the darkness, "I have to be strong if I'm going to help him. I realize that now. Strength is love."

Reeve couldn't help himself. He reached over and gave Tifa a hug, a big squishy warm hug around the shoulders. She blinked in surprise for a moment, then returned it, laughing softly.

"Well if that's the case," the Shinra President said, "You're frigging Arnold Schwarzenegger. Ya big lug."

Tifa gave him a last squeeze, then pulled away. Her right hand lingered on the pocket of his sports coat though.

"Hey," she whispered, "You're shakin'."

"Huh?"

Reeve reached down into his pocket and pulled out his PHS. "Stupid thing," he muttered, "I turned the ringer off for the meeting but I always miss the vibrate thing. Reeve here."

"Reeve! Reeve, Reeve, Reeve, Reeve!! Reeveee!!!"

"Hey now, that's my name, you were right the first time. Who the hell is this?"

"It's me!! Meeeee!!!"

"Damn, tell him to turn down the volume, I can hear it from here," Tifa said, adjusting to a more comfortable position on the counter. She looked up suddenly. "Wait. . . that's not. . ."

"It is! "Reeve exclaimed, breaking into a grin, "Cait Sith, you old bundle of fur and toaster parts! I thought you'd be a smudge of black in Sector One! Where are you?"

"I'm not sure, Reeve. I'm really scared!"

"Hold on there, buddy, it's all right. Why do you sound so muffled? Are you using your internal speakers?" Reeve shot Tifa a confused glance and the woman shrugged, feeling a little bad that she hadn't paid more attention to Cait during the whole affair the past few days. But he was just a robot, as real as he sometimes seemed to be.

"I can't talk out loud, Reeve, I'm scared to. Chieko might hear me!"

"Chieko?" Reeve asked, startled.

"Chieko?" Tifa echoed, trying to snatch the phone away.

"Yeah, Chieko! That red thingie with teeth and big claws and wings! She left moogles there to burn in Midgar and took me away with her to find Cloud and Vincent! She keeps talking to thin air, and talkin' about Jenova. Jenova's dead, ain't she? I thought you guys took care of her!"

"Aw, man. . ." Reeve leaned back against the nearest wall, one hand to his head, shutting his eyes and turning up to

the ceiling in supplication, "Cait, your circuits are in need of updating. You're outdated, kitty. Tell me where you are."

"Um. . ." There was a pause on the phone. Reeve could hear his robot's gears ticking furiously, "Um, I'm uh, here, I guess. A beach? Yeah, a beach."

"You can't be any more specific?" the man demanded in tight frustration. Tifa patted his shoulder comfortingly.

"Um. No. Sorry. There's some sand here and water. I think it's the ocean, if that helps."

"Doesn't he have a tracker or something, Reeve?" Tifa asked, tugging his sleeve to get his attention. The President's dark eyes lit up with the fire of realization and he grinned hard.

"Yeah. . . hey Cait, password: Wombat459, user: Reeve, execute pro--"

"Access denied."

"What?" Reeve smacked his PHS as though it were misbehaving, "What do you mean access denied, ya little furball? I've used that same password since I was a kid, what're you--?"

"Reeve. . ." Tifa called her friend's name patiently, trying to keep her voice calm despite the sudden excitement. She was having a hard time keeping from jumping up and down like a cheerleader. She was getting closer to Cloud, fate was helping her out. Helping in the form of a robotic cat, but Tifa wasn't going to be particular. Saviors came in all shapes and sizes. "Reeve, he's not yours anymore, remember?"

"Huh?" Reeve snapped around and eyed her in confusion. Then it hit him. "Oh yeah, he's you guys' now. Heh. Cid reprogrammed him, right? What did you and Cloud give him as a password? I need to access his navigational software. Launching programs like that requires his operating password. So uh, give it up."

"Access de--"

"Yeah, shut up, Cait. C'mon, what is it, Tifa?"

Tifa blushed for a moment and turned away to stare at the wall. She'd never had any idea she'd have to one day give out her children's nanny's programming password. She'd never thought it would be important, never thought that anyone besides themselves would ever have need of Cait Sith again. Sighing profoundly, Tifa muttered the words.

"What? Didn't hear ya."

"Orthopedic underwear! Gods, Reeve, get your hearing checked."

Reeve stared for a moment as Tifa turned thirty shades of chartreuse. He blinked. "Ortho--"

"Shut up!"

"Well, I'm going to have to say it to Cait!" he snapped, a smirk curled at the corner of his lips. Tifa and Cloud had some kinky little fetishes he just didn't want to know anything about. He cleared his throat and said the two words into the PHS, then started laughing despite his best efforts not to as Cait began spewing technobabble into his ear.

"Oh. . . five-hundred mile radius," he answered his robot in between chuckles, "Enter. 7.89 pps. Confirm. Enter. Launch. Log out user Reeve. Launch IA, standard mode. Cait, ya there, pal?"

After a moment or two of fuzz, the cat's squeaky little voice piped into Reeve's ear again and the President grinned wide, entire storm clouds lifting off his brow. Something was actually working out.

"Reeve, you're comin' ta help me, right? I'm so worried, Chieko is so big and she flies really high and shakes me around a lot and, and, and. . . oh, I miss my moogle!"

"Calm down, calm down, Cait, we're going to follow your signal in the Highwind and we'll be there in no time. Now listen to me, buddy. Are Cloud and Vincent there with you?"

Tifa looked up at the names, watching Reeve's face as he listened to Cait.

"I dunno, Reeve," the little cat answered piteously, "Chieko says they are, she said we were here to reunite, but I haven't seen them. There's a big cliff behind me, really high. I think maybe they're up there but I dunno really. Oh, and we're headed north, Reeve."

"What?"

"Chieko says that her mom says we're goin' north."

"That's kinda vague, isn't it," Reeve mused, rubbing at his rough chin, "But then again, not really. Not when we consider who we're dealing with. If you're moving north and you're at a beach now, ya must be at the shore of the Eastern Continent. You can't go too much further north. Unless. . ."

Reeve looked up to Tifa who eyed him right back, features drawn. She frowned deeply, eyes softening with hurt and suppressed tears. Reeve broke the staring and let her look away, sensing that she wanted to cry.

"Unless she's heading for the Crater," he finished quietly. "I hope her only reason for that is nostalgia's sake. I don't know what's there that she'd want, what her purpose for returning there would be. Returning there with her new disciples. . . son of a bitch. . ."

"Ooh, Reeve, don't swear."

"Sorry, Cait," the Shinra President apologized absently, "You hold tight, all right? We're on our way. If anything drastic happens, you call me, but only if it's important. I don't want that Chieko thing figuring out that we can communicate, it could be dangerous for you."

"But I'm just a robot!"

"No, you're CJ and Ifalna's nanny now," he corrected with a smile, "And they miss ya, furball. So be safe."

"Okay. Thanks, Reeve!"

"Yeah. Remember what I said. Bye."

"Bye!"

Reeve clicked the little gray PHS shut and dropped it in his pocket thoughtfully. He was glad as hell for the lead, for his chance to prove useful to his friends and to their aims, but at the same time he was suddenly scared. Suddenly bloody terrified. It was a strange feeling that left him with a dry mouth. He took a deep breath, his heart racing in his chest for some reason, then folded his arms and leaned heavily against the sharp edge of the counter, beside Tifa.

"How long is Cid going to be checking the engine?" he asked, shattering the brief quiet. Tifa looked up and forced herself to smile, pushing away the terrible thoughts that had been raging in her head. North. North. That word held the potential to terrify her. Still smiling, a weak, washed out lie of a smile, Tifa slid herself off the counter and stood on two firm feet, looking up at her friend.

"I don't know," she answered with steely cheeriness, "But too long. I'm going to go and pester him. He'll work faster knowing we have a lead."

"More than a lead, honey," Reeve said, observing her composure skeptically, "Cait's beacon will send out bursts of signal that we can pick up with the Highwind's homing equipment. As long as Cid hasn't gone and changed his hardware since last I was aboard, Cait can lead us right to him. Looks like the fates are smiling upon us at last, eh?"

Tifa's attitude cracked for just a moment and her brows lowered a fraction. "I don't know," she whispered, "I'm still waiting for the black hole. . . but I'm trying not to think about it. Heh. Thank the gods for their smile, eh?"

Reeve shook his head lightly. "No, thank the gods for talking, robotic cats."

"Hhm. Well, I'm off to the Highwind." Tifa gave her friend a parting pat on the shoulder then took off briskly for the front door of the quiet inn, careful to keep her treads muted and not awaken the Shinra execs or her slumbering comrades.

"You don't have to keep up this front, Tifa," Reeve called softly to her, "You can worry, you can cry, you can scream, you can threaten, if you want."

Tifa paused and looked back. There was a thoughtful glint in her rusty brown eyes. The starlight from the front window reflected in her pupils and she blinked it away. "No," she said slowly, "I think I like it better this way. I think Reno called it, what, flaming optimism? I called it naivete. But it doesn't matter what you want to label it. It's a lot easier to keep telling myself that we'll get to Cloud and Vincent before the word "North" ever lives up to the connotations. Don't you agree?"

Reeve grinned and nodded, suddenly tempted to hug Tifa again. This was the woman he was friends with. This was who he loved to get into long conversations with, she and Cloud were the reasons he loved to get himself invited over to the Strifes for dinner whenever possible. This was Tifa Lockhart. That other woman, the broken one, the one who'd had nothing to lean on, was gone. Tifa had her children and her hope back and she'd returned with them. He wasn't sure where the latter had been hiding itself, but he was certainly glad it'd reappeared. This sudden resurrection made the Shinra President's heart swell.

"Tell Cid to get the homing equipment set up," he whispered, "I'll gather up the troops and meet you out there."

"Aye aye, Prez."

Tifa smiled up at him, he smiled back, and they shared a look of mutual respect and understanding. The inn door closed behind Tifa softly on her way out.

Screw you, Planet, Reeve cackled mentally as he turned and made his way to the side parlor of the inn, a cocky smirk plastered on his dark, unshaven face. And screw you, Jenova. Chalk one up for humanity, cause we're comin' to get our guys back.

~\*~

Berk sat in the dark parlor, eyes closed. His wiry frame was pressed comfortably into the soft cushions of a leather armchair. Black, warm peacefulness spread out about him. The parlor was empty. It was so blissfully, gloriously empty that Berk nearly laughed out loud. Dark, quiet and empty.

Three hours in three days. This fact had the young Turk grimacing through his chuckles. He'd had three hours of sleep in three days. Two short hours in Marlene's apartment the night before, and a brief nap in Wall Market on a bench in a park the night before that. Three measly pathetic, laughable hours in three long, bastardly, tiring days. The numbers added up and Berk didn't like the sum. He was a frigging Turk, not a college student. He'd stayed away from college specifically for that reason. He liked sleep. Sleep was good.

Aw, man, his eyelids felt like a coupla sumo wrestlers were hanging off of them. They slid slowly down over his dark green eyes and the warm blackness pressed on him like a blanket, tucking him in. Oh, that's it, they were closed. His poor tired eyes were all covered up. Here it came, the reward for his diligence, for keeping his charges alive after the Shinra building had fell that afternoon, for putting up with Barret Wallace, for getting his back and chest torn to shreds by Chaos, here it came, the main event. .!

Marlene Wallace's lips.

Oh, shit. Now that wasn't what he'd been expecting. But there they were. Berk irritably shoved the pleasing, if unwanted image out of his head and searched again for sleep.

Leave me alone! he muttered to himself, I'll screw with you later, Marlene! Scram!

But her face stayed there, looking reproachful and sad. Berk's bloodshot eyes snapped open and his conscience's claws came out.

Ya shouldn'ta said that stuff to her in the tent this afternoon, the little voice accused, It's not her fault that you're such a loser she can't notice you. It's your fault for being a loser to begin with. You're a loser, Berkie, the big L. La-hoo-za-hur. Loser.

Yeah, that's nice. I don't care what that chick thinks anyway. I don't care about someone who's such a pain in the ass. I'm not going to climb any ladders for any girl. And Marlene's a frigging firetruck when it comes to ladders. Her dad, her job, her brain, her attitude. Toss Neto in there and her freaky Sephiroth summon and suddenly you've got the most unapproachable girl on the Planet. You can have her, she ain't worth the trouble.

Are you sure?

Yeah, I'm sure. So shut up and let me sleep already. I'll deal with it in the mornin'. I'll deal with Marlene and then go save the world. Yeah, I have it scheduled. Now it's sleep time. So can it.

I love the way you put Marlene before saving the world on your "to do" list. Heh heh.

Shut up, ya prick.

Berk settled back more comfortable in the armchair, clasping his hands together over his tight stomach. Whoa, check that out, there went his eyes again. Ah. . . it was so quiet. He'd spent the whole last few days around people with barely a moment to himself. And tonight he thought he'd never get rid of Reno, the guy kept giving him stuff to do, but Reno was gone now, he'd left to check on Rude and now it was Berk's time. Time to sleep. What a cool word. Sleep. If only he could dream about something interesting, something that'd put a smile on his face when he woke up and remembered it. Something he could use to battle the tough stuff he was sure was waiting for him the next day. Something like. . .

Marlene's legs. . .

That's it, now I'm starting to get pissed! Stay the hell outta my head! I haven't had this problem before, you need to get outta my thoughts now! I've dismissed ya, babe, you don't interest me anymore! You're too unattainable and too much hassle! Leave! Go!

Berk's eyes snapped open again. The dark shapes of the furniture in the parlor laughed at him.

Please please let me sleep, he pleaded, I promise I'll apologize to Marlene tomorrow. I'll be sweet as pie to her. Please don't keep me up feeling guilty and horny, please! Okay?

Okay what?

If I promise to apologize you'll leave me alone.

Mmmm. . . it's your head. You're the one fixated on her.

Don't screw with me, conscience! Just tell me you'll cut me some slack!

Whatever you say, Berkie. You apologize and maybe you'll be able to get some peace of mind about her and the whole situation.

That's better. Now piss off.

Grumble grumble.

Berk stretched his legs out until his joints snapped, then sunk down in the chair, sighing. Peace, real peace at last. No more of. . . her. Maybe now he'd have some dreams, get some well-earned, real rest. Hero stuff was harder than it looked. And really wore him down.

Ah. . . there it was again. Creeping oblivion, inching its way over his limbs, sneaking up under his closed eyebrows. Aaahh. . . Berk sighed softly. Sleep was yummy.

"Hey there. Berk. Berk! You awake, son?"

The young Turk was on his feet in a flash, shaking it all off. Though the room was dark, he immediately recognized Reeve's face. He gave a quick salute, remembered he wasn't in the army anymore, and then dropped his right arm, slouching awkwardly.

"Er, excuse me, Mr. President, "he mumbled, stifling a yawn, "What is it, sir?"

Berk's yawn broke through and nearly knocked him backwards. Reeve watched him with wide eyes, so pumped on caffeine himself that he couldn't even imagine what it was like to be tired. He caught Berk by the tie just as the guy was about to fall backwards into his chair again.

"Tired?" he asked as the Turk attempted to get a hold of himself.

"No, sir. . ."

"Uh huh. C'mon, you can sleep on the ship. I've got good news for you, Berk, Cait Sith called with a lead, we know where Mr. Strife and Valentine are."

"Really?" Berk perked up just a bit, rubbing at his eyes, trying to keep his posture respectful in front of his boss. "Er, really, sir?"

"We're heading out as soon as possible. Now c'mon. You go and wake Marlene, Bugah and the crew. I have to make a few arrangements with Mr. Reno. Do you know where he is?"

"Med. . . medical tent, I think, sir. . ."

"Ah, sitting up with Rude again. Okay, well, gather the gang and meet at the airship, Berk. Berk. Berk?"

Reeve smacked the young guy on the shoulder and his eyes popped open again. "Uh, sorry, sir, "he mumbled, "Will do. I'll get 'em."

"Okay. . ." Reeve muttered dubiously. He grabbed Berk by the shoulders and steered him out of the dark parlor and into the lobby, plopping him at the foot of the stairs. "Up, "he ordered cheerfully and the young Turk nodded, heading to the second floor, tripping on every other step.

"No, that's the bathroom, Berk! They're in the bedroom! Yeah, that's right. The room without the toilet. Uh huh. Oh, I know you're not tired, I believe you."

Reeve sighed lightly, then turned around and breezed from the inn, hoping Berk wouldn't break his neck on his way down the stairs.

It was bitterly cold outside. The stars stared down at the Shinra President like chips of ice marked by moonlight, scattered by uncaring hands over the heavens. He buried his hands in his pockets and walked quickly towards the dark green medical tent in the center of town, ignoring their white gazes. He was feeling too damned good to care what the frigging stars looked like.

Junon maybe. Costa del Sol? Nah, too humid. What about Gongaga? Probably not, probably better to stay on the Western Continent and keep his ties with Kalm and Junon. Hmm. Where O where to build the new Shinra? It was almost fun to think about. He had the whole world to consider, and once Jenova was taken care of, there'd be nothing to threaten his company again. Yup, things were looking up. Even with Midgar lying there in the distance reduced to soot and stony rubble, Reeve was optimistic.

Reno wasn't in the medical tent. Except for a few sleeping patients and a dozing nurse, the place was empty. Reeve sauntered outside, stepping around the people sleeping in the streets or taking little constitutionals of their own, and pondered. Then he saw Kalm's quaint dark tavern wedged into a distant stone wall and made for it, a knowing grin on his face.

Gods, these streets were packed. Reeve guiltily examined the people wedged in the gutters, wrapped in blankets and

sleeping bags. If only he'd been more prepared, they wouldn't be here now, homeless, jobless, everything-less. To hell with the mayor, the people of Midgar had put their trust into President Reeve of Shinra and he'd let them down. He'd allowed the wickedest entity the Planet had ever seen to come in and knock their city down like a playing card castle. He'd allowed these people's friends, family, and neighbors to die there in the distance, engulfed in flames, cursing his name. . . these sudden thoughts put Reeve on edge. His head bowed beneath the deaths and he blamed himself for the fact that the streets weren't even MORE crowded. It should've been so that he couldn't even walk down them, there should've been so many refugees from the city that they all had to resort to cannibalism, so many survivors that the medical staff went on strike. But no. There were many. But there weren't enough. Too large a number had stayed in their city. Too large a number of Reeve's little subjects were dead. The Shinra President shivered as he walked, drowning in cold and guilt.

Jenova had to die, it was that simple. His new city, his new company, and his new subjects had to be safe, they would be safe, Reeve would see to that. If Nanaki was correct and Jenova truly was the counter element of the Planet, if she truly was Death incarnate, created only to feed off the flesh of humanity, then Reeve figured she'd just be a more interesting enemy. There could be no other possible results from Red's theory proving to be true in his mind. Jenova would die, immortal or not. Reeve would destroy her. He'd keep the rest of his citizens safe. He'd get them out of the gutter.

Forcing the darker thoughts from his mind, focusing on the fact that things were looking up, Reeve pushed the swollen wooden door of the Kalm tavern open. It swung inward on silent hinges, unlocked. He saw that the owner had generously turned it into a shelter, there were people in the corners, sleeping on pushed together chairs, snoring softly. Reeve stepped over a stuffed moogles that'd rolled out of a kid's sleeping bag and onto the middle of the floor, then nudged it back over to the little boy's side, smiling softly. Reeve had always tended to fiddle around with his plush animals when he'd been a kid. He'd take the phone apart, rig it up in a toy and make it talk. It'd really driven his mom nuts. When he'd tried to dissect the family cat at the age of eleven, she'd taken him to a shrink. Reeve figured Cait Sith was his own little way of revolting against his parents' lack of creativity. At least that was what his psychiatrist said.

Damn, the tavern was dark. Deep too. Treading softly, Reeve stepped back into it, spying a hunched figure at the end of the bar. He smiled cheerily and approached him, recognizing Reno's red ponytail and signature bony shoulders.

"Hey, man," he whispered, slapping a friendly hand on one of the aforementioned shoulders, "You'll never guess who I just got a call from! The cat! Cait Sith! Seems he was kidnapped by your buddy Chieko and is even now with Cloud and Vincent somewhere up north. I've got him sending out homing signals so we can track him. C'mon, let's get to the airship, we're heading out. This mess'll be over before you know it. Damn, I can't wait."

Reeve's enthusiasm dulled sharply as he noticed Reno trembling beneath his touch. He craned his head around and saw the ex-Turk's two pale hands resting on the bar top. One grasped a long since emptied bottle of beer. The other clutched a pair of shades. Suddenly dizzy, suddenly scared, Reeve turned his friend around in his seat and stared at him face to face. Twin lines of tears ran from his empty aquamarine eyes, while his jaw was so tensed, his teeth clenched so tightly, that Reeve thought he was in pain. And he was in pain. Muttering something about Rude being dead, he fell forward onto his friend's shoulder and broke down. Reeve let him stay like that for a long time.

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The pleasure and the party lights of Wall Market stuck up sharply into the void of midnight sky. Spikes of neon oranges and pinks and greens. There were laughs in there too, women's high pitched squeals, men's threatening chuckles. Debauchery and sin hung heavy in the air. Music played, dancing in and out of the corruption, the fun, the good times. Bass-ridden strains and thumps that made your gut hurt if you listened too long.

The neon lights and the electric displays only made the unlit shadows darker. These were the shadows that the Turks dwelt in. The black places that the revelers wouldn't touch.

There was someone who needed to die out there amidst them all. One face, one personality, one identity that needed to be wiped from existence because President Shinra had bid it. He could've been any of them. Any one of those laughing, smiling, contorted with pleasure faces out there in the garish lights. But it wasn't. It was one man.

Vincent didn't know his name. He didn't know why, but he couldn't come up with the name of his mark. Nor his face. Nor the reason he had to die. He only knew that he had a job to do tonight, a life he had to end. His gun was cold in his hand. His fingers roved over the grip, over the pebbled rubber handle. It was loaded. The clip was fresh. Not many people could tell exactly how many bullets were in a gun just by picking it up, but Vincent could. He felt the weight of each round pulling down on his hand. Fifteen. But he'd only need one.

The laughter roared in his ears as the revelers reveled outside of his black shadows. Tie centered over the white front

of his starched shirt, blue blazer pressed, neat, clean, he stepped out into the light. His cropped black hair hung just above his eyebrows. A stray breeze blew ticklish strands of it over his ears. His brown eyes scanned his surroundings.

Wall Market. So ugly. So damned ugly, even for Midgar. The lights were obscured by a dirty gray mist. The mist caught their glow and rose to the sky, breaking the perfection of the black with clouds of neon-colored shit. He could barely see the stars beyond them. Barely see the moon.

The place was empty. He heard the laughter of merrymakers but he didn't see them. Storefronts and brothels lined the long street before him, but Vincent thought it all looked rather deserted. A few skulls lying in the gutters. Old bones, old bodies. But where was the laughter coming from. And where the hell was his mark?

Steps slow and measured, the Turk traversed the long, littered street. As he walked, he saw the buildings about him begin to burn. As he walked, he saw Wall Market turn to soot. He gripped his gun tighter, desperate for something tangible amidst the destruction. The laughter echoed about him, danced in the glow, the skipping orange sparks of the blaze, and began to condense.

It was so cold here. The fires burned but they didn't give heat, they consumed any warmth they lapped up against, sucking it into their maws greedily. They consumed everything. The buildings, the streets, the warmth, the air, they wanted it all and they grabbed at it without regard to the fact that Vincent was cold, that these sudden burnt surroundings were unsettling to his eyes. They wanted the world and they'd have it. They left only ash in their wakes. Ash, and that lilting laughter.

"Where are you?"

Vincent's young voice demanded an answer. It revolted against the chaos around him and wouldn't be denied. He stopped walking, moving his finger to rest against the trigger of his pistol, then swiveled around on his right heel, taking his surroundings in efficiently. Wall Market was gone. Any neon that'd been was burnt away. Everything that had been color was gray. Everything that had been light, or white, was black now. But the fires burned on.

There.

A ghost of a figure against the flames. Vincent's senses picked up on it instantly and he darted to the side of the road, intent on pursuing it. That had been his mark. That figure. He knew it, something inside him told him that was his target. If he could kill it, he could leave this burnt out shell of a Sector and go back to Headquarters as soon as that bastard was dead. He began to run through the flames, feeling the fires catch a hold of his clothes and hair but he didn't care, he was desperate to put an end to this insanity. One bullet through the head of that phantom figure. . . and he could go home.

He skidded to a halt, suddenly spying the silhouette again, about a hundred feet off, body starkly dark against the glow of a distant orange blaze. He quickly raised his gun at a level with the figure's head and pulled the trigger. His target flew backwards and was still, leaving Vincent to smile in satisfaction. Sheathing his gun, he pushed his hair from his eyes and stepped forward to investigate the body, to perhaps find out who it was who'd needed to die in order to preserve the safety of the Shinra Corporation. But a heavy hand on his shoulder halted him.

"Hello, Mr. Valentine."

Flinching in surprise, Vincent turned around and saw Professor Hojo standing there. But. . . it wasn't Hojo. It was a monster with the dead scientist's face, a humanish figure mutated by Jenova cells and greed, bent to corruption by a lust for power and revenge. Its question was just as jarring, as lurid as its appearance.

"Why do you hate Chaos?"

"What?"

Vincent took a step backwards as Hojo eyed him, gaze solemn.

"Why do you hate him? When I made him for you years ago, Vincent, I crafted him to be just like you. You should be getting along splendidly. But you're not. You hate him. Why?"

Vincent fell to his knees in shock, suddenly realizing that he wasn't a Turk anymore. He was dressed in tatters, a bloody crimson cloak shielded his face and his body from the stares of a cold world. His hair was long and unkempt, hanging in his face, covering him like a shroud. And Hojo stared at him like a specimen on a petri dish, expecting an answer.

"I-- I don't know. . ." he stuttered, stumbling to stand, "He wants to kill everyone. He wants to push me down while he rises, starve me while he eats. I hate him because he's a murderer."

"He's a murderer because you are a murderer, Vincent. I made him to keep you company. I made him dark because you're dark, hungry because you're hungry, silent because you're silent, and heartless because you're heartless. Most of all though, Vincent, I made him an animal because you so despise humanity. You can be a devil now, a beast, a remorseless, efficient murderer. I've given that all to you with Chaos. But you hate him. I just want to know why."

Vincent couldn't answer. He couldn't deny the words either, because in essence, they were true. He just stood there, fingering the golden claw that'd replaced his left arm, wishing that those yellow eyes of Hojo's would stop staring at him so intensely.

Hojo granted his wish after a moment or two. He slithered off a bit, brows furrowed, genuinely confused. "You've always spurned my gifts. After Lucrecia died and you attacked me, after I shot you in simple self-de--"

"I didn't attack you--!"

"In simple self-defense, "Hojo finished adamantly, "I could have let you bleed to death. But no. I saw how much you and 'Crecia loved each other. I thought you should be together. But I couldn't kill you, or let you die and rejoin her. Why? That's murder. You're the murderer, I wouldn't be, I refused. So I did all I could. I put you to sleep in a coffin, and you could've stayed there forever, dreaming of her. I wanted that for you both, I offered that. You didn't take it. You rejected my gift just as you're attempting to reject what I've given you now. I don't know if you're ungrateful, ignorant, or just delusional, Vincent. I honestly do not understand how your black little mind works."

Hojo glared at the man in disgust. Vincent withered beneath the gaze.

"Neither do I, "he admitted finally, "All I can judge things by is instinct. My instinct blares the evil of Chaos in my ears. So I listen. So I hate. I hate that devil you've always seen me as, Professor. Maybe you saw the truth, maybe I hated the truth but what difference does that make? Doesn't it matter that I know what I am? Or at least, what I was? That I can admit to the crimes I've committed and realize their wickedness? Yeah, that does matter. I was a god damned devil, cold as stone after learning that was the easiest way to keep from getting hurt. But I'm not anymore. What I was is dead, buried, in the ground. It's. . . back in that coffin. Killing Sephiroth. . . and killing you, that redeemed me. You see, Professor Hojo, your wife forgave me a long time ago. And she still comes to me, speaking in a voice I'll wager you never heard. She knows I'm not a devil, not a cold blooded murderer. If she were here right now, she'd renounce Chaos and explain to you just why I hate him."

"But why can't you explain for yourself? Would you hide behind a woman?"

"I did explain!" Vincent shouted, straightening and glaring the monster dead in his face, "Chaos is everything I'm not! If it's true what you said, that you made him as you saw me to be, then there's no question in my mind that he's everything I am not!"

Hojo grimaced and looked away as Vincent advanced, his gun drawn.

"You never knew me, "he snarled, "You never did, no one ever did! And I don't care, I never expected the world to go out on a limb to get acquainted with a man named Vincent Valentine. I didn't hand out calling cards, and it never asked and I was content. But you. . . when I met you, you made up an identity for me that was all your own. It wasn't what I was, it was the twisted fairy tale of who you thought your wife's lover should be. An image that would make you more able to deal with the fact that you'd been jilted. I'll admit that I gave you plenty of fodder for your phantom man. I WAS a murderer, it was my job. I was dark and quiet and cruel. Perhaps I still am. But I wasn't Chaos. I was never a devil who'd snuck into your bed and stolen your love. You pushed Lucrecia away, off of you, and I caught her and made her mine. That's the only truth. Everything else is a tale to make you feel better. You couldn't accept that she chose a young, common Turk over the great Professor Hojo. You had to make me into a monster, a worthy enemy, an adversary you could understand. That was the real reason for what you did to me, isn't it? Not a joke, not a crazy idea inspired by your insanity, it was a cold, calculated solution to something that was driving you mad. Lucrecia loved me, not you."

Vincent shoved Hojo to the ground with his claw. His sharp fingers left five slash marks across the scientist's bare chest. "Get it through your thick skull!" he snapped, "It was me! All the time, it was me. I know it. I'm so sure of it that I've given whatever's left of my life to the fact. I worship that love like a god damned deity. It was the only one I ever had. The only one I'd ever known. . . so I. . . I keep it sacred. You, Professor, you need to stop haunting me, tainting the memories I have with your bitter presence. You, Hojo, need to die."

The gun was in his hand. Fourteen bullets were in the clip. The weight of each one called to him. There was Professor Hojo's twisted face. Not the sallow face of that young scientist from so, so long ago, but the Jenova-tainted visage of a monster. The scar tissue grasping at his forehead, snaking around his yellow eyes from the last time Vincent had killed him, it was all there, obscuring the man that Vincent had stolen from. Obscuring the true face of that thing that'd stolen her back. But after the sound of fourteen gunshots, there was little of any sort of face left to see. The gun fell from Vincent's hand and he staggered backwards, breathing hard.

Looking around him suspiciously, untrusting of the still-burning fires licking up at the blackness, Vincent stepped away from the corpse he'd made and towards that other form still laying on the ground in the distance. That laughter hadn't stopped. It'd chuckled at him all throughout his spat with Hojo, and it roared now. The voices pressed down on him and he put a hand to his head, smelling the fresh gunpowder staining his fingers.

"Vincent. . . I'm bleeding. . . "

"Lucrecia!"

He twirled around, looking for the source of that divine voice. His heart roared in his ears. He wanted to hold her in his arms and kill whatever it was making her sound so hurt, so sad.

"Lucrecia!?"

He saw that fallen figure in the distance moving. The fires blazed up brighter, gleeful to illuminate the form of Vincent's lover, lying there in the dirt of decay and ruin, dying again. He raced to her side, clenching his teeth, fingers cold in fear.

"Do you remember that day? Hojo was out of the city with Professor Gast. They'd gone to some pompous conference and insisted I was too ignorant to accompany them. You knew I was upset about it. You knew how tired I was of being excluded, thought of as an idiot because I was a woman with a degree and not a man. So you came over to the apartment and took me to Gold Saucer. I wouldn't go at first, I said it was too expensive, too far, but you picked me right up and carried me out the door. And you dropped me on the way down the stairs. Oh, gods, that was funny. You dropped me right on my ass but we laughed for ten minutes straight. Do you remember that, Vincent? We went to the Gold Saucer and rode the gondola. We watched the fireworks and drank chocolate milkshakes on the roof. That was our one normal night. Our "date". Our one chance to be together without worrying who was watching, who might go to him and give us away. We didn't go back to Midgar that night. We stayed at the Gold Saucer and said to hell with Shinra, to hell with Hojo, to hell with the Turks. There was only Vincent and Lucrecia that night. The rest of the world had gone to hell. The rest of the world were the devils. But then, so were we. Two fallen angels who hadn't realized what we were yet. We picked ourselves up from the dust and flew again. As high as our broken wings would take us. For just that one night. . ."

The words escaped her lips in a whisper and Vincent held her bloody body close, praying to god that she wouldn't leave again. But god didn't listen to the prayers of selfish men. Lucrecia shut her eyes and died right there in his arms, just as she always did. And, right on schedule, Vincent realized he was dreaming.

But he didn't wake up. That's when he knew there was a problem.

Vincent set her on the ground, gently, and brushed the delicate strands of deeply chestnut hair away from her cold, dead face. His fingers lingered on her cheek, ran softly over her red lips, hovered there, hesitant, unwilling to leave the presence of her being. But he eventually drew away, noticing how stark and wrong the contrast between his blackened appearance and her divine one was. He wandered off, tripping over the crisp, charred beams in the ground, his boots sinking down into the soot of Midgar, trudging through the ash. Hojo was dead over there. Lucrecia lay dead behind him. His entire past was a string of corpses. When would it be his turn to join them? Sleeping in the pages of the past, entombed in easy death. It'd been too long. Too too long.

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Chaos leapt to his feet, roaring. Vincent's vision returned to him and he watched the milky moon above, grinning at him carelessly. Its reflection off the sea wavered, swam, danced before his red eyes. He was still numb from his nightmare, stuck in dreams he hadn't had for the longest time. Jenova was free to pick through his mind and was going through his heart, his memories, his very soul as though they all were papers in a folder, books in a library there to keep her entertained. Trivial human emotions tended to amuse her. She'd told Vincent so.

He was so tired. Each attempt at sleep ended up in nightmares. He wasn't sure if Jenova was purposefully trying to break him, trying to drive him insane, or just torturing him for the sake of the sound of his screams. Did she enjoy seeing him suffer? He knew that Chaos enjoyed it. For so long that demon had fed off his anger, fear, and frustration, glutting himself on it. It was when he became fat with the feelings that he was able to break free and blast them onto his enemies. Now that Chaos was in control he still hungered for Vincent's pain. And Jenova was keeping her pet fed.

The shore was so beautiful. The sands reminded him of Icicle Inn, the Great Glacier. The sun off of the snow matched the moon off the sand here. He didn't even care that he couldn't see it properly, he knew how it should look and put that picture before his mind's eye instead. Instead of the red-misted scene that Chaos let him see.

The strains of the dead nightmare sat heavy in his thoughts but Vincent shook them off, mind sore from the lashes of his memories. He had to find a way out of this prison. A single fact though, kept him from being too hopeful as to any possible success of that.

Midgar was gone.

As Chaos paced the top of the cliff, eager to depart, eager to kill, Vincent planned. He went over the facts coldly.

Midgar was gone. He'd watched it burn as Chaos had glided away, here, to the sea. He'd seen it coming, he'd heard every suggestion that Jenova had made to Cloud, and he'd been there, in a way. The same way that he'd been in the alley when that phantom Sephiroth had attacked Cloud. Vincent had seen first hand as his friend had killed so many. He'd watched the man's rage, felt his despair, and witnessed the power that Hojo had given him.

I'm glad that you were impressed, Vincent.

Jenova's imperialistic voice. Vincent balked at the sound but at the same time became angry with himself. It felt wonderful to be addressed, to be spoken to, even if it was by something as evil and heartless as Jenova.

"I wasn't impressed. I was sickened."

You may find it difficult to believe, but your opinion does not matter to me.

"What are you planning to do? What will you have Cloud and Chaos do?"

Jenova laughed in his head. He'd grown to hate that laugh. It made him truly feel like a miserable wretch of a human.

Why do you care? There'll be nothing you can do to stop me, even if you knew! And you do know, Vincent, if you think about it, you'll realize why we're going North.

She was right. He knew. He'd just been denying it. Vincent was silent as Jenova began to lecture him, taking pleasure in her words.

Why did I wait thirteen years? Do you remember what my dearest Hojo told you when first you spoke? He was waiting for me. He'd stayed in his laboratory for thirteen years, waiting for me. I was where you left me all that time. In the Northern Crater. You humans are so pathetic. So self-righteous. You thought you could kill me. If you'd done any thinking at all, you would have realized that I cannot die. I cannot die anymore than the sea can die. The wind, the Planet, the moon. I am as immortal as death. And there is nothing more immortal than that. I am power and I am beautiful. I offer oblivion and the purity of destruction. I am a cleanser, a virus, a disease that separates the able from the weak. I am a fallen traveler, an agent from another place, a force that is kind but cruel in order to accomplish that kindness.

"And what. . . what 'kindness' is that?"

Vincent's voice was small compared to the haughty grandeur of Jenova's.

Death. I am death. I am the end of civilizations, I am the absolute power, the essential balancer, the counter. And I cannot be destroyed. The Cetra, they attempted it. For two thousand years they kept me trapped and your race flourished, multiplied, and infested this Planet like vermin. There was nothing to counter you, nothing to challenge your festering growth. That is what I am, I am destruction. I counteract the intensity of Life. I offer ordered, structured death amidst the chaos of creation. I am NECESSARY. Do you understand?

". . . yes."

What that human Gast did with my body long ago, that was interesting. My body houses my essence in the same way that life is housed in the bodies of you humans, in animals, in trees. Though you are all separate, you all share the power of life, mako. But I am destruction and that destruction exists in my every atom, my every cell. My power is strong and Gast thought he could harness it in a human body, but he was so wrong. It's his fault, his and Hojo's fault that Sephiroth felt the desire to carry out the purpose of my cells thirteen years ago. Destruction. Do you understand?

"Yes."

You and Cloud were also fused with me. But you had little I could feed off of in order to manipulate you as I did Sephiroth. The furthest I could go with you, Vincent, was your mutations and they were hampered by the limits set by Hojo. You used the power of my destruction to aid your own petty causes, to fight your own petty battles. It was a waste. My awesome power was wasted in you. And in Cloud. The Planet held too firm a grip on that man, my power was lost in his torrents of mako. Another waste.

"But why a waste?" Vincent asked desperately, "Why do you want us all dead? Why should you want those cursed with your power to use it to destroy?"

It is my purpose. I've explained that already. I travel from world to world, and I dispense destruction as it should be. The Cetra were arrogant and tired of my interference. So they stopped me, willing to give their lives in order to do so. I don't focus on one race, one world at a time. I am not vicious. But this Planet and you humans have wronged me. By imprisoning me for 2000 years, you wronged me deeply. You have forfeited your lives by doing so. I would have been willing to exterminate you all quickly thirteen years ago but you furthered your insult by coming after me and my chosen vessel, slaying him, and hampering my aims. You cut me apart, you diluted my power. It's taken me these thirteen years to reform myself. . .

"And that's. . . that's why we're going North."

I'm glad you understand now, Chaos.

"That isn't my name."

But it's what you are. What you'll create. It doesn't matter though. You don't have to worry about it much longer. You and Cloud are of use to me only because I've yet to reclaim my true form. As soon as I've taken my cells from your beings and my body is whole again, I'll kill both of you. I'll kill you painlessly, you've been of much use to me and I'm grateful for that. I'll be honest with you, human. I don't care what you think of me, your opinion is irrelevant, a whisper in the wind, but I'd prefer if you understood me. If you understood that all I want is for each of you sniveling, cocky, self-assured human wretches to die. That's all. Fit punishment after the two thousand years of isolation and cold that you put me through. So, do you understand?

All of her words, her entire explanation, rang in Vincent's mind. None of it had really been new but hearing it like that, laid out under the white moon, shone a new light on it all. Vincent looked around through Chaos' eyes, taking in the seascape before him, looking past the bloodied vision, striving to see the blue of the waves that he knew was there as each wall of water pounded the surf. There was only one answer he could give.

"I understand, Jenova. I understand that you are the embodiment of cruelty. You're little more than any other self-righteous little villain is. You think you've been wronged and you want revenge. Vengeance is primitive. If you think humanity is a primitive, simple race, then you must be a damned monkey. You're spit on the ground and hardly worth my time. I would never quit fighting something like you, a, a thing so remorseless that you'd break a man into pieces, kill in cold blood, imprison children, destroy a city. . . so many lives. You use the most painful things in a person's mind as weapons against them. You're an animal. I understand that."

Vincent smiled internally and added, "The human race will come after you, Jenova. They won't let you, I, or Cloud do this, they'll stop you. Tifa and Reeve, they'll cut you apart again. Heh. Smaller pieces this time."

Chaos reared up at the fury in his voice and Vincent was glad to throw the thing off. He would have liked to have been in his own body, cursed Jenova, defied her as a human and not the demon she'd helped create. As it was, he was sure he'd managed to piss her off as just a voice.

It is seldom a wise idea to anger a vengeful being. You forget the significance of whom you're talking to. I told you before that I am not vicious. But I am proud. I have every right to be. And you'll pay for your foolish human words. Chaos will make you pay. Chaos will be glad to. Tomorrow, perhaps, he will take you home. For a last visit.

Vincent cursed her again, called out taunts, attempted to sound unintimidated by her threats but just as suddenly as she'd started her grand speech, it ended, leaving Vincent alone with Chaos. There'd never been anything to see of her, so there really wasn't any way to know she was gone, but Vincent sensed it. She'd moved off. To plan. To gloat.

He could feel Cloud somewhere nearby. Cloud had spent the night wandering the beach and the fields around the place, mourning his children, his wife, and his old life. Vincent didn't even bother calling out to him anymore, Jenova kept him on a tight leash and made sure he only heard what she wanted him to. Vincent could feel the rage in his friend but there was nothing he could do to alleviate it. There was nothing he could do to ease his own mind over all of this, much less Cloud's. They were headed North, to a reunion with death. Vincent wasn't sure how such a fact could be softened.

Chaos gave a sudden feral screech and leapt off the edge of the cliff he'd been perched upon. His sleek black form dove towards the sea like an ebony dart, then his wings opened wide, catching the sea air and began lifting his body up. The demon glided through the night air in graceful sweeps, chasing after the grinning moon, trying to catch up with it, unconcerned that the effort was futile.

Vincent was tired. He would have slept. Stress, worry, frustration tugged at his weary mind, begged for a few black hours of unconsciousness. But Jenova tugged at his mind too. She let him know that if he dared try to sleep, she'd assault him in his dreams again. Vincent didn't want to keep reliving his past, keep watching that woman die in his own arms. He was sick of defending himself to a dead man, sick of the pain Jenova could cause him so easily. The memories hurt. It hurt even more to have them demeaned by something so cruel.

So he stayed awake and stared down the moon.

And Chaos crossed the sea.

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"Okay. Ya see that little bleep?"

"No."

"Yes ya do. That little red bleep right there in front of your eyes."

"Ya got a tv on this tub?"

"Shaddup and pay attention. I want you to understand this and tell me how cool it is. Now, focus. See that little red bleep?"

"Yes, Cid."

The pilot grinned enthusiastically and rubbed his hands together. He pointed a gloved finger at a little green dot on the screen next and CJ groaned.

"Okay, well ya see this green one here? That's Cait Sith. The red one is us, the Highwind. Do you know why we're red and Cait's green?"

"Oh, gee, lemme guess. 'Cause we haven't started movin' yet and Cait has?"

Cid's face fell in slight disappointment. "Maybe!" he spat, crossing his arms huffily, "Damn, you're awful knowledgeable for a little punk."

"Well, c'mon, it's not that hard, man! Kinda obvious."

CJ sighed, resting his elbows on the Highwind's control console as Cid made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat and started typing things into the airship's computer terminal with petulant fingers. "When are we gonna head out?" he asked, elbowing Cid through his flight jacket, "I mean, ya fixed the engine thingy, right?"

"This ship's in as good a condition as it's gonna get considering it's overdue for a tune-up and a rest. We're waiting on yer mom's word. What's yer hurry anyway? I thought you hated this thing."

"I do. But I wanna get to dad."

"Ah. Well, if you're going to stand there and act all unimpressed and just annoy the piss outta me, why don't ya go in the back and tell Reeve I want him, hey?"

CJ considered this for a moment, then shrugged and nodded, dashing off the bridge and towards the Highwind's cabins. He knew Berk, Marlene, Nanaki, Bugah and his sister were catching Z's in the airship's cramped forecabin, trying to make do with the crew's less than comfortable bunks, but he wasn't sure where Reeve was. Probably with his mom.

The engine room was dark and creepy as the kid walked through it. He could hear the massive workings of machinery from below the catwalk, they made the whole walkway shake and his stomach shook with it, remembering that icky storm. Ugh. Just as he was skipping off the end of the platform, he slammed into someone and nearly tripped to the floor. Tifa grabbed him by the waist and caught him just in time.

"What's your hurry, Lightnin' Jack?" she called, picking him up with some difficulty. He squirmed so fiercely in her grasp that she had to drop him though.

"Nothin'. Cid needs Reeve, where'd he go?"

"I think he's up on the deck, babe."

"Oh." CJ nearly took off again but paused, whipping around and facing his mom suddenly. "Hey, what's the holdup? You said we had t'be fast. Why we hangin' 'round Kalm?"

Tifa frowned slightly and crossed her arms, looking off towards the door to the bridge as though wishing she could take off and not have to answer the question. "We're waiting on Barret. He hasn't shown up yet."

"Aw, I'll bet he's wussin' out again. He did the same thing at the Shinra building the other day. He's awful yellow considering he helped save the world and all."

"No, he just isn't interested in any of this is all, Ceej. He hates seeing Marlene in danger. But she's all grown up and he can't stop her from coming with us."

"Well, shouldn't he come too? I mean, geez, he should come and watch over her if he's so worried, right?"

"Right," Tifa answered with a smile, "And that's why we're waiting on him. He'll show up."

"Well, we can't wait too long, mom, clock's tickin'. I say we give him another five minutes to un-wussify himself and then we split."

"Five minutes, eh?" Tifa asked mockingly, tweaking his nose, "If you say so, Mr. Strife. If he's not here in five minutes, we're gone."

"Yeah." CJ grinned huge, blonde bangs hanging over his eyes, and took off for the stairs leading to the deck, sliding on the smooth floor on the way. Tifa watched him retreating, absently wondering where she'd been while her son had so suddenly grown up.

The wind was blowing on deck and it was blowing cold. CJ huddled into his jacket and cursed the weather as he shuffled across the Highwind's highly polished planks. The infinite black night sky spread around him, a sliver of moon hung crooked in the corner of heaven and the stars mocked its incompetence. Reeve was leaning on a rail, the collar of his sports jacket flipped up around his ears. He stared out at nothing in particular, eyes distant and sad. CJ was hesitant to approach him, he seemed such an island of loneliness there under the night sky. The kid kicked at the deck as he walked to try and make some noise and eventually the Shinra President looked up.

"Hey, CJ. What're you doing awake? You should be sleeping while you can."

"Cid wants you."

"Oh? What's up with him?"

CJ shrugged and approached the railing, sticking his head out between the bars, seeing what there was to see. The dim lights of Kalm glittered from a few hundred feet off. Dying campfires flickered about them, the red square-shaped glow of heaters from the people camped in the fields around the town. Pretty boring stuff.

"He probably wants you to look at the little bleeping lights on his computer," he answered after a moment, "Just remember, red means stopped, green means go."

"So I've heard."

Reeve didn't make any indication that he was going to climb below decks and see what was up with Cid. He just kept staring off into space, that look in his eyes. He occasionally ran his gaze over the people spread about the docked airship but his dark gaze flickered in unease when he did so. "Ya look like someone stole yer lunch money, man," CJ said after a while, "What's up?" The kid slipped his legs over the lower bar of the railing and rested his chin on the upper one, kicking at air. Reeve looked down on him and gave a weak smile.

"I'm just a little sad is all, CJ. Grown up stuff."

"It's always grown up stuff," CJ sighed, staring off at the sky, "If grown ups have so many stupid problems, I never wanna be one, that's for sure."

Reeve grunted noncommittally in reply, clasping his hands over the railing, tapping a harsh melody against the bar with his wristwatch strap. CJ got annoyed. He was going to cheer this dude up if it killed him. Grinning out the side of his mouth, he held his right hand up and showed it to the Shinra President, wriggling his fingers for emphasis.

"Check it out," he said eagerly, "Mom gave me her glove. It's her first one, her teacher gave it to her when she was a kid. I used it to beat this guy, Ash, up with it. Gave him a broken nose, knocked him out. It was great, Reeve, sorta like on TV but better cause all my friends saw me do it. Man, I got suspended, but when I go back to school I'm gonna totally be a hero 'cause no one liked Ash. Er, well. . . I guess I would've been a hero anyways. School's kinda not there anymore. Not that that's a bad thing, but still. Hmph."

"Your mom gave you that glove?" Reeve asked, looking his way slightly.

"Yeah! It's enchanted too. It makes whoever wears it just as strong as who they're fighting. Wicked stuff."

"Let me see it."

CJ unstrapped the glove from his little hand and held it out to his friend. Reeve turned it over, turned it inside out, then straightened a little tag sewn into the seam. "Made in Wutai," he read, "Kundeki industries, 1992. Hmm. Seems a little recent to have been given to your mom when she was a kid, don't you think?"

CJ's jaw dropped and his violet eyes darkened.

"Ya mean. . . ya mean it ain't real?"

"You've been duped, Ceej. Oldest mom trick in the book. Using false confidence to build the real thing. Your mom's good at more stuff than Zangan-Ryu martial arts, it seems."

"Man, what a gyp."

Reeve tossed the glove back to him and the kid took it bitterly, throwing it back and forth in his hands. Just a dumb work glove. Well, damn. What if Ultima Weapon was really spray painted cardboard with a buncha batteries? Ack!

"So I guess this isn't gonna be much help when I beat up Jenova, huh?" he asked, strapping the glove back on. At least it worked to keep his hand warm. Better than nothing. Reeve shook his head and shrugged.

"It might. But you have more important things to help ya out with that."

"Like what? I'm weaponless. A total unarmed chode. Chieko could take me down just by lookin' at me the right way."

"That's why you got your mom, blondie. And me and Barret and Cid and everyone. We're here to be your weapons. Just point and shoot. Get it?"

CJ eyed the Shinra President skeptically, swinging his legs out farther and really kicking the hell out of the side of the Highwind. Stupid airship. He had no idea what Reeve was talking about. All he knew was that weapons customarily looked like guns or swords or cannons or stuff and that the bigger they were, the better. The Dragon Weapon from Wutai sitting in the Highwind's hold right now. . . that was a weapon. He shrugged his shoulders at Reeve who smacked him fondly in the back of his head, then turned and headed below decks.

"Hey Reeve, check it out, here comes Barret! Hey, Barret! Took ya long enough, ya wussy! Didja forget what the Highwind looked like??"

CJ jumped up on the railing and leaned over, waving to Barret as he passed below and sauntered up the gangplank. The man flipped an irritated middle finger up at CJ and the kid grinned and called, "Do that in front of my mom and she'll shove it up yer nose!" Barret waved him off and thundered onto the ship. Laughing to himself, forgetting his glove, CJ hopped from the railing and dashed after Reeve. When he caught up to the Shinra President, he was already standing in the doorway of the ship across from Barret. He tried to duck into their conversation but Reeve shooed him off.

"Go tell Cid I'll be right there, okay? And tell him to get going, Barret's here."

CJ hesitated for a minute, smiling up at Barret who grinned back at him, then ran off to do as bid. The man watched him going and sighed to himself, rubbing a thick hand up over his face, scratching at his salt and pepper sideburns. He was about to eat something with an especially bitter taste: his pride.

Reeve stood there, wondering why Barret had immediately asked for a minute alone with him upon stepping into the ship, and he grumbled silently, fearing that he was about to get a load of crap, or threats, or dark promises. He wasn't so sure he'd be able to take any of his anti-Shinra garbage right about then. Reeve was ready to go off on something and if Barret wasn't careful, he could wind up the unlucky volunteer. "What is it?" he asked finally, after listening to the guy clear his throat and shuffle his feet for a full minute. Barret looked up, not particularly liking his tone of voice, but he pushed his aggravation down and forced himself to speak.

"I'm sorry 'bout Rude," he muttered so softly that Reeve had trouble making out the words, "I heard about him and I'm really really sorry 'bout it. He was a good fighter, a worthy adversary, a good guy, when ya got right down to it. This whole load of shit's gonna be that much harder without him to help. And, hell, I'm just plain sorry."

Barret crossed his arms defensively and leaned back, looking away. He was standing a little awkwardly after his wounds that day but he was standing straight. He wouldn't back down under Reeve's now fiery gaze. But he sure as hell didn't actually have to meet it. He stared at a little spot on the ground and huffed.

"So are you going now because you feel guilty that he's dead?"

Barret hadn't been expecting that. He glanced up, looking innocent as hell.

"I'm goin' cause Marlene's going!" he answered, "We're gonna try out this experiment. It's called me trustin' her. Oughtta be fun." Barret guffawed but Reeve couldn't share the joke. He crossed his arms and clenched his teeth, looking at the wall just past Barret's head passionately.

"Reno isn't coming. . . "

"What?" Barret glanced up at the sudden statement. Reeve shut his eyes and massaged his forehead with one hand.

"I haven't told anyone about Rude," he whispered, "I don't want to be a downer, or ruin everyone's enthusiasm. Rude wouldn't have wanted that. It's better they not know, not until all of this is over and we can grieve as we should, give him and the other's who've lost their lives over all this the respect they deserve. But. . . Reno. . . he was there when he went. . . " Reeve's words died away, and he watched the ground, clenching a fist to his mouth, shoulders high, every muscle in his body tensed in the suppression of tears. Rude had been one of his best friends. He'd known him for twenty years. ". . . Reno was there though and he won't deal with it. I found him in the bar and we had words. He told me he can't handle this anymore. And you didn't see him, man, he can't handle it. I'm worried as hell about him but there's nothing I can do, I have to be here with all of you, I have to stop Jenova. It's fucking unfair is what it is. But. . . but he was one guy and there's millions at stake now. I can't hole up in Kalm and bawl my eyes out over it."

"Th-that's right!" Barret agreed suddenly, desperate to stop Reeve from breaking down, "Rude wouldn't have wanted that. Ya gotta keep fightin'. Years ago, a coupla real good friends of mine were killed in a battle, but there was still a lotta stuff to do afterwards. The fight didn't end just 'cause their lives had. Ya gotta keep strugglin' cause the train don't stop. It'll plow through a thousand bodies and it'll trample who ever's unlucky enough to get caught under the wheels but it won't stop. Forward, forward, forward and you gotta keep movin' with it."

Reeve smiled weakly, his head bowed. "Yeah. . . "he muttered, "I guess so. . . "

The two of them were silent for a while. Barret shuffled uncomfortably against the wall, eager to get the hell away from the grieving Shinra exec and Reeve stood there, arms crossed close to himself, fighting for composure.

"So copper-top ain't comin' then, eh? Well, can't say I blame 'im, he's lost a lot from all of this I guess."

"Everyone's lost too fuckin' much, Barret, "Reeve spat. He flung himself away and paced the metal floor irritably, his steps loud, his eyes snapping ire, "I'm so pissed, Barret, I'm so pissed, I'm not sure I can deal with it. And all I can do. . . the only fuckin' thing I can do is plot some kind of revenge! Why's it gotta come down to that? When it's all said'n done, the only thing that makes it all bearable is the thought that I'll see Jenova burn in hell for what she's caused to happen! But that's not right! I don't like havin' this god awful fire inside of me, wanting to see that stupid bitch suffering, writhing in the agony that I put her through! But when I think of Rude layin' there and, and th-the fucking look on Reno's face when he told me. . . oh god, Barret, the anger makes me scared, it really does."

"Pull yerself together, man!" Barret stepped forward and grabbed Reeve's two shoulders, shaking him a little, "It's okay, it's all right for you to feel that way. It's the best way to feel right now because ya need something to make you wanna keep fightin'! If it's gotta be vengeance than fine! Let it be vengeance! Get that thing back for killin' your friend! There's a helluva lotta worse things than vendettas. The worst is givin' up. And that's what your pal Reno's done. Givin' up is worse'n dying. I've lost any respect I ever had for that red-headed Turk bastard if he's gonna give up after this. You don't be like him, Reeve, you keep fighting and you add Rude's name to the list of people you're fighting for. Death is nothin', it's a fucking nuisance. As long as people are still fightin' for ya, living for ya, than dying doesn't mean a god damned thing."

Reeve grit his teeth and turned away, flinging Barret's hands from his shoulders. The dark mustiness of the Highwind's interior spread about the two men, and pressed on Reeve's chest until he thought he'd suffocate. "You make a convincing argument, "he finally gasped, biting his lip. "And I, I'll. . . take it under consideration, Mr. Wallace."

The Shinra President walked of towards the head to clean himself up, jamming his hands in his pockets and watching his feet. "Don't you tell any of them, "he mumbled on his way out, "Don't t-tell them until this is all over. They might take it as a bad omen."

Barret rubbed at the back of his neck, falling against a bulkhead and sighing as Reeve walked off. "Sure, "he answered, "I won't say anythin'."

He stood there for a long time in the empty engine room, listening to the Highwind's gears whirring and clicking in the stillness. And finally it hit him. Barret Wallace had just comforted the President of the Shinra Corporation. He'd practically friggin' patted him on the back. He'd practically given him a big sloppy kiss on the side of his teary-eyed face. Hmph. Well, damn. Wasn't life just full of unexpected twists.

Outside, in the quiet streets of sleeping Kalm, Lenny the barkeep looked on as the Highwind's massive engines suddenly blasted to life. They dyed the night sky bright electric blue and gave everything sharp black shadows. Lenny covered his ears as the airship's signature sonic booms shook the atmosphere and then, like a great bulbous balloon, it rose up from the ground, shedding its mooring lines in disdain. It hovered hundreds of feet above the fields for a few moments, then shot off to the North in a blaze of fire. Lenny looked after it, crossed himself quickly, and said a brief prayer to Lady Luck. The eyes of luck and fortune seemed the only forces watching out for humanity anymore. Lenny hoped they'd be enough.

~\*~

It sat on top of the world. And maybe that was why he'd evacuated to Icicle Inn. The best vantage point to watch it all spinning around, to watch life revolving in those vicious loops it had. Birth, life, death. They spun their circles and he watched the revolutions, unable to just stand by and take them as everyone else did. But that was foolishness. Vincent did take them. He grit his teeth and he took them because he had no power to change any of it. And that was half his problem. The helplessness drove him insane.

Icicle Inn. It was a stupid name for a town. The entire thirty buildings of the place had sprung up around one outpost and the residents had been too lazy to come up with anything more original than that outpost's joke of a name. Thirty buildings and that was all. Thirty black, wooden boxes up against a clearing of white, all of it surrounded by a sea of wolves, mountains and evergreen forests. His home, or at least, the closest thing Vincent had to a home, was down there among them. One featureless box amidst all the rest.

With the sun just barely sticking a semicircle of light up over the horizon, Icicle Inn was bathed in a reddish illumination that threw dark shadows behind each structure. Each pine tree looked more vicious, the snow looked colder, and the sky looked harsher in the light. It was a promise and Vincent didn't understand, not in the least, how the Planet could be cruel enough to put something so evil before his eyes; bathing the world in that ruddy glow. It wasn't fair.

I wonder how those cabins would look on fire, Chaos. Look at them. Each building is nothing more than a stack of

dried kindling. There's potential down there, demon. Opportunity for you to live up to your name.

Chaos' form was like a scrap of the remaining night, though starless, as he sailed through the pale dawn skies over Icicle Inn. He flew in ever descending loops, in circles, in revolutions that constantly doubled back over themselves.

And all Vincent could do, was watch.

~\*~

Arik Bivs bellied up to the bar. Flurries of careless snow stuck to his shoulders and he flicked them off irritably, watching the white flakes evaporate to steam in the heat of the tavern. It was snowing with a bloody fury outside. He eyed it through one of the quiet building's frost-bitten thick windows, wondering when he'd ever get to go up and see Holzoff. At this rate, it'd be spring before the Glacier cleared up enough for him to make the trip. He crossed his arms lazily, turned around, and leaned them on the bar top, licking his chapped lips.

"What'll it be, Arik?" the barkeep asked, swiping his signature white bartender towel over a dirty shot glass. His customer eyed him with a grimace.

"I been coming in here for fifteen years and ordering the same thing, you ass," he murmured, "Yet everyday you insist on asking me what I want. Any reason for it?"

"My, aren't you in foul spirits," the man answered, finishing with the one glass and moving to the next, "I suppose it's the weather."

"The weather certainly isn't helping."

"Well, ya live here by choice, Arik, you have no right to complain, why don't you move to --"

"Costa Del Sol," Arik finished for him, "Do you ever think that we more or less have the same conversation everyday? My order, then the weather. It never changes. Why is that?"

The barkeep shrugged and moved off, annoyed by Arik's attitude. He couldn't help that life in Icicle Inn was boring, that it dragged on in endless cycles of snow, work, and sleep. What the hell else was there to discuss? Perhaps if Arik didn't come in there everyday and order the same thing, the barkeep wouldn't feel the need to ask him each time just what he wanted. It was the bartender who was doing his best to keep things interesting. Arik was the boring one. Oh, well.

Arik Bivs sat there for a while, slumped on the old bar stool, back to the counter, and eyed the few people in the place. It was dim inside, still early morning out and hard to see much of anything in the filmy dawn light. Not that there was anything of interest to see anyways. Just the same old frost-bitten faces that'd lived in the town for years. Nothing ever changed. People got older, but that was all. Arik got older, got less patient with the monotony, but that was it. He absently heard the barkeep set his two drinks on the counter behind him, reached around and grabbed at his glass of rum. With a flick of his wrist, it was gone.

"Maybe you need a holiday, Arik," the man called to him, "Maybe you should head somewhere down south. You could go to Midgar, see the sights. Go to one of the resorts in Kalm. . . go to Wutai and see the Pagoda that everyone's always talking about."

"Ya know, I was considerin' it," Arik answered back, brightening just a bit with the thought, "I was thinking of heading to Midgar and checking out that Shinra building. Taking a tour of the place, seeing what's up. Supposed to be damned interesting. And I hear they give out free pens and stationary to tourists."

"Well damn, free pens you say? I may head down there myself. . ."

"Ah, don't bother," Arik sighed, "I gave up the idea, at least for now. The trucks won't come through this storm and Vincent's been gone for almost two weeks, there's no one to rent a chocobo from. We're stranded."

"He's still gone?" the barkeep asked in surprise, "He was only supposed to be away four days, that's what he told my boy. Mathew's been watching after his birds. . . hmm. . . that's passing strange, Vincent's never late coming back from his outings, he's rather predictable that way. Odd."

"Well, I don't know anything about it. I just saw that his shack's still shut up, no smoke comin' from the chimney," Arik snapped in what was almost a pouty voice, "I don't care where that freak is, but I need one of his birds! Dammit all!"

"Calm down, calm down, mate. . ." the barkeep said soothingly, refilling his shot glass with expert years of precision. He shivered when sudden cold air from outside blew over him as another customer entered his bar. "You can't blame the man for a vacation."

"I can when he's keeping me from takin' mine!"

"Well, damn my eyes, that's cock-eyed logic, A--"

The bartender's voice died away suddenly, and he froze, mouth hanging half open, nearly empty bottle of Lucky Seven clutched loosely in his hand. His squinty hazel eyes were fixated on the doorway of his establishment. Arik scrutinized his friend through his frustration, convinced that he'd been wronged somehow and eager to bitch about it, and was thusly annoyed when his listener's attention suddenly fell somewhere else. Muttering, Arik swiveled his head around, burying his stubbled chin in the folds of his scarf as he gazed towards the front door. He got little yarn fuzzies on his tongue when his own mouth fell open at what was standing there.

Cloud looked like hell. And he was aggravated at the stares of the people inside because he knew he looked like hell. Thing was, he was almost glad they were staring, that they found him so horrible, so monstrous. The terrified eyes were nearly comforting because they told him he wasn't the only person in the world who thought Cloud Strife was a monster. These people obviously thought so too.

He stumbled inside, shaking off the cold, and the snow fell from the shoulders of his jacket and hair, trailing behind him onto the floor. All of the seats at the bar were empty but one, so he took the stool farthest from Arik, plopping his weary form down with a soft sigh.

"Michelob lite, man."

"Huh?"

"You heard me, I need something warm to fight off this damned snow."

"Beer's cold, son."

"Oh, yeah. . . gimme a warm beer then."

The barkeep eyed him skeptically and then muttered, "If you wanna put up with bitter beer face, I ain't gonna stop ya." He reached below the counter and took out a bottle of mich from one of the cases there. He popped the lid with a calloused thumb and slid it towards Cloud, throwing him fifty different suspicious glances. Arik threw him a few glances of his own, his breath stuck in his throat at the sight of him. Gods. . . what was wrong with the younger generation nowadays? What sorta shit was this boy on? He pushed himself a little further away as Cloud downed his warm beer, not even noticing how disgusting it was, just glad to feel something besides cold, besides chill, besides ice. The warm liquid slid against his tongue and made him feel somewhat human again.

"So. . . where ya from, son? Arik and I know everyone in town and we don't know you. . ." The barkeep took Cloud's beer away and brought out another one, placing it before him at a respectful distance. He didn't look up. Arik started to get nervous. Well, more nervous than he'd been. The few customers who'd been quietly sitting in the booths began to inch their way towards the door, tossing gil to the barkeep as though paying for their lives. Arik tried to follow them but his friend's pleading eye caught a hold of his own and glued the man to his seat. He couldn't leave him alone in the place with some kinda fellow lookin' like this. . .

"If ya don't wanna talk, that's fine," the barkeep said, more to break the sudden silence inside than for anything else, "I mean, not everyone's a talkin' kind of man. Arik here, he'll talk ya till he's blue in the face, but if you'd rather not, than I--"

"Midgar."

"Huh?"

"I'm from Midgar."

"Oh." The man's lips parted into a grin, glad to have broken through the cold barrier of indifference around this new customer. As a bartender, such things were as much his job as pouring drinks. "Well, Arik and I were just discussing Midgar. We were going to take a trip there, see the Shinra building. You must see it every day, must not be anything special to ya. . ."

"I used to work there."

Arik stared the guy in the eye, distrustful of the statement. There was something very un-Shinra like in the look of him. He'd always gotten the impression that execs wore suits and carried briefcases and went around shouting into cellphones. This guy looked like he'd been in a war. And as screwed up as he appeared, he looked like he'd probably won. There was a power about him that Arik sensed was nearly indestructible, like tempered mythril, and it made him nervous to be so near it. "Why don't ya work there anymore?" he asked, finally daring to speak to him, "Did ya get canned fer wearin' your hair like that?"

"No," said Cloud matter-of-fact, "I blew the place up."

"Oooohhhhhh. . ."

Arik tossed the barkeep a "this guy is screwed in the head" look and the bartender nodded carefully, taking a step back away from him. Cloud finished his second beer and politely ordered another one.

"Don't you think you've had enough?"

"What? Two frigging beers? You've got to be kiddin' me, that ain't enough to get a gerbil drunk."

"Are you lookin' to get drunk? 'Cause this establishment doesn't cater to that. We serve drinks to people who know their limits, not to people lookin' to cross some line."

"Cross a line," Cloud muttered with half a bitter laugh, "I don't think there're any more lines for me to cross. I'm rather sure I've reached the end. But fine, if you don't want to serve me, then fine. I'll just sit here and soak in the warmth. It's cold outside. The bad thing about starting fires is that they eventually have to go out."

"Uh-huh."

Arik slid from his stool, tossed some gil on the counter and muttered, "Sorry", then was out the door. The guy with the glowing green eyes and the J on his face was just too damned creepy to stand anymore.

"Finally got the clue," Cloud muttered, listening to him leave, "Don't blame him. I wish I could run away from myself."

The bartender stared at Cloud for a while, cleaning off the bar top, clearing away Arik's glasses, then he leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms. The tavern was dim and quiet around him. He could see down through the window, off somewhere to the east, still hesitant to begin for some reason. His days always started early in Icicle Inn, he tended to get up at four and serve a breakfast of rum to the miners before they headed out for the day. But the bartender had never come across a customer as bizarre as this sad, blonde-haired man, no matter how dark the sky outside was. He bit the side of his mouth thoughtfully, examining Cloud's face as the man unknowingly stared at the fire in the hearth, green eyes distant.

"You look like a nice enough guy, what happened to you?"

The barkeep asked the question quite suddenly, surprising even himself. Cloud looked up, rubbing his fingers over the smooth sides of his empty beer bottle.

"Nothing," he muttered, "Just more of the same old."

"Ah. Where's your old lady? I see ya have a wedding ring on. Or at least, I'm assuming it is."

Cloud snapped an eye towards the golden band and moved it around in the smoky yellow light. "She's. . . she's. . . I'm not really sure where she is. As long as it's away from me though, it's much safer."

"Well, I'm sure that's not true--"

"What do you know?" Cloud turned his gaze up angrily and eyed the guy square in his face, indignant for some reason, "You don't know anything about me!"

The barkeep shrugged, straightening, and went back to washing glasses. "You're right," he agreed cheerily, "I only know what my eyes tell me, I don't know ya from Adam. I was just guessing, is all. You seemed like a good man. Something about you. . . I dunno."

"Ha, you really don't know me. Not if you'd say something so fuckin' ignorant. I'm not paying you for a psychiatric session ya know. Just the beers."

"I wouldn't charge ya for a session, son. I don't think I could help ya."

"Smart words. Very true. I've discovered I'm beyond help. I'm just playing it out now, seeing what sort of shit'll happen before I die. I'm condemned, my friend. It's all a matter of time now. I don't care though." Cloud drummed his fingers on the bar top, threading his other hand through his tangled blonde hair and leaning heavily on his elbow. "I've been waiting to die for a long time. All I want now is to take as much with me as I can. I don't want to be lonely in hell."

"What makes you think you're goin' to hell, fella?"

Cloud laughed softly to himself, shutting his eyes as though the strain of keeping them open was exhausting. "You don't know anything about me," he repeated, "Even if I were to turn it all around now, it'd be too late. I've done too much. I've killed too many, stolen. . . stolen so much."

"It's never too late, you should know that," the bartender rebuked softly, suddenly feeling it was very important for the man to understand that. Cloud laughed again.

"Even if you were right, man, it wouldn't matter. Because I don't want to repent. I don't deserve it and this fuckin' Planet doesn't deserve it. So much for that."

He sounded too sure of his words and the barkeep wondered if it wouldn't just be a waste of breath attempting to convince the guy of anything else. But he seemed so young, so hurt, so sad and broken. Despite his apathetic front and the

power fairly glowing from his frame, the bartender saw the weak, huddled thing inside. It was suffering and he wasn't comfortable being aware of that. "Ya know, son, I don't care what it is that's happened to you. Whatever it is, if it's making you do something you don't want to do, you should stop. No matter how horrible you think this thing was, it's obvious that whatever it's making you do is worse. And you should quit. There's always a point where you can throw up your hands and say you're finished with something, but I've found that the longer you wait, the harder it can be to stop. It's the same with anything: habits, hating, revenge, anything. So before it gets so that you can't stand yourself, I say you quit it. Of course, I don't have the slightest clue what's got you all worked up and lookin' like a psychopath, but there was my two cents. I serve advice in here, in addition to warm Mich Lites."

Cloud shook his head and laughed a washed-out laugh.

"You're totally clueless," he said quietly, "But I sure as hell wish I'd met you a few days ago."

"Heh, well, you don't seem too bad then," the barkeep said, smiling, "Maybe, whatever your problem, there's hope for y--"

The rest of his words were blasted to dust by the sound of a sudden explosion outside. The cruel blast shook the earth and for one quick instant flash flooded the entire town with a sickly reddish- white pulsing light. Cloud found himself thrown off the stool and to the floor, sprawled rather messily on the dirty planks of the tavern. Peanut shells and spilt liquor dirtied the palms of his hands as he pushed himself to his feet, scowling furiously.

"Hot damn! You okay?"

The barkeep was there suddenly, rubbing at a bump on his head, a fatherly hand on Cloud's shoulder. Cloud nodded, then froze, looking out the window, eyes glazing over in confusion. But then the confusion was dashed away, leaving something worse. A strange feeling in his stomach, he threw the front door of the tavern open and stepped out into Icicle Inn.

The cold was bitter. There was a blizzard sitting just north of them, Cloud could nearly smell it. Cold winds were blasting the town, and as he stepped from the building and into the main road of the tiny village, he wrapped the flaps of his jacket closer around his body, gritting his teeth to keep them from chattering. He could sense the bartender at his back, standing in the doorway, looking off down the street just as he now was.

"By the grace of Shiva and all things divine, what the hell is that?!"

Cloud turned to the man grimly, his fine but marked features lit garish by the flames now consuming the southern half of the town. He didn't answer him, he couldn't answer, he didn't have any words to offer. The fire now raging, turning the wooden homes to blackened rubble, it reminded him too much of Nibelheim. Swallowing hard, he stepped out into the road, boots crunching the snow with loud reports. The few people who'd been outside were running inside now, pulling at the leads of their animals, grabbing their children's hands. Cloud watched them going, not sure if they running from him or from the thing now stepping quite gracefully out of the roaring furnace consuming the southern half of town.

Chaos shook the bright flames from his skin as though shaking off dust, then skipped from the wreckage of the town's namesake inn, wriggling one of his legs to rid it of a few clinging embers. The hellish firelight flickered off his black wings and pebbly flesh, clothing him in shards of orange and black. His red eyes caught the glow and shimmered. They scanned his immediate surroundings, looking for prey, then Chaos sniffed at the air, rather curious at the freshness of it after the stink of Midgar. On a whim, he dug a claw into the snow and licked at a handful, long black tongue so hot that steam rose from the ice at his touch.

Jenova. . .

Vincent's inner voice was barely above a growl.

Stop this, you heartless bitch.

Chaos flung his claw out and the remaining snow caught the scant sunlight, flying from his claws in flashes of prismatic color. Licking its lips, the demon strutted forward a few paces, a silhouette against the glow of the blaze behind. By now the people had all retreated inside. Not much for him to see but shuttered windows and blank, barred doors. There was something to capture the creature's attention though. An older man standing outside the door to his home, shotgun raised, expression firm. His dark eyes watched the flames in the distance stoically. Chaos spotted him right off. So did Vincent. The man's name was Ghel, he owned a feed store at the southern part of town. The one now burning. Sometimes Vincent shared a drink with him in the bar.

Jenova, don't do this. Don't do this! Chaos! You animal, don't do this!

"I don't know what you are there, fella," the man with the shotgun called in an even voice, "But you need to take off right back up into the sky there and be on your way. The people of this town don't want nothin' to do with ya."

Chaos cocked his head to one side, the corner of his mouth reaching up in a smile, one white fang sticking out over his

lip. He stepped forward towards the man.

"Aw, fuck me. . ."

Cloud looked around as the barkeep muttered the words, clutching at the frame of the doorway, scratching at the wood with his fingernails. He looked off towards his friend as Cloud frowned. "Ghel, "the bartender muttered, "Please don't. . ."

"Are you listening to me, blackie?" Ghel demanded, moving his weapon up firm to his eye, prepared to fire off a round, "You have no right to be here, leave!"

The air was silent and cold as the two faced each other. Chaos could hear the man's heart beating rapidly, loud, in blatant fear. It made the adrenaline and the hunger rise up in his primitive mind. It made his ever-present desire to kill all that much stronger. He kept advancing on the unfortunate man as Vincent beat invisible fists against invisible walls inside. I'm sorry, damn it! What do you want, an apology for what I said to you? Fine! I apologize, you're totally right in all you do, you're god or whatever, I'll worship you, I'll bloody give in to it all, but please! Spare this town!

Why does it matter if these people die now or later? They will die.

No, not like this, not with their blood on my hands. Please, I'm begging you! Pride can take a leap, I'm begging you!

Vincent could almost sense her thinking it over as Chaos drew closer and closer to his prey. The demon felt no particular need to hurry, the man couldn't get away. He was there, a quivering, pale human armed with nothing but a gun that couldn't do a damn thing to his practically indestructible body. The sands in the glass of his life were draining away, swirling away, leading into an abyss that Chaos was only too glad to make as deep, black, and wide as he could. The man knew it too. He watched the demon approaching and any power his forty year old limbs possessed immediately began to leave him. But he wouldn't drop his weapon. Giving a small cry, he unloaded both barrels into Chaos' face. And Chaos killed him.

Vincent watched in unmitigated disbelief as his own clawed hands ripped Ghel apart. A single swipe tore his chest open, another one cut his throat. It happened so quickly that Chaos nearly lost his balance with the momentum of the two strokes. The great black beast stood there in the snow, dripping crimson, and as it had back on the sands of the northern shore, the gore ran from his fingers and into the white of the snow, coloring it forever red. Vincent saw the terrible stain there, and it struck him in his heart like nothing in that entire week had been able to. He felt so enraged he didn't have words to describe it. He could only sit, imprisoned, weak with loathing. Why. . . why. . . ? Why did pure things have to be so shamelessly killed? Why? Why couldn't white stay white? It was the same with the canvases that he painted. He felt so guilty afterwards. He'd begin with a perfect piece of canvas, beautiful, unmarred, perfect simply because it was raw and untouched. And then he'd attack it with paint and his own dark memories and experiences and ruin that perfection forever. And he always felt guilty about it afterwards. What he'd done. . . that always galled him.

Cloud heard the barkeep behind him give a cry as his friend was torn apart. The murder bounced distantly off Cloud himself though. He stood there, hair falling in his eyes, the taste of warm beer on his lips, and his vision full of red and white and black. The wrongness of what he'd seen screamed at him, clawed at a part of his soul that he hadn't felt rebuke him for the longest time. He clenched his fists at his sides and narrowed his eyes as the barkeep muttered at his back.

"I-- I. . ." his voice died away and he shook his head, mouth still moving after the words were gone. Cloud eyed the ground, torn.

What the hell was wrong with him? Why had he been going around for the past few days, with a blood lust like a gaping canyon in his soul, screaming to be filled and now, now with the incarnation of death standing before him, doing what Cloud only wished he could, why now, was his conscience screaming at him? Why? But it was so wrong! Seeing that body in the snow, seeing Chaos standing there looking so self-satisfied it made him sick. . . what was wrong with the world?

But isn't this how it should be?

What. . . ? Was what how it should be? That man and that blood and the voice of Vincent Valentine screaming just as many infuriated questions as Cloud. . . ? What the HELL was wrong with the world?

"Do you know that thing?"

Cloud turned around as the bartender addressed him, his face haggard and covered in sweat despite the cold. "The way you're lookin' at him now, I'd swear you know him from somewhere else. You have a look in your eyes, behind all that green, like there's a righteous man inside, disgusted by all of this. . ." He laughed bitterly, gesturing to the carnage so close by, "If this is so wrong, why don't you stop it? If it's hurting that someone else inside, why don't you do what's right and help him out? That man inside a' you, I thought I saw him earlier and that's why I asked you what'd happened. I saw it behind this mask you're wearing--"

"Shut up! You don't know me, stop talkin' like you know me--!"

Cloud whipped an arm out, knocking the man to the ground. The bartender slid in the snow but pushed himself up, nearly snarling. "You will go to hell if you're actin' indifferent by choice, son! If you act cruel and wicked by choice, you will burn! Whatever it was that hurt ya, let it go. . . "

"Shut up. . ." Cloud's voice was a growl, a trill of ice rolling in the northern air, "You don't know my pain. . . you're just another pleading, bleating bastard who wants something out of me. . ." Cloud stared at the man laying there in the snow, his brows dark and dangerous over his eyes. The distant fires still burning, raising their plumes of black up into the heavens, flickered over him, coloring his skin with the manifestation of his tortured mind. Whipping around, flinging his arms out to his side, he stepped from the bartender and towards Chaos, who'd left Ghel's lifeless shell and was now sniffing around the yet whole houses of the town, eager to repeat his actions.

Vincent snapped out of the fury the murder had sent him into and took the world in through Chaos' red eyes. The snow was cold around him, the blood was warm on his hands, his home of twelve years, Icicle Inn, spread burning and bloody in every direction that Chaos faced. It would all die. They'd all die, the people cowering inside the yet standing homes, Jenova would make him kill each one. And she'd make him do it for reasons he didn't even understand. To make him pay for his rebellion a few hours before? To hurt these simple people who had never wronged her, who'd never even heard of her and her great powers? Vincent just didn't get it. He wouldn't accept the fact that perhaps there was no other reason behind her actions than to experience his pain and their pain. That perhaps she just loved the sound of screams. His human mind couldn't understand it. It only understood one thing: none of this could be allowed to continue.

"What're you doing?"

It was Cloud's voice. Chaos snapped around at the sound of it, black wings flaring up behind him, catching the cold breeze and spreading wide. He grinned like a cat at the sight of his partner, then frowned as Vincent shouted things he didn't like.

Kill me, Cloud, the man commanded, Listen to me. Take Chaos out. Do it! Don't let him kill again, I can't stand it!

"What?" Cloud stuck his hands in his pockets and stomped his boots a little against the cold. "Quit with your games," he said wearily, "I'm tired of them. I'm leaving and I want you to stop following me, you hear? And you leave this town alone, it's done nothing to you."

Vincent laughed to himself, ready to scream. Chaos bucked uneasily at the dark, unhinged mirth echoing in his mind, then turned to Cloud, swiping a claw his way in a half-hearted attempt to shut him up. He knew the man wasn't an enemy but he recognized enmity in his tone. And Chaos wouldn't hesitate to bite his head off.

Cloud perked up at the semblance of an attack thrown his way. He could understand violence, that was simple enough. At least it gave him a reason. Trying to keep the burning and the blood and the body out of his vision, he focused keenly on the demon's face and asked "You want to go at it? You just keep it up. There's something decidedly evil about you, you devilish bastard, and I don't think the world would miss you very much." Cloud glared at the thing, jaw tensed, then looked away. He turned his back suddenly and began to trudge off through the snow, walking north out of town. Dark, storm-obscured mountains loomed off on the horizon, ringing his vision, and he kept his gaze fixed upon them, knowing full well what was waiting for him hidden away somewhere in that chain. Chaos watched the man's retreat for a moment, but then something struck at him and his red eyes opened wide with the sudden thought. He leapt after Cloud and slashed him across the back, leaving four bright red trails through his jacket and into his flesh. Cloud flew forward under the momentum of the attack, yelling out a curse, then rolled sideways in the snow, leaving a bloody trail against the white. Chaos leapt at where he'd landed but wasn't fast enough and Cloud was on his feet again in a flurry of movement, grabbing a smooth, fist-shaped stone in the road and bringing it around and into the side of the demon's horned head in one swift arc of his arm. Chaos dropped onto the ground, breathing hard, and Cloud backed off, swearing at the stinging pain throbbing beneath the black folds of his jacket.

"Okay. . ." he breathed, laughing a little, his arm wrapped protectively around his side, clutching at his back with hooked fingers, "Let's see if you can give me more of a challenge than Barret. Take my mind off what I did to Midgar, just like he took my mind off what I did t'the Shinra building, though I didn't know it at the time. Kill me, you sonuvabitch, let's see ya try. And if you're lucky, maybe I'll kill you too, like ya asked."

He nudged the fallen monster with the toe of his boot and Chaos flew to his feet, lashing out with both arms. Cloud jumped backwards, expression grim. "I'm not sure what I should do anymore," he murmured, circling as Chaos began to circle. His movements were cool and masterful, despite the wavering in his voice, "I'm not sure if the death sentences I've passed were accurate or not. So, I suppose I'll just let her decide. That bitch has the right idea, as wrong as it is to admit. Blow it all away. . . put everyone on the same level, take the power away from a Planet that's grown too selfish and too drunk off its own strength. . . "

Cloud shook his head slightly, not sure where the words had come from, but he let them be. They gave him a purpose

and a mission and cleared the doubts from his mind. He watched Chaos darkly, thinking for a moment that he recognized something in the creature's blood red eyes, but then shook it off, clenching his fists. He laughed softly to himself, a laugh more laced with sadness than anything else. "I hope ya kill me, monster," he whispered, "I really do. . ."

Chaos breathed a low, rattling growl sounding something like a purr. And the two warriors advanced on each other as Icicle Inn looked on.

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"Can't this crate move any faster, Cid??"

"Cut my baby some slack, she's tired!"

"But Cait's getting further, going faster. . . "Reeve followed the little green bleeping light with a trembling finger as it darted across the monitor. The Highwind's respective blinking light didn't have a chance, "That Chieko creature's been moving like this for nearly an hour and half, how's she keeping up such speed? We'll never catch up at this rate. . . dammit. . ."

Cid grumbled to himself, steering the airship through the dark sky of dawn with an easy hand. Grayish mists, more like fog than clouds, rippled past the fore window, obscuring his view. The sun to the east was shining reddish into the bridge, screwing with his eyes and giving him one hell of a blind spot. "What's our position, navigator?"

Reeve looked up, surprised that Cid would trust him with such a title, but then he caught the sarcasm behind it and frowned. "Around fifty miles southeast of Icicle Inn," he rattled off, "Icicle Inn. . . what's there? Why there? I hope to God Jenova doesn't have some huge secret we haven't figured out yet stuck up her sleeve. . . why would she be going to Icicle Inn?"

"Hey, maybe she wants to get some snowboarding in before the season ends," Barret called, stepping forward from his half-asleep position against the control room's rear bulkhead. He scratched at the back of his head and yawned as Reeve and Tifa tossed him looks. "What? How do we know that thing doesn't snowboard?"

"Vincent lives in Icicle Inn. . . "Tifa mumbled, eyeing the screen thoughtfully, "But that doesn't necessarily mean anything. I don't know. . . Hey!"

"What?"

She moved forward excitedly and peered closer at the monitor. "Hey!" she repeated, furrowing her brows in consternation and surprise. "Cait's stopped." She glared at the flickering dot and Reeve knocked into her, trying to see. Mumbling, CJ shoved between them and stared with wide eyes.

"Ha! Hey, Cid, the dot turned red! Red means stopped, I toldja!"

"Yeah, Ceej, shaddup. What's the little furball's location?"

Reeve examined the dark smudge on the pixelated map on the computer screen and mumbled, "Icicle Inn, just as we assumed it would be. There's little else up here. But why?"

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, prez," Cid called with an irritated flip of his head, "Just be glad it ain't that friggin Northern Crater. The most dangerous thing Jenova can do from Icicle Inn is run over a few moogles on the snowboarding course." He laughed silently to himself as the others sank into thought, desperate to come up with some clue as to their enemy's actions. Nothing volunteered itself.

Leaving the brain work up to them, Cid surveyed the dark skies outside, watching the shores of the Northern Continent rapidly coming into view. The bulbous white shapes of icebergs bobbed in the ocean beneath the ship, and it seemed to the pilot as though they were following him like a couple of scavenging sea birds, just waiting to watch him fall. He was almost glad when the Highwind left the sea behind and began soaring over the bright green of land. Heavy snow loomed in the distance, blanketing the familiar peaks of the Northern Mountain chain and Cid got that old uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach like he always did at the sight. He never let his pilots steer them near the chain, he always made them take the ship around, made them take the long way, to hell with practicality. Maybe it was an old superstition, old fears, but Cid didn't like the thought of his baby being so close to those mountains. The whirling snowstorm eddying about the faraway crags didn't help his unease.

"What's the matter, Cid?" Tifa asked, seeing the pilot's face drain white.

"Nothin'. I dunno, just remembering stupid things," Cid shook his head slightly, "That blizzard doesn't look too friendly in the distance there, eh? Damn snow. This is why I don't like comin' up here."

"That ain't the only reason, Cid, "Barret called from the dim back of the bridge.

"Shut yer hole, Barret, you don't exactly sound too chipper to be here either."

"Just don't worry about it. . . "

Reeve backed away from the screen, and CJ darted into his place, watching eagerly as the now green Highwind light got closer and closer to the now red Cait Sith light. He traced their path with his little finger, making airplane noises. He could feel something coming up real soon. He didn't need his mom to tell him that. He'd had a week in a cage and then two days of mulling the situation over in his ten year old mind to come up with the fact that at some time, at some point in the future, his mom and her friends would have to stop all of the stuff going on. There had be a time when it ended. And the gnawing feeling in the ends of his fingers told him it wouldn't be long now.

"What we need to worry about now is the plan for when we get down there. . . "Reeve began, trailing off and hoping someone would suggest something. No one did, so he sighed, stuck his hands in his slacks, and muttered, "Are we just gonna dash out their blindly?"

"Always worked in the past, "Cid muttered. Tifa tossed him a look.

"We need to disable them and bring them back here, "Tifa said simply, "Then we go after Jenova. Sound good?"

"It sounds good in theory, but so did communism. Yeah, we need to do just what you said, but how in the hell do we go about it?" Reeve sighed and stared out the fore window at the looming mountains uneasily. "You didn't see Chaos yesterday, Tifa, that thing is vicious. Ask Barret if you don't believe me, he gave him a new bellybutton."

"Er, yeah. . . "Barret contributed nervously. He rubbed at his stomach and looked away.

"And I doubt anyone's forgotten good Mr. Strife's power. . . "Reeve continued, "I doubt any of us ever will. So I suppose the question is, how do we take out two adversaries like that?"

"Who aren't even adversaries, "Cid chipped in, "I mean, they're our buddies, it's not like we can drop bombs up their asses or anything. We can't go killin' 'em, right?"

"Right, "Tifa answered quickly, "So we knock 'em out, we clean up on em, we do everything we can to get them to come to their senses. You told me that Vincent came around when. . . when, er. . . "

"When Sephiroth came and slashed him up with Masamune, "Reeve finished for her. Tifa watched her shoes uneasily, hating the picture of the silver-haired murderer that came into her head. Reeve watched her discomfort and frowned sympathetically, "But I think I know what you're getting at, "he said, "If we can weaken Chaos enough, then Vincent will be able to overpower him and take his body back. That must've been the case yesterday."

"Didn't it use t'work, like, Chaos came out when Vincent got mad or hurt too much? What d'ya call it. . . that's ironic, I suppose now, that the tables are sorta turned, "Barret mumbled, shrugging.

"I hate irony, "Cid snapped, "Okay then, we can help vamp-man, but what about Cloud? We just need to convince him that the kids are okay and he'll come around, dontcha think? But he wouldn't believe Tifa when she told him, right, girl?"

"Excuse me. . . ?" Tifa looked up, shaking off her own thoughts, "Oh, yeah, he. . . he wouldn't."

"Well, if not you, he certainly won't take anyone else's word for it."

"No problem, "CJ butted in, looking up from the monitor, "I'll just go out with you guys and give dad a wave, yell at him for blowin' up my room, and that's that. What does Reno say. . . piece o' pie, piece o' cake, piece o' strudel, pick yer pastry. Heh heh."

"Uh. . . " Cid looked to Tifa who shook her head firmly.

"There's no way, CJ, "she said in a steely voice, "Not with Chaos out there, and Jenova running around making an appearance whenever she sees fit. You stay here. We'll bring dad to you."

CJ grumbled a bit but wasn't really surprised with the answer. The bridge grew quiet as everyone lapsed into thoughts as to just how they'd bring the guy there to his kid when the guy probably wouldn't hesitate to blast them all to soot. Cid broke the quiet abruptly.

"Another eight minutes until Icicle Inn is in sight. Who says the Highwind isn't the fastest hunk of tin in the sky?"

The pilot flicked a few switches, checked on some read-outs, then lit a new cigarette and started puffing on it as though his life depended on it. Reeve eyed him, his hands getting cold and he stuck them in his pockets. He wouldn't have minded if the Highwind was the slowest hunk of tin in the sky. "I'll go wake the others, "he muttered, stepping from the bridge briskly, "Poor Berk."

Tifa watched him go and narrowed her eyes, targeting her gaze out the fore window, towards the looming white outside. She stepped towards the airship's computer console and put a hand on CJ's shoulder. He glanced up at her, rather

startled, and she gave him a reassuring smile.

"It's gonna be okay, blondie," she said softly. He nodded.

"I know."

He looked up from the monitor, peering outside, eager to see Icicle Inn as they approached. He couldn't see the houses of the town, but he saw something else nearly as interesting.

"Smoke."

"What?"

Tifa followed his gaze. There was a thick line of the stuff streaming up from a blaze somewhere off in the distance, hidden by a grouping of evergreens. It was like a black slug moving across the pale dawn sky.

"Yeah, "Cid confirmed, adjusting the airship's course slightly, "Smoke."

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The barkeep crouched in the doorway of his tavern, watching the scene before him with disbelief in his eyes. He'd had no idea when he woke up that morning he'd end up witness to crap like this.

Cloud stood in the main road of town, snow trampled into a gray mess all around him. He was clutching one arm and bleeding out of a thousand different gashes. His right eye was shut and useless, four gaping claw marks having left a trail through it and down his face. Red dripped into the frozen dirt off the bottom of his chin with a steady rhythm.

Chaos was laying in the snow a few feet from him, trying to get a hold of himself after being blasted by five different spells in quick succession. He shook his black head, a stream of blood running from the corner of his mouth.

"Psst. . !"

The barkeep snapped his head around at the sound of the hiss. His friend Arik was laying in a small alleyway between two houses across the street. The bartender gestured to him and, crossing himself quickly, Arik darted out of his hiding place and towards him, running bent nearly double. He threw himself at his side, smacking his shoulder painfully against the cement stoop, and then lay on the ground, staring off at the two battlers in the road.

"How the hell are they both still standing. . ?" Arik whispered, shaking his head slowly.

"That guy isn't what he looks like. . "the barkeep answered softly.

"He looks like a friggin' psycho and he fights like a friggin' psycho. I dunno what you're talking about, "Arik snapped. He leaned up on his elbows, suddenly flinching as Chaos lunged at Cloud again. Cloud, too tired to dodge completely, got a fresh gash across his left shoulder as he dove out of the way. He barely managed to get off a lame counterattack, nothing more than a useless punch in the demon's ribs. The two stood, facing each other, both showing signs that they were tiring.

"Okay, "Cloud mumbled, "Okay, I'll admit it. You're strong. But you're screwed up, flapping boy. You've been following me around, trying to make me think you're Vincent. There's something wrong with impersonating a dead man. Something cruel, disrespectful about it. . . "

Dead?

Vincent heard the garbled words from his friend in confusion. What lies had Jenova convinced him of now?  
I'm not dead.

"Dammit, you're doin' it again!" Cloud swept an arm out in aggravation, as though to sweep the insanity from the air. "Vincent died back in that lab, I've had three days to figure that out. Hojo finally got what he wanted and maybe it's better that way."

Do you really think I'd go out that easy, Cloud? Then maybe you deserve every slash of this creature's claws.

"Go to hell!"

Chaos pawed the ground, grinning like a cat, uninterested in the conversation but ready to fight. Without warning, he worked a low growl into a roar and lunged, lowering his head before him, charging like a bull. Incensed but wary, Cloud threw himself to the side to avoid being messily impaled but still got hooked with the jagged edge of one of the monster's serrated horns. It tore into his upper thigh, crimson streaking through the air in a flashing trail and he grit his teeth, immediately clamping a hand over the wound as he lay in the dirty snow.

"What the fuck do you think you are. . . "he growled, "Do you know what I could do to you? I've just been messing around up 'till now. . . you wanna get serious? I'll kill ya in Vincent's name. And I'll kill ya slow. It's all I know how to do and

I've been practicing it for years. You want a lesson?"

Chaos wasn't listening and Vincent wasn't caring. The demon grinned again, harder, and scrutinized his opponent, rubbing his black claws over each other, smearing Cloud's blood on his skin. He knew he shouldn't be fighting this man, something was telling him that, but he had a hard time caring. The cold of the air, the fresh blood on his claws, it all combined within him into a desire to rip something apart. And this cocky human would do nicely.

"Watch out, fella!" the barkeep cried, as Chaos charged Cloud again, screeching a bestial curse into the quiet northern air. Cloud leapt to his feet and met the attack squarely. After an exchange of blows that about floored Arik Bivs and his friend as they looked on, the two separated, both flying backwards into the snow. Cloud pushed himself up and spat ice and blood from his mouth, a sputtering laugh escaping his lips through it all. "What the hell am I fightin' for?" he demanded to no one in particular, flipping onto his back and laying in the snow, staring up at the sky. He laughed until he coughed, rubbing his head. On his feet again, Chaos watched him for a moment, then turned away with a slight sneer of disgust, stalking towards a group of cottages on the opposite side of town.

"Ya wanna know what you're fighting for? You're fightin' to keep that monster from killin' innocent people!" The barkeep shouted his words, his tone of voice adamant despite his fear. Cloud opened his eyes and sat up, wiping blood from his eye.

"No one's innocent. . . "he muttered, "Not really. Heh. How do I tell the good guys from the bad guys when everyone's just as conscienceless as everyone else? I'm sick of this."

His entire face nothing more than a blood-streaked scowl, he leapt to his feet and stood tall, shaking off the pain and the voices in his head. Chaos was in the road forty feet or so before him, shape black and lethal against the snow scape, looking away and considering burning some more homes. Cloud watched him through narrowed green eyes, so tired of living in a haze of grief and confusion he wouldn't have minded blowing it all up right there. The pain was unbearable and never ebbed. It only dulled or sharpened as something else within him saw fit. He didn't know what it was that insisted he suffer. He didn't know what was making the world so cruel towards him and he could not understand why no one was there to help stop it. It would stop if he made the murderer pay, he was sure. Something told him that and he believed it willingly. He'd get revenge just as he had years ago against Sephiroth, Cloud Strife would get his revenge and then he could shove the hurt of all he'd lost away and go on with his life. That had to be the answer. He could deal with nightmares, the nightmares he knew would haunt him after he achieved his revenge. Cloud thought he was immune to that crap, he'd put up with it after Meteor and he could do it again now. It was nightmares that pricked at him while he was awake, this never-ending horror he was even now trapped in, that was unbearable, that made all of this seem impossible to live through. He had to kill the dark dreamer conjuring this nightmare, and then he had to wake up and go find Tifa. But he could only go to her with a clear conscience. And to get that pardon, he'd have to kill the murderer. It all made sense. The solution seemed easy enough.

Houses lined the rough street on either side, wooden shacks, log cabins, northern homes that reeked comfort and warm walls. Cloud vaguely saw frightened faces peering out of each window, pressed pale and fearful against the frosted panes. They were watching him and they were watching the monster. And Cloud knew they would rather he won. He, as dubious as his appearance was, was human. That counted for a lot in their eyes. He had no idea why. They were all the murderers and he would eventually get his revenge against them.

But what the hell was that?

Gritting his teeth, he clutched his head, his own small voice lost amidst the sea screaming at him. But those two little screams were loudest and they were what made him straighten his form and focus his gaze forward. He stalked down the road, snow crunching like gravel beneath his boots. He entered the southern part of town and the fires in the homes raged around him. From the wreckage of one, Cloud plucked out a still burning beam and hefted it in his hands. He picked off a few splinters, shaping it slightly, then wrapped his fingers around it, grinning at the faint orange flames still licking up its length, letting the warm glow bake over his cold nose. He swung it around a few times experimentally, and was pleased at its weight. In a fury so cold it rivaled the air around him, Cloud advanced on Chaos, his tattered black jacket hanging loosely off his frame, his breathing sounding labored in the still, blue air.

Vincent heard him coming.

Do you know why you're fighting then, Cloud? he asked, Or have you decided it's not worth your time to think about? Perhaps you decided it was too uncomfortable a thought. You want the truth? You're fighting because she tells you it's all right to fight. And you don't care enough not to do exactly what she says.

Chaos whipped around just as Cloud swung the beam, desirous to kill that voice of reason. The demon fell sideways to avoid the blow but Cloud anticipated his move and immediately swung again, so quickly that he managed to use the momentum of Chaos' dodge as an aid in the force of his new attack. The wood connected with the side of the monster's

head with a sickening crunch and Chaos staggered, screaming. Instinct made him dart outwards with a claw and he swiped it through Cloud's scalp, leaving four long lines of tattered red. The two opponents flew apart with equal damage on both sides and fell back into the dirty slush.

I don't have to be here, I really don't, Cloud told himself as the wet snow froze his forearms and soaked through his clothes, I'm here because I want to be, I'm fighting because I want to, right? Screw that demon, it can't tell me any differently. I've started this now and I'm going to finish it. I. . . I took out Midgar but that wasn't anything, that was a beginning. If I'm ever going to do them justice, it all has to go.

But I don't want to. . .

He stifled a groan, pulling at his hair, as a voice whispered into his mind. Gasping with pain and confusion, he opened his eyes and watched the sky. Had it been true what he'd been told? Was the sky everyone's link? Was Tifa watching that sky right now, the same one? Watching dawn spread over the Planet, thinking that such colors shouldn't be allowed? Oh, Gods, what a wonderful thought but something told him it was a lie.

Wasn't that the Highwind?

A shining silver shape way way off on the edge of the horizon, her hull colored a dazzling orange with the light of the rising sun. It was the Highwind, as insane as that observation seemed.

Leave this town to Chaos. Why should it mean anything to you? Don't you hear what you have to do, what WE have to do, Cloud? To the north, hidden away in those rocks you clawed your way through thirteen years ago, is your salvation and my arms. I'm waiting for you there, Cloud. You want the pain to go away, then go North. This torture can end any time you're ready to end it.

"So that really is the only way then. . . "

Jenova's words rang just as loudly to Vincent as they did to Cloud. He cried his protests in a furious voice.

Don't listen to her! Damn you, Cloud, don't listen! All that we fought for so long ago, didn't that teach you your enemies from your friends? Don't you realize that you're aligning with something evil, something that'll kill us all? Is that what you want? Is it?

Cloud sat in the snow, idly eyeing the Highwind as it halted its advance and hung suspended in the haziness of the northern atmosphere. He only had one answer to give.

"Yes."

~\*~

"Half the bloody town's burnin'!"

Tifa, arms crossed, expression cool, looked past Barret and out the Highwind's fore window. She was nearly in an attack stance, as though expecting the last of the world's sanity to crumble away any instant. She was expecting it to. She wanted to be ready.

"Who do you think did that?" Barret asked, gesturing broadly to the flames below. The orange glow of them lit up the small town of Icicle Inn and gave it a frightening appearance. The fire off the snow reflected upwards and the entire village glowed hellishly.

"I'll give ya two guesses, genius," Cid answered, moving his expert hands over his airship's controls, "Shit, but I've seen fewer friggin' less inviting battlefields. Hmph. Well, we're at the limits, about three hundred, three fifty feet out of town, I'm going to bring her down a bit and we'll hover just above those pine trees down there. Any obje--"

"There! Dammit, there! You see 'em?"

Reeve ran forward and pressed his hands flat against the fore window, pointing to the ground with a frantic hand. At one end of the clearing below, in the main road of town, two black figures moved against the snow, shadows thrown before them as the fires raged behind. "It's Cloud and Chaos, I think. . . "

"Yes, that's definitely Chaos," Nanaki confirmed, blinking sleepily, tail flickering thoughtfully, "The wings are rather hard to miss. The other must be Cloud considering the spells he seems to be using. You can feel the power from here."

"But why are they fighting?" CJ voiced the question on all of their minds.

"Hell, why not?", Cid snapped, "Maybe they'll do our job for us." He peered at the tracking monitor and noticed that the two significant dots, his and Cait's, were on top of each other. "Reeve! Move yer ass outta the way! I can't see!"

The Shinra president backed off from the window, almost glad to go, and stepped into the sudden darkness of the bridge. "I didn't see Cait or Chieko anywhere out there. But the view is limited and they did get here almost ten minutes before us. Have they moved on the tracker, Cid?"

"Nope. The cat's here somewhere, dead or alive."

"Shit!" Berk said the word before he could help it, then felt sheepish under his President's fierce gaze. He pointed outside and Reeve approached again, Tifa, Barret and the others shoving close to see. Below, Cloud's black silhouette suddenly lunged at Chaos' bigger one with an upraised club, bashing hard into his head but receiving a cruel swipe of claws in return. Tifa gasped as the two of them staggered and fell into the snow.

"They'll kill each other," she breathed, a hand rising unconsciously to her lips, "But I don't understand, why would Vincent? Why would Cloud..? What's happening?"

"That isn't Vincent, that's Chaos," Nanaki said firmly, "And as for Cloud. . . I just don't know."

The bridge was suddenly silent save the flicking of a few switches as Cid fiddled with his airship, moving them downwards slowly, doing his best to avoid breaking the tops of the pine trees around them. They couldn't land but he could get them down to a reasonable height, he certainly had skill enough for that much. Chewing irritably on his cigarette, the pilot glanced to his passengers suddenly and snapped, "I've done all I can, kids! We're ready to move. If we're goin', we need to go now."

The bridge had grown dark, the black shapes of the evergreens they were submerged in butting against the airship's windows, choking the scant sunlight and the glow of the nearby fire that'd dyed the interior a bright red. Cid tapped his foot in impatience at the silence from his passengers. He could feel the hesitation in every one of them and he had to admit it was in him too. There were ill things in the air, the pilot could smell them, practically taste the evil on his tongue. Yet he had one hell of a desire to save his friends from it all. One hell of a desire to save Shera and his kids back in Rocket Town. He knew the situation, he wasn't underestimating it.

Clenching his jaw, a throbbing vein sticking out on his forehead, Reeve tried to come up with something Presidential to say, something inspiring, something intelligent. Someone needed to give the command to move out. Someone had to take the responsibility for whatever happened onto their own shoulders. He was very grateful, though ashamed, when the voice that finally spoke wasn't his own.

CJ broke the silence.

"What's up?" the kid demanded, stepping away from the monitor, face lit by the lights flashing from the console, "Ain't you guys gonna go down there? Mom! What's goin' on? Go down there! There they are, go help 'em!" CJ stalked to the fore window and pounded on it with his little fist, "I ain't scared! I'll go down there myself! Stupid Jenova, stupid Chieko, stupid alla this. You guys are the heroes, so go do somethin'. . . hero-ish!"

Tifa smiled faintly as he tugged on her shirt in aggravation. She laid a hand on his head, then stepped away from the window and towards the doorway leading from the bridge. "Cid," she addressed suddenly, imperially, "Can we get down from here?"

"Uh, yeah, I've taken us low enough. . ."

"Alright then. Reeve, grab the rope ladders from the storage bay. Marlene, you stay with Bugah, Ifalna and CJ. I'm trusting you, luv, please watch out for them. Now, anyone else who's coming. . . c'mon already."

"But mom, don't leave me behind!" CJ protested, a catch in his voice and he rubbed irritably at his eyes, "I want to help!"

Tifa knelt down and hugged him fiercely. "You already have, Ceej. Protect your little sister, all right? She's sleeping in back with Elder Bugah. Don't let her look outside, no matter what happens. You stay away from the windows too, okay?"

"All right," CJ grumbled, returning her hug, then immediately stepping back to the fore window, peering through the dark shapes of the trees and towards the burning town. He could just barely make out Chaos' black silhouette laying twitching in the road way off. Giving her son a last glance, Tifa raced from the bridge, Reeve on her heels and dragging a very red-eyed Berk. Cid made a few last adjustments to the Highwind's controls and left the engines on stand-by, keeping them hovering at a comfortable height. He turned to Marlene and ordered, "Don't touch anything, understand? You neither, CJ, I don't trust ya as far as I could throw ya."

"Yeah, yeah. . ."

The pilot grinned and gave them all a thumbs up, grabbing Venus Gospel from its holder on the bulkhead and running for the exit. "C'mon Barret!" he called on his way, tossing his friend a quick glance.

"I'm stayin' with Marlene."

"What?" Cid froze in his tracks and did a double-take, mouth half open, "After everything, you're still doing this? Still bein' this way?"

Barret crossed his arms, stubbornly staring out the window as everyone left on the bridge tossed him a dirty look. CJ felt like punching him. "I'm here for Marlene," he said firmly, "Not for the two bastards outside. One nearly cut my throat, one shoved his fuckin' claw in my gut yesterday morning. Wouldn't make a lot of sense fo--"

"Shut up," Cid growled, whirling his pike around and planting the butt end harshly onto the floor. The metallic snap it made echoed throughout the bridge, silencing anything else from Barret. "I'm sick of your excuses and I'm sick of you, Barret Wallace. Stay in here with the children and the old man, with Marlene. Stay in here and hide like an old man. But you are an old man, maybe. . . Ha!" Cid snapped back around towards the exit, hollering, "I honestly don't give two shits, Barret! I won't condescend to care!"

The pilot stormed from the control room, followed by Nanaki, who surveyed the group left on the bridge through one sober yellow eye. Not sure if he should bother with a rebuke of his own or even really sure if Barret deserved one, he simply shook his heavy head and followed his friends out, leaving the room in an uneasy silence. As soon as they all were gone, Marlene marched up to her father and slapped him across the face, and the sound of it reverberated through the air, slaying the silence. No words, not even a particularly angry expression in her eyes, just that slap. CJ's mouth hung open but he didn't say anything. He just pressed his nose against the glass of the fore window and watched the ladders unrolling from the side of the airship in awe. Behind him, he heard Marlene's shoes clacking on the floor taking her away from Barret and to the darkest corner of the bridge to sulk. But he didn't care about the little drama inside. The real action was down below, in the blood-soaked battlefield of snow.

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They grappled with each other, each clawing at the other; a wiry guy with matted blonde hair and a pebbly-skinned demon with two razor sharp wings. They rolled in the snow, neither really gaining an edge over the other, both bleeding freely. Though Chaos had nearly three feet on him, Cloud didn't let that work against him. He used the monster's height to his advantage, figuring out that it was easy for the thing to get caught up in his own gangly limbs.

Go ahead, Cloud, fight me. Beat the living crap out of Chaos. I want you to, I really do. Vincent's voice was calm and collected suddenly, an eye in the storm. But it won't help you any. Just what are you looking for, Cloud? Relief from that false pain she's implanted in you? Or are you looking to hide from what you consider to be a failure of yours? I can tell you all about hiding Cloud. It's something you never want to get into, because it's a hard habit to break.

"Why won't you shut the hell up?!"

Cloud was desperate to get away, desperate to go where the voices were all screaming for him to go. North. North, he had to go North. Why wouldn't this spawn of hell with the kind voice let him go North? Didn't he understand that that was the only place where he could find some peace? Screaming in fury, Cloud wrenched free the arm that Chaos had pinned and grabbed for the charred beam laying only a few inches from his shoulder. He wrapped his strong hand around it, found a good grip, and swung upwards. Watching with cool, narrowed red eyes, the demon roared quietly and caught the beam, tearing it from the man's hand, flinging it away. He reared his own claw back then and brought it hurtling towards Cloud's bare face, spitting in sudden rage and impatience for the squirming thing under him to hurry up and die. But Cloud wouldn't have that. Using his free hand to bat the claw away, he grabbed a hold of one of Chaos' horns and wrenched the demon's head around.

"Babbling bastard. . . you're holding me up," he spat between gritted teeth. He twisted the monster's dark head and Chaos had no choice but to move the rest of his body in the direction of the pull, else have his neck snapped. Once Cloud was on his feet, still holding onto the demon with an iron grip, he gave a cry and shoved the creature's face into the snow, kicking down hard with the heel of his boot into the base of his skull. Roaring in pain, Chaos was still for a moment, then lay twitching, his wings flapping in the faint northern breeze as he fought to stay conscious.

"Well damn, I'm glad I didn't call a truce now. You ain't so tough."

Breathing hard, Cloud pushed himself to his feet, wiping red from his face, gritting his teeth against the sting as his cursed powers healed the wounds in his brow and eye and scalp. The process left him gasping for air and sent him to his knees, the wet snow soaking through the thin fabric of his pants. "What the hell is this..?" he muttered, head bowed, fingering his face. The cuts were gone but the J was still there. He traced the upraised line with a trembling hand, "Heh. I just don't know. . . heh heh." Cloud sat back in the snow, taking up a handful of it and pressing it to the burning in his face

and scalp, shutting his eyes, wishing all the hurts in his body were so easy to tame.

Suddenly exhausted, Cloud sat in the cold, his arms wrapped around his pulled-up legs, his heavy, hurt head shoved in the crook of an elbow. He stared down at the ground and grew steadily more and more terrified. Because he knew what was coming. What he was going to have to do very very soon.

Breathing shallow, as though afraid his chest might shatter if he wasn't careful, Cloud lifted his head up from his arms and shivered with the cold. His breath obscured his vision for a moment but then he blinked hard and suddenly thought he was dreaming. Cid Highwind was running at him with his pike poised to strike. Moving so quickly Cloud didn't have time take a preparatory breath of air much less get out of his way, Cid flew forward and leapt into the sky, shouting a war cry, Venus Gospel held high above him, surrounded by a halo of dawn sunlight, and sailed right over Cloud's head.

"Good mornin', boys! How ya been?"

Grinning fiercely, Cid jabbed the head of his pike straight into Chaos' midsection, then muttered a string of swear words as the honed blade slid right over the demon's tough skin with a whining noise. "Well, hell, what does Masamune have that ole Venus Gospel doesn't?" he demanded, falling back off balance and into the snow. Snarling and snapping, irritated that Cid had interrupted his attack on an unsuspecting Cloud, Chaos grabbed at his pike and wrenched it out of his hands, then threw his bulk on top of the grounded pilot, bashing down with fists, wings, claws, and fangs. Gripping the butt of his cigarette in his teeth, Cid struggled cheerfully, kicking up with harsh booted feet and fighting off the Jenova-spawned creature. Cloud watched the two of them battling and blinked hard, still sitting in the snow.

"How ya doin', Cloud?" The old pilot called pleasantly, eyes on his opponent, "Heard you've had a tough time of it lately. Hell, I saw what you did to the city. You're lucky I don't live there or I'd have to be pissed." Cid ducked to avoid a swipe of Chaos' claw, then rolled over a few times, slipping right out from under him and leaping to his feet, pretty as you please. Before Chaos could get over his surprise, Cid plucked Venus Gospel from its grip and hefted it casually in his right hand. He flicked a stray strand of blonde back behind his flight goggles and grinned, looking at the two of them as though they were all at a picnic. "We're here to find out what we can do to keep you gentlemen from siding with the alien," he said easily, "Care to fill me in?"

Cloud staggered to his feet, clutching his head as Vincent cursed him in his mind, demanding he listen to reason. Reason. Heh, there was no such thing anymore. Jenova was waiting and he wasn't about to disappoint the little bitch, not after all he'd done. The mako monster, Hojo, the Shinra Building, Midgar, he'd already blasted so much to hell, he wasn't going to stop now. If he was going to be what she wanted him to be, he was going to at least do that right. North. It would all end there.

Interrupting his thoughts, Chaos snarled and lunged, sending him flying backwards and Cid to the ground. Moving on all fours, the demon circled, grabbing the pilot by the excess of his flight jacket and hurtling him face forward into the snow. There was a blur of red and Nanaki was suddenly there. Roaring a shout that shook the air, he threw himself on the monster's back, barely dodging the razor edges of his wings, biting down hard on the thing's throat, using the instincts of a predator. Nearly laughing, Chaos flung him off and bounded away, just as Reeve and Tifa showed up, breathing hard.

"Are you all right? Why didn't you wait for me?"

Tifa approached Cid quickly, wincing as he spit ice and two teeth out of his mouth. He pushed himself back to his feet and swore so hard it hurt his head, Nanaki giving him a helping snout up. Chaos stood a few feet off for a moment, wings rubbing against each other in the still air and filling the morning with a high pitched scraping sound, like a metal fork across a blackboard.

"Fightin' him. . . fighting him is useless," Reeve sputtered, trying to catch his breath, "We can't kill him."

"Do you mean we can't kill him because we'd be killin' Vincent or do you mean we can't kill him because we just can't kill him." Cid wiped his arm across his chin and tried to stop the world from spinning around. "Actually, you probably mean both."

"Where's Cloud?" Tifa searched the deserted Icicle Inn road in alarm, noticing suddenly that he was gone. Reeve shook his head, hugging his arms close to his body against the cold.

"He musta slipped off. Damn it, this isn't going well. . ."

Chaos watched them, knees slightly bent, decidedly sick of the whole struggle and thinking precious little of the group. They were a couple of very agile buzzing mosquitoes that he couldn't quite get under his claws. Heh, they weren't important, hardly enough of a threat for him to even waste his valuable time. Vincent nearly laughed as he felt the thing's thoughts, its disgust was intense. Chaos hadn't come to this place to fight these nobodies. He had another purpose. Throwing them all a repulsed sneer, he turned and stalked off, growling lowly into the air. Jenova was being quite insistent with her orders.

"Hey!"

Cid ran forward, brandishing his pike like a native does his spear.

"Hey, you overgrown gargoyle! Where the hell you think you're slinking off to?! Don't you turn your back on me, I'll stab ya in it!"

"Cid, stop--!"

Snarling a curse, the infuriated pilot ran forward and lashed out with Venus Gospel, thinking he could wedge the blade between the demon's arm and shoulder, a notoriously sensitive spot. But the spearhead was deflected as Chaos whipped around. With hardly a thought, he let go an iron fist into his face and Cid slunk into the snow with a broken nose.

"Okay, point taken. . . n-new battle plan. . ." Cid grit his teeth, ordering the world to quit doing a jig before his eyes. Ooh, pretty colors. . .

"And what would that be?" Reeve questioned hopefully, hauling his friend back to his feet and hoping the pilot had some brilliant idea in mind. Cid shrugged, touching his gushing nose gingerly.

"I dunno what it should be, but we sure as hell need one. . . Man, this better not ruin my good looks." "Jenova!!"

Tifa's strong voice cut clear through the air. The others turned to her in surprise as she screamed to the sky. "If you want to kill this Planet, why the hell don't you do it yourself?! Don't send other people out to do your work, you get your ass out here yourself! Where are you?!" The woman's mouth turned into a hard thin line at the lack of response and she crossed her arms, trembling in rage. "Where are you, you coward? You showed yourself before, back in Midgar, but here, with the four of us. . . are we too much for you? Are you scared?"

"Tifa. . ." Reeve's voice was hesitant as he laid a hand on her shoulder, "I don't think we should taunt death incarnate, do you?"

"I don't care, I'm just god damned sick of this! Cloud! Where are you?! Dammit, where'd he disappear to?"

Cid shook his head slowly, looking off down the road and swearing suddenly. He grabbed a hold of Nanaki's mane, tugged, and pointed the creature's gaze towards Chaos. "I don't know, man," he murmured, "But I think we have bigger problems right now."

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"This is just terrific," Berk muttered to himself, tramping through a foot and a half of snow, "Just fuckin' great. I shoulda been a cop. I shoulda like, gone to medical school, or moved to Junon when I had the chance. This is just frigging peachy!" The young Turk drew his gun, checked his ammo, tried to stop his stupid hands from shaking, and stared at the grouping of footprints leading off towards Icicle Inn in inch-thick irritation. A dark looming forest of evergreens crowded in on him like a lot of pushy passengers on a subway. "They couldn't wait for me? Why the hell couldn't they wait for me? Now I'll waltz into the middle of the battle, they'll all be dead and then it'll be up to Berk to save the day. Only this time, Mr. Reno won't be comin' in the middle with a loaded shotgun to save my ass as I try to save everyone else's. Damn. . ." He could hear the nearby shouts and roars of battlers and picked his pace up a bit, chest sore from breathing in the chilly air. Saving the Planet sucked.

Startling the guy, there was a sudden flurry of movement in the treetops above his head, then a twittering of snow drifted down atop him, melting cold in his hair. He shook the flakes off and raised his gun, looking up. Berk gave a groan. Plummeting from the sky and landing in a crouch directly before him, a red-furred, leathery-winged, very hairy Nanaki lookalike appeared to block his path.

"Aw, shit. . ." he groaned, sighing profoundly and swallowing hard as his tired dark eyes looked the creature over, "I was really hoping I'd get outta meeting you."

Chieko was unimpressed with this blue-suited thing before her. She lowered her head and eyed him dead on, claws out and shining silver in the morning air. She lifted her flat, heavy paws with supreme delicacy, flicking snow off of them like droplets of water. "I thought you were the other. . ." she growled, licking her lips, "But he had fire for hair."

"Fire for hair? Ha, you must mean Reno, kitty. I heard you guys were buddies." Berk grinned nervously, fingering his gun and taking a step backwards. The others were too far off to hear him if he hollered for help now. God damn it. . . "So er, what're you going to do? Ya gonna kill me? Or ya gonna stand there and intimidate the hell outta me? Ya probably won't think I taste as good as Mr. Reno, but I've had a lotta girls say different, heh."

"Yo, Einstein!" A squeaky little voice called out mockingly from Chieko's back and Berk blinked quickly, raising his gun

and narrowing his eyes. He stood on tiptoes and peered over the monster's broad red shoulders. A paw to his mouth, Cait Sith stared back. "Don't tease this thingie, ya Turk retard!" he piped, "Do fangs and a big fat attitude mean anything to ya?"

"Hey, you're President Reeve's fruity cat thing! Sh-sh-shut up!" Berk took another step backwards, as Chieko lowered her head and let her mouth slip open, pink tongue dripping saliva into the snow. "Man! Stop lookin' at me like that, I'm not your breakfast!" Berk clenched his teeth and snapped his vision around himself in a panic. The orange glow of the fires came to his eyes from close by. He had to get out there in the open and away from these confining trees. "Dammit, you wanna go at it? Wanna fight? I figger I owe you for Shinra, for Mr. Rude, and for the Turks, you can't go around ruining their reputations by chawing on 'em!"

Hissing, Chieko shook her head and crouched in preparation of a spring, ignoring his hollow threats. "I don't care about your petty loyalties. I only want to eat you alive. . . "

"Oh. . . " Berk gulped audibly and the noise echoed in the stillness of the air. "Well then. . . later." He took a hesitant step back towards the town and then with a stifled yell, took off running, his blue jacket flaps streaming behind him like wings as he stretched his legs into the snow.

"Coward! "Chieko called after him, not even bothering to give chase, "Unworthy coward. . . " Her voice died away as the sound of Berk's footsteps did. She really didn't have it in herself now to bother, to care. She paced with heavy steps and a heavy heart as Cait Sith sat straight up on her back, glad the dude in the blue suit wasn't now in the big cat's stomach. He breathed a quick sigh of relief, then nodded his little head down towards the monster.

"Nah, he ain't a coward, he's smart, Cheeko, "he disagreed, "Tactical retreat or somethin'."

She growled in response, walking in circles, leaving a round gouge through the snow of the clearing. She was so uncertain it was frightening. Why wouldn't someone show up and tell her what to do? Was that so much to ask? "Where's Jenova?" she mumbled and Cait perked his ears up, "Why won't she talk to me? Doesn't she even care about me?"

The little cat harrumphed, then smacked the back of Chieko's furry head with an impatient paw. "That thing don't care for anyone, haven't you figured that out yet, furball? She's probably just using you in one of her twisted as a corkscrew little plans! And ya know what? Ya deserve it after what you did! Stop mopin' around!"

"I have to find her. My mother's left me but I'll find her and make her take me back. I can be every bit as useful to her as those two men. . . "

Cait scowled at the words, his already squinty eyes going squintier with the expression. His current knowledge of Jenova was pretty limited but his internal hard drive had stored quite a cache of information from the robot's encounters with the monster years before. He smacked Chieko again and piped, "That thing ain't really yer mom! She's screwing with your brain or somethin', I've seen this happen before, ya know. She don't really care about you, she's using you. You're a, a. . . what's that word that old Seph used ta use? Oh yeah, puppet. You're a puppet, Cheeko, ya gotta quit obsessing over the alien chick and move on with your life."

Chieko didn't give an answer, only quit her fruitless, aimless pacing and stood still, occasionally looking off towards the sound of battling in the distance. Cait continued beating on her with his insistent gloved fists.

"You ain't even a real bad guy, are ya, Cheeko? You're a bit player in alla this, yer bein' overlooked I'll bet. Sucks, eh? Bit parts suck. Bein' overlooked sucks. I was overlooked by Tifa and Cloud for a whole coupla days, they just forgot about me and it sucks, but ya gotta make yerself useful again, like the way I called Reeve and gave 'em a lead. You should do somethin' like that, furbag, and get back in the limelight. 'Cause Jenova's just plain evil. I mean, I can tell ya this for certain. Heck, if evil were calories, Jenova would be a Hershey bar. She ain't gonna go outta her way for you, you're on your own, pussy cat."

That was all she could take.

"Silence!"

Without warning, Chieko's brown eyes rolled over white and she whipped her head around, grabbing poor Cait's frail body between her jaws as he gave a little cry. With a stifled roar, she tossed the robot away and into the trunk of a tree. "She does care!" the monster demanded furiously, spitting synthetic fur from her mouth, "Because if she doesn't, no one does! I won't have anyone then!"

Without another word, Chieko took off towards town, leaving Cait sprawled in the snow at the base of the tree, circuits crackling, logic board rolling over in confusion.

"I don't understand him, I don't understand his logic! Does he even subscribe to logic, to rational thought? Dammit, he does, that's his problem! He's worked everything out so logically in his mind. An eye for an eye, no second chances. Someone hurts him, he disowns them. He lives by his morals and those that don't agree can go to hell. I just don't understand how he can be like that!"

Marlene paced the Highwind's engine room in a panic, speaking out loud like a mad woman. She rubbed her chilly hands together, back and forth, playing with her fingernails, nervous as hell. Barret was back in the bridge with CJ, the both of them watching the battle out the front window as though it were a particularly interesting sci-fi movie. But she couldn't handle it, she couldn't be like her father and just watch her friends out there getting torn to shreds.

"They're acting like heroes, they're doing the things that need to be done. . . they're acting unselfishly! Why can't he? Damn you, dad, why are you being this way? Cloud needs you! He needs a friend! Why won't you be there for him! Is it your pride, your stupid stubbornness, what? What is it? Are you truly only here to protect me? Does your supposed "trusting" me go no further than allowing me to do what I want while you keep your own stunted views? That just doesn't seem right, it just doesn't seem fair. . . it's your usual brand of rationalizing, stubborn as a mule garbage!! If I ask you about it, that's the spiel you'll feed me, I just know it!"

Marlene balled her fists at her sides and made a frustrated noise, stamping her foot and looking towards the bridge, hoping he'd hear her and come out so they could fight and she could tell him off. "I don't need your protection, "she muttered darkly, "Your loyalties are shallow and self-centered. If I was a gun you particularly liked or admired, you'd protect me then too. I'm just your dumb daughter and it's your obligation to be here for me. No one can question you for that. But your friends. . . the people you decided to call friends, you can be judged by them, and that's what you're scared of. You're scared that they disagree with your morals so ya won't have anything to do with them."

Turning around on the heel of one foot, she made for the Highwind's chocobo paddock, footsteps loud against the metal grating of the floor. Scowling furiously, forehead scrunched up in determination, she approached a golden chocobo tethered inside and began strapping reins on her, the bird warking loudly and crunching hay in her beak. "What's your name. . . ?" Marlene snapped, peering at the word sewn into the chocobo's plain leather saddle. "Okay, Yunata, "she muttered, "Let's show dad that not every Wallace in the family is an ass. Marlene Wallace knows when to help her friends. Maybe it's not very scientific, maybe it's not very rational, but it's the brave, the just thing to do. And just what the hell else matters if you can't occasionally be those?"

Yunata warked in agreement, suddenly fond of the young woman before her. The Golden chocobo bucked, eager to be free of her cramped stable, and Marlene gave her a pat on her downy shoulders, pulling a stray strap tight on the saddle. "Heh, who knows, "she breathed to herself, leading Yunata outside absently, "Maybe I'll get to prove a theory or two while I'm out here. Nothing more interesting than a little field work."

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"I think I know why Chaos is here."

Cid blinked hard, tightening his grip on Venus Gospel. "I think he's gonna burn down Icicle Inn."

"Scatter!"

Cid and Reeve took off in one direction, Tifa and Nanaki dashed in the other as the air around them suddenly seemed to break into pieces and jab at them all. Chaos stood black and ominous in the road at the center of a sudden stretch of wet and blackened dirt. The snow in a ten foot radius around him all had melted and ran away in rivers of boiling water, collecting in puddles at the bases of the nearby cottages. The demon beamed broadly as his power set the homes around him ablaze.

Tifa crouched nearby besides Nanaki and watched him with clenched fists. "Okay, "she whispered, tapping her friend on the back to get his attention and opening and closing her right hand to get the kinks out, "I'll go at him from the front, feign a punch to his face, he'll probably block, you come at him from the back, get him as he tries to counter-- "

"Get him?!" Nanaki stuttered, "With what?? His skin's like a Da-Chao Dragon's, we haven't been able to hurt him!"

"Well, figure something out, Red! We can't let him burn down this town-- Shit!" Tifa was on her feet suddenly, seeing a group of people rushing out of one of the houses Chaos had set on fire. They fled in terror out a flung open front door and the demon was there waiting for them. Roaring in pleasure with the action, he lunged at a dark-haired guy, knocking him to the ground and snapping at his face. The man screamed in terror, flailing upwards desperately in an attempt to fight him off. Tifa was there suddenly, launching a vicious bicycle kick into the monster's gut, flipping him over and off his victim, face first into the snow. The blow hardly phased him though and he was back on his feet in a flash, coming at Tifa and

screaming in fury.

"Vincent!"

Nanaki couldn't help but shout his friend's name as he sprang forward and into Chaos, knocking him off balance and letting Tifa scramble away to a safe distance. Before he could retreat himself though, the demon twisted around and clawed him violently, releasing some of the heat that he was using to decimate Icicle Inn's frail wooden homes into his victim. Nanaki felt a burning that was from more than a physical attack tearing through his frame and gave a grunt, falling to the ground and ploughing up a length of snow. He laid there, unable to move, feeling as though every inch of his body was in flames. Opening one yellow eye feebly, he saw Chaos charging in to finish him off. And then there was a flash.

"Try scrappin' with me, asshole!"

Nanaki distractedly saw Cid leap into his vision, and then Venus Gospel flashed in the dawn illumination throwing off white light and blinding him for a moment. When he could see again, he thought he was dreaming. Chaos was in the snow, Cid on top of him, the old pilot beating him over the head with his pike. The demon lay there, the blows doing nothing but surprising the hell out of him. Using all the strength left in his arms, Cid gave a last smack, right between its horns, then leapt away. Or tried to. Grinning in disbelief at how easy he'd made it, Chaos grabbed at the retreating pilot's ankle in mid-air and he smashed into the ground with a grunt.

"Let go a me! I ain't playin' around you sack of shit, let go!"

With something like a bestial laugh, Chaos gave a growl and picked the pilot clean off the ground by his ankle, spun him around once or twice, then hurled him away. Cid cursed the entire two seconds he was airborne, then slammed into the side of a burning cottage and slumped into the snow. Chaos watched him for a moment, made sure he wasn't going to get up again, then gave a grunt and walked off, intent on finishing his destruction. He was having too much fun listening to Vincent Valentine cursing him as he burnt the town and killed its residents to stop now.

"Cid! Oh, my god!" Tifa rushed to the pilot's side, and Nanaki pushed himself to his paws, shaking off the last pangs of the fiery elemental attack that'd rushed over him. Tifa was feeling for a heartbeat down the front of Cid's shirt, sticking a trembling hand beneath the fabric. Giving a groan, the pilot suddenly shot a gloved fist up and clamped it around her wrist, and she gasped in surprise.

"Gettin' a little too friendly, eh?" he asked lowly, "I'm a married man."

"You ass! Are you all right?" Tifa backed off as he pushed himself up slowly, then fell back down in a near faint.

"No. Damn. . . I'm too old for this crap."

Nanaki sniffed at him, frowning and wincing at the blood oozing from a gash in his friend's head. "You stay down, "he ordered, "You're hurt."

"Thanks for that professional diagnosis, doc."

A roar from the road made Tifa and Nanaki look over and gulp. Cid just proceeded to pass out. Chaos was making his way towards the town's lone bar. There were two guys huddling on the stoop of the place, watching his approach in terror, and knocking each other over to get inside and away from him. "We have to do something, Tifa. . . "

The woman looked over and threw her gloved hands into the air. "He shakes off everything we do to him and you said you've yet to see a weapon other than that damned evil sword that can pierce his skin. If you'd tell me what the hell to do, I'll be more than glad to do it!"

"He's going to tear through this town until there's no one and nothing left. . . "Nanaki mumbled, pacing towards the demon in determination, "Just to get back at Vincent."

"What?"

"Don't you see? This is his way of getting revenge on Vincent for keeping him behind bars all that time. You told me that before all of this started happening, he hadn't changed into Chaos in years and years. That demon must harbor an unholy hatred after such a thing. He's nothing more now than a prisoner broke free with a gun in his hand, desirous to kill the guard who held the keys. He'll hurt his caged master now any way he can. Animalistic vengeance, animalistic hunger for blood. . . that's what that monster embodies."

Tifa frowned at the dark words and reluctantly stood from Cid's side, shaking her head. Chaos was at the door of the tavern now and seemed intent on ripping the place apart with his bare claws. He tore at the main supporting beams of the place and splinters flew, the moldy worn wood shattering beneath his blows. The two-story tavern was swaying with each attack and Tifa watched it fearfully, knowing it wouldn't be long until the entire thing collapsed.

"There're people in there, "she muttered in frustration, "But what can we do about it? Dammit, how do we take Chaos out? Can't Vincent help somehow? We can't do this!" Tifa stamped her foot in frustration, taking a few half-hearted steps

forward into the snow. She wanted to immediately go after Cloud, worried about where he'd wandered off to since they'd entered the town but she knew she couldn't leave these citizens or her friends alone to do battle with the demon. And she couldn't leave Vincent trapped inside him. He'd done so much for CJ and Ifalna and Tifa owed him for it. She had to figure something out.

"Hey!"

Tifa and Nanaki jerked their heads sharply around, looking for the source of the yell. The tavern was about to fall, they could both make out the horrible shouts of the two men trapped inside.

"Um. . . hey! Dammit, cut it out!" The cry came again, half a command, half a plea. Tifa suddenly caught sight of Reeve standing there across the street, half-cloaked in the shadow of a building. He was waving his arms like a madman trying to get Chaos' attention. Sweat poured off his forehead in buckets.

"Has he gone insane? Why? Why in the hell is he doing that?"

Nanaki had no clue.

"Perhaps he's trying to impress us," he growled in disbelief, "Huh. Just what does he think he's going to do?"

"Oh, damn. . . I guess we're about to find out. . ."

Chaos was hesitant to leave his destruction behind, but he couldn't resist the sight of the totally unarmed man standing so near him, practically a sacrifice, there in the middle of the street. Easy kill. And adding to it, dark voices told the demon that his caged master knew the brash, dark-eyed guy in the suit. Frosting on the cake. Glad and horrified at the same time that Chaos had decided to take his invitation, the Shinra President gulped but held his ground as he approached.

"Get outta his way, Reeve!" Tifa ran forward but the confrontation was too far down the street. "What're you gonna do, you crazy idiot! You're a god damned executive, not a warrior!"

Reeve heard her shouting but ignored it, shaking his head, not taking his eyes from Chaos. The black demon filled his vision like night creeping in off the horizon. But he didn't let that phase him. He just kept staring at the thing's red eyes, and reminding himself just who he was really looking at. The eyes gazed back at him and behind Chaos' inhuman ferocity, inhuman capacity for heartless murder, Reeve saw his friend. When the monster finally leapt at him, claws raised to quickly slash his throat, the President mumbled, "Sorry, Vincent" before he was overtaken by tar-like skin and flashing fangs.

"Shit! Red, hurry!"

Tifa pumped her arms and ran like an antelope down the streets, intent on prying the demon off her friend no matter what it took. Nanaki was a thousand times faster though and in a second or two was leaping beyond her, red limbs stretching into the trampled snow, head down and headfirst in place for what he knew would be a useless charge. But he never got the chance to attack. With a noise so intense in its suffering, a screech so immense that it immediately shattered every window in the tiny village and momentarily deafened anyone listening, Chaos rocketed off Reeve, clutching at his left eye and spilling dark blood into the slush. Tifa back peddled and fell to her knees, stuttering in shock as Reeve suddenly leapt away from the flailing beast and dashed towards her, grinning so wide she thought his face might split apart. She and Nanaki gibbered, staring off in disbelief as Chaos writhed in the snow, howling, growling and snarling in such heated fury it made them all terrified.

"Ha! Ha ha ha, hee.e. . . ." Reeve laughed so hard he snorted, falling backwards on his ass and looking to Tifa, wondering why she wasn't laughing too. He pointed at Chaos, eyes tearing up in mirth as he held onto his sides with his other hand. "My. . . my hee hee. . . god damn. . . I knew that swiss army knife would . . . ha. . . come in handy some day. . . haa ha a hee heh."

"What. . . ?"

Tifa shook her head in confusion, eyeing Reeve as though he were crazy. He forcibly grabbed her face in two hands and pointed her gaze towards the demon, just as Chaos moved a trembling, bloodied claw away from his face, revealing the handle of a swiss army knife stuck in his left eye. Tifa laughed then too and Nanaki couldn't help but grin.

"Well, good for you, Reeve. . . ." he practically purred, "Brains over brawn. What a lovely moral and a sterling example of it in action. Heh heh."

"Now try and call me just an exec or a businessman. Hee hee, I wish Reno could've seen that." Reeve beamed like the sun and quickly stood up, "C'mon, let's go get those guys outta the tavern."

Still laughing maniacally, he took off down the road, straightening his tie and combing his hair with his fingers as he ran, Nanaki loping along behind him. Tifa gave Chaos a look, shuddering at the noises he was making. She kept hoping to see him suddenly change back into Vincent but the demon only lay in the snow, clutching his head, trying to pull the knife from

his eye. Reeve had used the corkscrew attachment and he was having a hard time.

Tifa called Cloud's name out as she chased after Nanaki and Reeve. She could almost feel him close by, feel his presence as she did sometimes. But there was no answer but a mocking echo to her cries. The entire town now seemed a nest for echoes. The fires raged in unabashed glory against the snow, reaching high into the ever-lightening sky. It was nearing seven am, Tifa checked her watch with weary eyes, cringing as her feet crunched through the snow and added to the swirling melody of ill-born echoes in the place. The echoes of her cries, of the villagers who'd been injured, of the fires, of her friends before her as they lead two very disgruntled men from the innards of Icicle Inn's decimated tavern. She closed her ears to it though, tired of such ugly sounds.

"Tifa!" Reeve called to her, kneeling at the side of the guy that Chaos had jumped as he'd ran from his burning home a few minutes before, "You have a Restore Materia, right?"

"Yeah. . ." She walked a little faster, feeling selfish for thinking about Cloud amidst so many other people's pain. Fiddling with the materia in the slots of her glove, Tifa didn't see Berk until it was too late.

"Incoming!!"

The young Turk ran out of nowhere at a breakneck speed and smacked into her, knocking them both to the ground. Tifa was getting decidedly sick of winding up in the snow. Brushing wet slush from her jeans, she shot Berk a dirty look and got to her feet, rubbing at her bruised hip where he'd bashed into her. "How about using a bit more caution, Mr. Berk?" she asked, pulling him up with a petulant hand. The guy looked to her in a panic, gritting his teeth into a wall of white behind his lips, then shot to a standing position and pointed off towards where he'd run in from.

"Ch-Chieko!" he stuttered, wheezing and trying to catch his breath, "She's here, she's right behind me!"

"Chieko?" Tifa looked around suspiciously, a hand on his shoulder as the young Turk swallowed and gasped for air, still clutching at his gun. He'd felt that monster's hot breath on his neck and there was a single claw mark, almost a tickle, running horizontal across the back of his scalp, through his short brown hair. She'd leapt on his back and pinned him face-first in the snow for a few seconds and Berk had seen his short life flash before his eyes as he'd felt those heavy heavy paws pressing him into the ground. He'd been so sure that she'd rip him to pieces or bite into his shoulder, pluck his head from his neck like the top of a lollipop, but she hadn't. She'd only stood there, panting in his ear, then whispered, "Mother wants me to. . . so I won't. . ."

And then in a flash of wings, a swirl of red, she'd leapt away and disappeared. And Berk had ran.

"D-d-damn. . ." he breathed, bending over double, leaning on his angled knees. He shut his eyes, ready to keel over, he'd ran so fast and so far, "Man, I thought that was all she wrote for a while there, Mrs. Strife." He whistled, regaining his composure, then straightened and checked his gun as she looked on.

"Call me Tifa," she admonished, then asked, "Was Cait Sith with Chieko?"

"That toy cat thing? I dunno. First time I saw her, yeah, but then when she jumped me, I . . . don't really remembering seeing it. But then, all I could make out was a whole lotta snow in my face. Ow. . . I think I have frostbite." Berk looked up, rubbing at his nose and a cut on his chin, then surveyed the area, taking in the burning buildings, Chaos' twitching form a few feet off, Cid Highwind laying unconscious at the base of a wall and his President and Nanaki off helping out a few wounded citizens at the northern end of town. He didn't see Chieko, but he wouldn't let his guard down. That monster had a taste for Turks and his own blue suit was much too bright against the snow for him to feel too at ease.

He turned to address a question to Tifa but the woman was already walking off towards Reeve, rearranging materia in her glove. He ran to catch up, cursing his trembling, weary legs and the exhaustion behind his eyes. "Did I miss out on the action?" he called to her back, "Who took out Chaos? What happened?"

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Berk," she said absently, distantly, not looking up. She plucked a green materia orb from her glove, peered at it for a moment, then tossed it to the young Turk with a sniff. "Go help out Cid, will ya please?"

Berk barely caught the glittering little sphere. He rolled it in his palm, looking at it like it might bite. It was pretty, a swirling little ball of green glass, almost like one of those Christmas snow globes but. . . not. It tingled in his hand and made the hair on his arm stand on end.

"Where's the "on" button, eh?" he whispered, narrowing his eyes at it. Tifa groaned.

"You've never cast a spell before?" she asked impatiently. Sheepishly, Berk shook his head. "Then never mind, you wouldn't have enough power to heal a concussion and a dislocated shoulder anyway. If one of us stubs our toe, I'll teach you how to cast Cure. Deal?"

"Er, yeah. Sorry."

"Uh-huh. I'll speak with Rude later about what he's teaching his Turks. I wonder if Cloud knows you can't use materia. .

?" Tifa smiled weakly, staring at the snow, eyes going distant again. Berk shuffled his feet nervously, wishing she wouldn't stare downwards with that look in her face, as though she were about to break into laughter and tears at the same time. Shaking her head slightly, she suddenly turned up and grinned at him in reassurance. "It's okay though, Mr. Berk," she said, "You shouldn't have to know how to use this. There shouldn't be a reason to learn, not anymore. Go give it to Reeve, I'll deal with Cid."

She turned and walked off towards the pilot, leaving Berk holding the small Restore materia uncomfortably and staring after her. Scanning the skies once again for Chieko, he jogged off towards Reeve and Nanaki, unease sitting heavy in his stomach.

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A pain in his head, a stinging, galling, fiery pain that throbbed and pulsed with every beat of his heart. It hurt everywhere, everything did; thinking, moving, breathing, growling, everything sent waves through him and he howled, amazed that he'd been injured, still unable to believe he'd been bested.

Does that hurt?

But what was worse? The thing embedded in his eye, or the wickedly satisfied voice of his master echoing in his head?

Heh, heh. Does it hurt that bad? Is it hurting you as badly as it's hurting me? Heh heh heh, I think so. Good.

Chaos roared, desiring silence, desiring to tear Vincent apart. But he couldn't get at him. He'd never been able to get at him. He was always there, always in charge, always mocking him or holding him back. That invisible man, that man he'd never even seen. He was just this phantom that he hated and feared and depended on, all at the same time.

I told you. I told you and I told Jenova that this would be stopped. You can't grind your heel in the face of humans for so long and not expect a smack back at some point. Gods, that hurts. Good. Heh, good. Now they only need to finish you off and that'll be that.

Vincent smiled in satisfaction through the pain, so suddenly elated it made him dizzy. The things Jenova had told him the night before had had him stewing ever since. But if his friends could kill Chaos, then there was a chance. Part of Jenova would die with the creature, a part of her being, a percentage of her cells were in his body. Kill him and they'd be killing a bit of her. The thought that he'd die with the demon didn't even cross his mind. After Jenova's promise of destruction, his own life seemed rather unimportant with the lives of everyone on the Planet at stake. All he wanted now was to make up for what he'd killed. The thought that the possibility for redemption was at hand made him want to cry for joy.

A roar of pain brought Vincent from his thoughts and his own inner cry at the searing in his head nearly had him and the demon he dwelt inside unconscious. But both held out against blackness as Chaos wrenched the knife from his eye and flung it away into the snow.

Shit. . .

That hurt.

Through a haze of red, Vincent saw the blood on Chaos' claws. The stuff was everywhere, but that only made him smile harder, glad to see the thing had been hurt. He grew a little less cocky as the stunned demon climbed onto two shaky legs and began to look around, regaining his senses a bit. He was half-blinded but that didn't make a difference, he only needed one eye, two had been a luxury anyway. One red eye showed him all he needed to see. The people who'd done this to him. . . they were still there. The fools.

Do you want to know why it is an ignorant thing to have hope, Vincent?

Jenova's voice came suddenly, blasting from the void and raining on his mind like the virus she'd often been labeled as.

If you didn't before, I'll bet you know now. Hope dies. Just as people do. In bloody throes.

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"Cid!"

Tifa patted her friend's cheek lightly until he gave a groan and his eyes snapped open, staring at her in a panic.

"Tifa! Shit! Where's Chaos?" He sat up quickly, right hand automatically reaching for Venus Gospel. He gripped the pike firmly, ready to fight but Tifa pushed him down gently. The pilot looked confused for a moment but a smile from Tifa put

him slightly at ease. That and the aching pain radiating from his shoulder and head sent him back down into the snow with a dull plop.

"Damn. . . "he breathed, shutting his eyes and taking a deep breath, "I guess I musta blacked out there for a second, sorry about that. Is everything all right?"

"I don't know. . . I really don't. I think things are getting better but I don't want to jinx us."

"Yeah, good idea."

Tifa grinned weakly, then sat back on the stoop of the cottage Cid was laying beside. The cement was icy cold beneath her jeans, and sent shivers up and down her body. She was relieved that Cid was all right, but his wounds hadn't been that bad and Tifa was skilled with magic, her strong soul and mind had graced her with the talent. She drew her knees up close and wrapped her arms around them, laying her forehead down.

"What about you? You okay, Tifa?"

"Yeah. . . "she breathed, "A little tired is all. It isn't the physical part of fighting that gets to me, Cid, it's the stress."

Cid sat up shakily, rubbing at his sore head though there was no longer any wound there. He was silent for a minute, getting his bearings, smacking the ugly face of dizziness as it tried to mug him, winning, and then sitting there shivering with the chill of the northern air. He glanced at the top of Tifa's dark brown head for a moment, then glanced past her, wondering where the rest of their party had gone to.

"Hey. . . "he said suddenly, calmly. Tifa looked up with tired eyes and glanced in his face, wishing he'd give her a minute of peace.

"What?"

"Why the hell did you wake me up when Chaos was still around?"

"What?!"

"Be quiet. Don't move."

Cid was staring the demon down. Chaos stood a scant ten feet away, in the road, dripping dark blood into the snow and watching them intently with its one good eye. Alerted of his presence, Tifa breathed shallowly, coldness creeping into her chest, able to hear the monster's low, rolling growl. Very very slowly, she turned her head to look at him.

So noble. Even standing there half-blind, the promise of slow death in every twitch of his muscles, Chaos' nobility struck Tifa. He was proud, and self-assured. If his purposes hadn't been purely evil, purely conscience-less, he might've even been admirable. He would fight and kill until someone fought and killed him. He wouldn't give up, he wouldn't surrender, and he would never take prisoners. Maybe the traits were caused by nothing more than the fact that he was an animal with overpowering instincts, but even that had some degree of majesty to it. Absolute anything, absolution of anything, held the potential to be awe-inspiring.

"He kinda looks like he's wondering which of us he wants to eat first, dontcha think?" Cid asked suddenly, wincing as he tried to smile. Tifa laughed softly, her reddish-brown eyes fixed on the demon's garish features.

"He certainly looks hungry, "she whispered.

"Yeah, we should take him back to the Highwind. I think I have a few cans of Purina layin' around somewhere."

"That's not from when you played that joke on Red, is it? It'd have to be, what, thirteen years old. . ? " Tifa smiled, taking pleasure in Chaos' snarl as she did so.

"Thirteen years? I doubt it'd matter, this sucker'll obviously eat anything. I heard he took a bite outta Barret."

Tifa. . .

"Not too picky then. Yeah, we should take him to the airship, let CJ loose on him."

"Aw, c'mon, that's a little too cruel. I don't hate this freaky monster that much. 'Sides, that'd be too mean t'Vince. Nah, what we SHOULD do is take him to Wutai. . . heh heh, nah, that's even worse. Damn. . . "

Tifa. . .

"You shoulda seen Wutai, Tifa, Yuffie thinks she's Reeve, it's a disgrace. She paved the Pagoda and put neon lights on it! It looks like a Chinese fast food place. Thank you, drive thru. Heh heh. We walked by and Ifalna wanted an egg roll."

Tifa. . .

"Ha, really? I haven't been there in so long."

Tifa. . . Tifa.

With Cid looking on, a strange smile on his face, Tifa finally acknowledged the voice.

"What do you want, Jenova?"

There was nothing to see, no one to address, so she kept her gaze on Chaos who kept his own on her, snarling in a barely contained rage. His left eye a horrible gushing hole in his dark face, the demon suddenly held his claw out and dropped something small, hard, and round into her lap. Tifa scabbled for it, barely able to breath or see straight in her sudden terror and when she finally found the tiny object and held it in her hand, she forgot to breathe altogether.

The circle of gold caught the morning light faintly.

He left that in the snow.

"What is it?" Cid leaned over and peered into Tifa's cupped hands. It was Cloud's wedding ring.

"Is this a joke? Where. . . where is he? What have you done with him?!" She was on her feet in a single leap, addressing Chaos simply because there was nothing else there. Just air and the mocking voice of a monster.

You know where. But you shouldn't concern yourself with Cloud, Tifa. Worry about your own neck. I'll take care of him for you.

"You bitch!! Vicious whore! I swear I'll kill you!!"

Crying in rage and frustration, a mask of heated fury covering her features, Tifa tried to lash out at Chaos with her fists, but Cid held her back, unsure of what had goaded her to so much rage so quickly. Audible only to Tifa, Jenova laughed in sickening joy and just as sudden as it had appeared, her consciousness dissipated off to whatever dark plane it usually existed upon, leaving Chaos with one simple order, one he hadn't really needed to be given: Kill.

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Cold, cold, cold, cold.

You're in Icicle Inn, Einstein, the northernmost city in the frikkin' world and you go outside without a jacket. For a damned Planetary genius, Marlene, you're pretty stupid.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid.

Yup, dumb. Running out, into the cold, stupidly. What the hell are you going to do out there to help? What're you gonna do, recite Bugenhagen's Laws of Materia Development to Chaos until he passes out asleep? Dammit, but you're lame. You'll probably end up getting caught or killed and then pissing everyone off because you didn't just stay in the airship. You couldn't just stay in the airship with dad, you had to rush out here, gung-ho, with a hot head, ready to clean up. Lame! Where do you get off thinking you can be of any help to real heroes? You're so arrogant, girl! Berk was right yesterday when he yelled at you, you're an arrogant little princess! And princesses aren't meant to sneak outta their sanctuaries and battle with demons, they leave that up to knights and warriors!

So what the hell are you going to do?

Yunata galloped forward through the dark evergreen forest, her rider so lost in thought and busy rebuking herself that she didn't even notice the pine needles jabbing at her bare forearms as they moved. The silence of a northern scene surrounded her, the snow muffled the chocobo's footsteps, it was so deceitfully peaceful outside it almost made her forget what would surely be waiting as soon as she broke through the fragrant, concealing pines up ahead.

Don't try not thinking about it, what will you do, Marlene? Will ya threaten Chaos again? God, you're so pathetic it's sickening. There's nothing wrong with being a scientist as long as that's all you try to be. But here you are, pretending you're some kind of fighter, some kind of little AVANLANCE wannabe that Barret can feel proud of, and not argue with. Unfortunately, it's a frigging lie! You can't fight and you don't want to fight and that should be enough for dad, but it isn't. You've never thought so. You always wished you could be his little Shinra slayer, his little prodigy. But you wound up working for the enemy. Maybe that's what his problem is, he's screwed up because he can't decided whether to fight you or to love you. He says he trusts you but what does that mean? He trusts you to do what you will but that doesn't mean he has to agree with it, it's nothing more. . .

And what's wrong with that? Why should he change his opinions just because of you?

Dammit, Marlene had herself stumped there. She supposed there wasn't really an answer. No real reasons, just the blaring consequences of whatever the hell they were: She was making the both of them crazy trying to get her father to change his mind about things and people he'd passed judgment on long long ago. Whether she thought he was wrong or not was irrelevant. Her dad's opinion was her dad's opinion. And she was doing him an injustice by not accepting it and loving him anyways.

This thought made her pause, blinking hard.

"Well hell. . ." she whispered into the apathetic air, "I'm just as bad as him then. That's a twist."

The trees . . . were thinning out and the smell of smoke was thick in the air. It blotted out the sky above her head and Marlene strained her eyes to make out the sun way off in the east through all the mess of black. Yunata was beginning to get uneasy, sensing something so strong and ominous that even Marlene's less acute human senses could pick it up. What was it? But she couldn't identify it, couldn't find a better label than "evil". She'd yelled at Nanaki earlier for using such a basic word but now that word seemed like the only thing fitting. This infestation was deathly, it reeked of blood. Marlene began to feel very scared of what was waiting for her in Icicle Inn. It would only be another minute until she broke the cover of the trees and Yunata would carry her out into it all. She might find Nanaki and Tifa and President Reeve and Berk all laying dead in the snow with that horrible black demon standing over them, laughing. Oh, gods, that image snuck into her mind and made her pull up sharp on the reins, Yunata warking in distress at her indecisive rider. Yet, that image then made her dig her heels into her chocobo's downy sides and spur the bird forward madly through the remains of the forest. She would do this! Whatever she decided to do, she'd do it, she'd go through with it. Maybe Barret could sit on his ass and watch his friends get killed but Marlene knew she sure couldn't. Not with Nanaki out there, Tifa, even stupid Berk, as much as he annoyed her.

Yunata suddenly went nuts. Bucking and warking, shedding golden feathers into the fleecy snow, the chocobo stretched her neck and spread her wings, darting forward so fast through the slush that Marlene could barely keep her seat. She yanked on the reins until her hands blistered, chipping the bird's beak, but Yunata wouldn't obey. The golden chocobo knew she was close to her home and had been trained to return there, no matter what. No matter the pushy woman on her back or the stench of danger nearby, training was training and Vincent always gave her Sylkis greens when she got back after being rented out. The promise of greens was just too tempting.

Marlene tumbled off her back messily and into the snow just as Yunata ran from the last of the pines and into the center of Icicle Inn, reins trailing behind her. Spitting out grainy ice, Marlene pushed herself up and flung her hair out of her eyes, blinking quick, then blinking slow, sure she'd been knocked unconscious in the fall and was now having this really really bad dream. With the forest behind her and the sun free to send its most heated rays raining down on her unprotected head, sticking vindictively into her eyes, the scene before her was most effectively lit. She wished it wasn't.

With startling clarity and unexplained calmness, Marlene saw the demon Chaos standing tall over Tifa and Cid there in the distance. Her two friends knelt on a concrete stoop as the monster loomed over them, its massive wings folded at its back, its long lethal claws twitching at its side, and its noble sharp features, like carved ebony, facing the world like an armored mask. He could taste the ultimate act on its tongue, could hear Vincent begging him not to kill the two humans cowering beneath him. But that man's words didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was Chaos, because he was convinced that Vincent would never have control again. Now it was time to throw all reason away, to live for nothing else than the opportunity to feed on one man's pain and to use that nourishment to be a worthy weapon of evil. He had no other desires, no other goals. Just destruction.

Marlene's hand was in her pocket, fingers wrapping around the materia there before she even realized she'd started moving. All she could see was that great bloody black demon with his claws raised to kill. And Tifa and Cloud beneath them.

"Marlene. What're you doin'?"

The voice came from behind; thick, low, demanding. She turned around like a guilty kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar and saw Barret standing there, the reins of Cid's black chocobo in one fist. Marlene almost apologized, almost sheepishly bowed her head in shame. But no. No, dammit!

"I have to save them, dad, don't you see? I can't sit by like you, telling myself it's none of my business. . ." Marlene took a few steps towards the town, her sneakers sinking down through the foot and a half of new snow. The summon materia was out and in her hand.

"You don't understand," Barret hissed, walking forward and roughly grabbing her wrists, "it's not a savior in that materia, it's a god damned murderer! That summon isn't a toy, isn't a friend, it's a trap, you can't go whipping him out like a weapon!"

"I don't care, dad! Leave me alone! You're just. . . just a coward! A st-stubborn, lying bastard who said he'd trust me and now you won't! No--!"

She'd never spoken to him like that before, daughters didn't usually call their fathers lying bastards. The words hung in the air for a few moments, bare, naked, stripped to their most basic, cutting forms. But then a distant roar from Nanaki dashed them away and Marlene nearly dropped the summon as she heard her friend attacking Chaos in a desperate attempt to save Tifa and Cid. She and Barret jerked their gazes towards the sound in time to see Berk leaping in to help

him, gun blazing. But they were both flung away like disjointed dolls with the littlest of effort from the demon. Chaos reared back, patience gone, and began to work up a spell. The very air sizzled, crackling with mounting power.

"No! He can't do this again-- !" Marlene raised the red materia, lips beginning to form the invoking words. But with a frustrated snarl, Barret suddenly darted outwards and grabbed the sphere from her grasp, holding it firmly in his own left hand. She jumped at her father, fighting frantically to free her summon from his fingers, his narrow mindedness, his stubbornness. There was no other way to defeat Chaos but with that materia. She was sure of it. Growling wordlessly in dark anger, Barret wrapped his arm around her waist, pinning her close to his side.

"Listen to me, baby, "he whispered in her ear, his voice quick and dangerous, "I can't let ya have this sorta responsibility on top of yo' own little head. I'll take the responsibility. I will. Marlene, you do what ya think ya have t'do, forget about me. . . "

"What?"

"Just say you will! Say you'll go by your own judgment no matter what happens! Don't worry about what I'd think!"

"Dad. . . "Marlene sunk her head down and laid it atop her father's massive warm arm, "Dad, I love you. . . so much. But it never mattered, I-- I always have done what I wanted."

Something between a frown and a smile broke out on Barret's face at the honest words. He held the materia tight in his hand, his daughter tight in his other arm. "I know. . . "he finally mumbled, almost laughing, "I'm really actually glad t'see I haven't been a bad influence on ya. Ya DO do whatcha want, to hell with me. That's what drives me crazy, I guess. Ya really are Dyne's daughter."

Marlene shook her head, adamant, gritting her teeth.

"No. No, I'm. . . I'm Barret Wallace's daughter. And I've always been proud of that."

"Heh."

Barret kissed her roughly on top of her head, then shut his eyes. He gripped the summon materia spasmodically, as though afraid his common sense would suddenly kick in and make him drop it. Giving the winterish scene a final glance, he set his jaw in steely determination.

"God damn sonnuvabitch, "he swore lowly, "I can't believe I'm doing this. You remember what I said, Marlene. . . " He consumed the tiny summon with his massive fist and took a deep breath. "General Sephiroth. . . "

Marlene fell backwards with the sudden flash of light that accompanied that name and shut her eyes as the world about her began to shimmer red and green in waves, pouring from the summon materia even as Barret faded away. Pulsating droplets of light, like individual pearls, flooded out of the glass orb's walls, expanding into opalescent disks that grew larger as they floated farther from the materia. Her eyes wide, sparkling with her tears and catching the unearthly glow, Marlene crawled backwards on her hands and knees, awed again by how beautiful the Planet's power was when it manifested. Life. That was the power of life and it was beautiful, filling her with the knowledge of just what she was fighting for, just why the Planet had fascinated her since she'd first heard Bugenhagen lecture on it as a child. The Planet was gorgeous. Maybe it was shallow to fight for beauty but then fine, Marlene decided, she was shallow. There were other things too though, weren't there? Besides that beauty? Yes. Where Jenova was blatantly cruel, the Planet was apathetic, letting the creatures on her surface play out their lives as they would, with no interference from her. She gave equal chances to everyone and there was something to be said for that. That then, was something to cling to. Marlene would fight for the chance to live her life, the life that the Planet allowed her to shape as she saw fit. Maybe the Planet's apathy was evil, she really couldn't judge, but Jenova's deliberate cruelty was worse. Marlene was convinced of it. She made herself convinced of it. Anything else was too uncomfortable.

"It's about time."

Sephiroth stood, green eyes darting around the town like an eager bird's. He shook the residual mako from his hair and brushed it off his broad shoulders, looking to Marlene with upraised silvery eyebrows.

"G-good morning, General, "she stuttered, blushing in embarrassment and hurriedly getting to her feet. She wiped at her eyes with the back of one hand, smiling faintly in disbelief. Sephiroth seemed unimpressed with her greeting but he returned it impatiently, one black-gloved hand resting on Masamune's hilt.

"If you'd be so kind as to point out my foe. . . "

Marlene put her knuckles to her lips and blushed harder. She pointed towards the roaring demon at the end of town with a trembling hand.

"I mean, if you would, sir. . . " she added politely, weak with amazement.

Sephiroth raised his eyebrows at her again, breathing deeply of the fresh, though smoky morning air with a slight

smile. Flinging a few strands of his long hair back behind his shoulders, unsheathing his vicious katana, the summoned warrior gave a slight nod of his head to Marlene, then stalked off towards Chaos.

"I would love to."

~\*~

"Red!! What's wrong with the air?!"

Berk fired the last of his useless rounds into Chaos' head as Nanaki swiped at the creature again and again with the razor-edged blades embedded in his headdress. The Turk had no clue how that red lion thing thought he had any chance of hurting the monster with a buncha frigging feathers, but oh, well, it wasn't as though his .44 rounds were doing anything either. Chaos wasn't even paying attention. The demon was summoning his reserves of power to end them once and for all. One spell, one blast, and he'd be free to leave that cold and pleasureless town for dead and head forward with his destruction, out into the world at Jenova's side.

Nanaki backed away, shaking his head and breathing hard. "A spell. . . "he muttered, "He's ignoring us for a damned spell, Mr. Berk."

"What do you mean 'a spell'? Like that flashy flamin' skull spell from yesterday?"

Nanaki wasn't sure, but he thought he could sense much more power than what had infested the air of Sector Three the day before. This would be more than something meant to paralyze them. This could quite possibly be something very big. Circling the occupied demon with long strides, Nanaki tried to maneuver his way around to Tifa and Cid, who were stuck on the concrete stoop beneath the threatening claws of the beast. Tifa was glaring down at a circle of gold clutched in her palm while Cid was attempting to stand up and fight back, cursing his injuries.

"Run! "Nanaki fervently commanded to them both, a flame trail from his tail streaming out behind him as he dashed and bucked in the snow, leaping like a cat in his excitement, "He's going to use magic!"

"Fuck. . ."Cid muttered half-heartedly, trying to turn Venus Gospel into a cane. Nanaki eyed him anxiously, then ran forward between Chaos' legs and tried nudging the pilot to his feet, snapping at Tifa who refused to move. Berk reloaded his gun with a click and began firing at the demon again, sweat beading out on his forehead as the air around him crackled uncannily in his ears.

"Don't waste your bullets."

"No worries, Shinra pays for 'em, heh heh."

Wait.

Shit. That voice.

Berk lowered his gun slowly, seeing Nanaki, Cid, and Tifa suddenly gazing off behind him, the humans' faces drained to the same color as the snow. The young Turk knew he should probably look over his shoulder and see what they all were staring at, but he couldn't move. Probably because he already had a damned good idea who it was. Probably because he recognized that voice.

The touch of a strong, gloved hand on his shoulder made Berk nearly jump out of his skin. His dark eyes inched over and looked at it for a moment, just a moment, imagining where that hand had been, what it had done, who it had killed. But then it shoved him politely out of the way and, too shocked to stop himself, Berk fell on his knees into the snow, immediately turning around and staring along with everyone else.

"Excuse me, "Sephiroth murmured, giving him a quick glance, then turning to Chaos. His cloak trailed behind him as he walked, falling over his broad shoulders like a cool blue shadow. Whispers of cold breeze danced around Masamune's naked blade and the sword sang eagerly, breathing it in.

The sword. That arc of silver and light. Blood. Blood. That was the only word that screamed through Tifa's stricken mind as she watched him approaching with steady footsteps, approaching the demon threatening her life but approaching her too. She crawled backwards, hitting her head against the wall of the home behind her, eyes wide and streaming tears with the fear that now rose up to replace her anger at Jenova. It was Sephiroth. He was here, back from the dead to kill her and destroy everything again. No! It couldn't be! She was dreaming, Sephiroth was dead!

"Tifa! Tifa, it's all right!" Cid pushed the pain of his injuries away and got on his knees, falling on his friend and wrapping two strong warm arms around her shoulders, anchoring her to reality and trying to bat away some of the terror he saw in her face. "He isn't real, he's just a damned summon, remember? It isn't the same Sephiroth, we killed him! Do

you remember? We all fought him, then Vincent, Cloud, and I finished him off. . . remember? Don't forget about that, that was real."

"No. . ." her voice was a whisper, unbelieving, frightened, but angry at the same time, "No. . . no, I can't fight him and Jenova and Cloud. . . no, Cid, it isn't fair, it isn't fair!" She struggled in Cid's arms but the pilot grit his teeth and held her tighter, shielding the view of the old dead murderer with his own body, pushing the woman's head into his shoulder.

Sephiroth frowned and his proud jaw grew a little less firm. He had half an urge to run away and spare that woman the pain of having to look at him. Those sobs tore at his soul. He was used to such things. No though, that was a lie. He heard such cries often but he wasn't used to them. Dammit. The torture was here too it seemed. The hell wouldn't stay behind him, in the LifeStream. Sephiroth's hell was everywhere, he'd shaped a little piece of it inside of everyone he'd ever hurt. Damn the irony of it.

Tightening his grip on Masamune, forcing himself to remember his purpose and his reason for even existing anymore, the old General stalked forward and stared down his enemy. Chaos still stood there in the dirtied, bloodied road of Icicle Inn, body shimmering as electrical currents of dark energy flooded his limbs. Sephiroth felt the pulses and couldn't help but shudder, remembering when he'd had something just as lethal in his stock of offenses. He didn't have it anymore but he told himself he didn't need it. He didn't bloody want it, it wasn't worth the price. Movements subtle, graceful, gorgeous, he played Masamune's hilt through his fingers, moving the long blade in a slow circle through the air, letting it catch the light, letting it sing. He brought the tip of the blade to a gentle rest at the end of Chaos' chin. The katana quivered there, just barely grazing the demon's dark leathery skin and Sephiroth stood silent and smirking at the other end, staring his opponent in his one good eye. That was his challenge.

Everyone there but the summoned warrior cringed and flinched as Chaos roared and lunged, concentration broken by his own lust for Sephiroth's blood, unable to finish his spell. Sephiroth leapt backwards, swinging Masamune around and behind him, coming to a stop in a crouched position in the snow. It was cold, melting through the knees of his pants. Cold. Damn, but physical sensations were overlooked by the living. The feel of the cold made him smile.

Chaos blasted a ball of something from out of thin air towards him and the warrior dodged sideways, keeping his sword arm held high and his weapon from striking the ground. He twirled on one knee, then shot up to his feet, skipping backwards as the demon lashed out with both claws, slicing through the air and just barely missing cutting through his shoulder. As Chaos was trying to catch himself from the momentum of lunging forward, Sephiroth struck out with a combination of blows that left a pattern of gashes in the thing's chest and left side. Roars and dark red oozed from the demon and Vincent was overjoyed at the pain. It was a bitter enjoyment but it was all he had, he'd take it any day.

Eyes fixated on the battle, Marlene ran forward, a stitch in her side, watching the events in the middle of the town with morbid interest. Of course Masamune could hurt Chaos. The power of the Planet countered the power of Death. Rather elementary elemental Planet theory, pretty obvious, she thought. So why were Cid and Reeve and all of them laying there in the snow looking so amazed that Sephiroth was able to hurt Chaos? Marlene shrugged it off and kept running, swallowing hard. Perhaps it was because they'd just spent a half an hour futilely battling the thing. Yeah, that was possible. Shaking her head, she moved a bit faster, noticing her friends regrouping, desirous to join them. She saw Tifa cowering there by herself on the stoop, Cid moved off to stand near Nanaki as a backup pair of fighters despite both of their injuries. Marlene wanted to comfort her friend, wanted to help. Tifa needed someone who'd understand. Barret hadn't been there for her, Marlene would be.

Under the wan light of the dawn sun, Chaos lay there breathing hard and Sephiroth circled him, watching his fallen opponent with cool green eyes and a bloodied blade. He'd let it regain its feet, catch its breath. The demon had to be tired after AVALANCE had worn it down, and Sephiroth was too honorable to press his advantage. Besides, this fight was interesting, he was in no specific hurry to have it end so soon.

"I thought Bugah specifically told Marlene not to summon him!" Reeve's voice was a hiss that tickled Berk's ear as they both stood with their backs flat to the wall of the town's lone tavern. The barkeep and Arik Bivs had long since retreated into the woods somewhere. The young Turk shrugged in response, eyes glued to the battle.

"I don't think it was her, sir," he whispered, finally swinging his gaze from the scene, "Because uh, here she comes. You should ask her about it."

Marlene jogged towards them from the edge of town, steps hampered by the snow, jeans soaked through, hair hopelessly unbraided. Berk watched her approaching. Amazingly enough, she was the only thing able to get him to take his eyes of Chaos' panting form on the ground and Sephiroth's imperialistic figure standing over him. He watched Marlene and started grinning like an idiot for no real reason, not really surprised that she hadn't stayed on the airship. Hell, that was just Marlene. He was starting to understand that now.

A cunning, cruel look to his features, burning through the snaking blood across his noble face like the very flames he'd

created, Chaos watched the young woman's approach, ignoring the nearby humming of Sephiroth's blade. Marlene was capturing his eye too. In fact, she had his entire attention all to herself. After just a fraction of a second of thought, the demon decided she was close enough.

As though the entire world had suddenly slowed down just for him, Berk caught sight of Chaos. The monster was looking at Marlene with dark lust in his face, his black lips curled up in a snarl of pleasurable anticipation. Berk knew in that instant what he was going to do. With a cold, frightened hollowness in his chest, he saw the demon fly up from the ground, shedding snow, shedding his own glistening blood and dive towards Marlene, screeching like some bird of prey, horns lowered to pierce her heart. The speed of his attack, his fury, blew straight past Sephiroth, knocking the seasoned warrior to the ground. His lethal black form flew past Cid and Nanaki, Reeve took a protesting step forward and got a vicious swipe through his shirt front, swore and fell back. And Marlene could just stand and stare, her vision consumed by the visage of a monster, as Death approached to make her his.

But it never got there and Marlene was never scratched.

Because Berk took it for her.

"Dammit!"

Sephiroth flew to his feet in half a second and charged forward, cursing himself. If one of these people died under his protection, he'd be worse than a failure, he'd be a murderer all over again. With a shout of rage, he threw himself onto the demon, using every ounce of strength the Planet would give him to pull Chaos off the struggling kid in the snow. The demon's horns came free from Berk's chest in a spray of warm red and Marlene paled, only able to look on, trembling with emotion, a hand to her lips. This couldn't really be happening. The princess had been saved by a knight. A knight in a god-damned blue suit! Not breathing, colder now than the northern air had been able to make her before, Marlene stared at the things happening all around her. She stared at the monster and the red streaming off its horns. She stared and she stared and tried to force it to make sense. But nothing would.

Chaos flailed wildly under Sephiroth's grip, his left eye bleeding freely again. Deprived of its murder, the demon was maddened. It lashed out with fangs and claws and the edges of his torn wings and it was all Sephiroth could do to keep it from regaining its feet again and lunging at one of the others. He writhed in the snow, and the air was filled with chips of ice, flurries of white, black pebbly skin and his screeches, his roars. He wasn't scared of that sword, he didn't care if he died, he'd be back. He couldn't speak but the sounds coming from his animal tongue told everything he felt in his immoral, wicked black heart. I'll kill you all. You all are nothing. You all mean nothing and Chaos is everything. Jenova will win.

Reeve shivered with the sound. Nanaki turned away, tail still and lowered. Cid frowned hard, tightening his grip on Venus Gospel.

"Silence, creature."

Sephiroth swung Masamune around with deadly elegance and Chaos actually complied. He stilled his limbs and watched the silver plunging towards him in a deadly quiet. The quiet lasted a full two seconds. When the razor-edged sword pierced his sternum and cut through his heart, he gave a roar that deafened everyone there. And then he was still.

Breathing a little hard, more shaken than he'd like to have admitted, Sephiroth stooped in the snow, drawing his sword from the stricken demon's body smoothly. He stared Chaos in the one eye he could tolerate looking at, and heard a sudden voice echoing in his mind.

Okay. . . Okay. . . heh, now finish it. Cut this thing's head off. He'll just heal, he'll let me suffer, let me heal him, then take over again and I can't take it anymore. So do it. Quick. Kill Chaos.

"No."

Sephiroth was firm in his statement. He swiped the crimson from his sword's edge against the hem of his cloak, looking away from the single red eye and its pleading stare.

Why? You know it's the only way. If anyone knows, you do. It's the only way, Chaos needs to die. That Jenova in him and in me needs to die. Just like that mako monster said, all of it must be expunged from the Planet if the Planet's ever to be safe. . .

"It's Jenova, you're right. Jenova, she's all that must die. Leave it to me. I will not kill again. I will not kill you, Mr. Valentine. I told you that you can control your life. You can. It isn't up to me to end it for you."

That red eye closed in anguish at the answer, even as Chaos' hurt head fell back onto the ground. Sephiroth stood and turned away as Vincent cursed him softly.

"Berk! Berk! C'mon, don't die!"

Marlene sat collapsed at the young Turk's side, ripping off his shirt, gasping and crying and stripping off her own

sweater to press against his shattered chest. He grit his teeth and struggled for air, clawing at the snow as the fiery pain consumed him, a pain so intense it drained the strength from his arms and had him kicking in fierce spasms at the air. Where was the air? What unfeeling prick had taken it all for himself and left poor Berk suffocating?

Dammit, he was really hurt. Reeve balled his fists and paced, fixing his stare on his young employee's horrible injury. He froze and whispered his question in a panic.

"Where's Tifa?"

His gaze darted everywhere searching for his friend but came up with nothing. The stoop she'd been sitting on, her back against the wall, was vacant. He looked to Cid but the old pilot shrugged. He hadn't seen her leave.

"Oh, gods. . . no. She had the Restore materia. . . no. Please, where is she?" Reeve frowned, paling intensely, and then threw himself at Berk's side, "Berk, kid, listen, where's that Restore materia? Berk, snap out of it, listen to my voice, did you give it back to Tifa?"

"Berk, fight it! No. . . !" Marlene grabbed at the lapels of his jacket, smearing his bright blood on her forearms. She shook him forcefully. His protests against his lack of air were growing weaker, a faint oozing of blood creeping down from the corner of his mouth. "Don't you die, you asshole! Don't you do this, don't be like Barret and try to die just to get back at me! I won't let you! Behave, damn you! Wake up and tell me how stupid and bossy I am!"

Berk, eyes squeezed shut, mouthed something feebly, clutching at the air, then used the last of his strength and control to grab at his right pants pocket. Marlene watched the struggles of his bloodied hand and immediately reached into the pocket, producing a rolling cold ball of slightly glowing green, more beautiful, she thought, than any gem she'd ever seen. Berk's dark green eyes opened suddenly and he looked upwards into Marlene's tear-streaked face. Her braids had come undone and strands of her auburn hair clung to her neck, hung in her eyes. God, were those tears for him? Heh. Maybe Miss Mako genius was worth the struggle after all. If she cared enough to cry for him. . .

"Berk!"

His eyes slipped shut and Marlene nearly dropped the materia in her fear.

"Hurry, Marlene, give it to me, you don't have the experience to cast a strong enough heal to help him!" Nanaki snapped at the materia in her hand, jittery with nerves but the young woman snatched it away and held it close to her heart. She clutched the front of Berk's torn dress shirt and knelt down close to his face, anxious to hear a breath, a single respiration, no matter how weak or washed out it was.

Her body burned as she cast the spell, staring down at the pale young man with tearful eyes. Reeve knelt right beside her, frowning intensely, clutching at the hem of his pants just to keep his hands from shaking. The air around him was tinged a soft green as Marlene used her own will and her own spirit to heal the man in the snow. As opposed to the evil presence of Chaos' magic, Marlene's was calm, the power of the Planet she adored. It engulfed the both of them and was beautiful, like a gentle mist off the sea, the low fog over a grassy stretch of green, shifting, changing with the light filtering through it.

But despite Marlene's desire, the desperate intensity of her wanting to heal him, her magic wasn't enough.

"We've got to get to the Highwind, to Bugah. We try another spell and we could stop his heart. Hurry. Hurry, hurry, hurry." Reeve didn't rebuke her for ruining their chance at a full cure with her own feeble attempt but his voice was still a tense whisper. He gestured to Cid and the two of them lifted Berk's still, horrifyingly limp body between them, as quickly but as gently as they could. Marlene shoved the damned worthless materia in her pocket, right beside the red summon, and ran after them, clenching and unclenching her fists at her sides. Who did that man think he was? He'd thrown his life before her feet like a jacket, covering a mud puddle in the road so she wouldn't have to dirty her shoes walking through it. Twice. And both times he'd wound up bleeding, leaving Marlene at his side and on her knees to scream at him.

As the group moved off, Nanaki was left in the snow, looking blank and unbelieving, his three friends, one of them his best friend, walking away towards the Highwind's bulbous shape off beyond the tops of the trees. It was an inviting sight, that airship, portable normalcy to battle the events he'd just witnessed. And Bugah would most certainly need his help with Berk. But Nanaki couldn't go. He still had a friend here. His sharp hearing discerned his raspy breaths from the whistling of the cold winds and the crackling of the burning cottages. He turned around and faced Icicle Inn again, what was left of it, then approached Vincent, head bowed.

In the snow, dressed in nothing but the tattered remains of his black pants, a strip of crimson across his shoulder all that was left of his cloak, Vincent lay there shivering from the cold and from the lethal sword wound in his chest. Sephiroth stood beyond stoically, eyeing the sky, watching the others retreating to the airship, considering what would be the best way to approach them all about what had to be done. He stared at Nanaki thoughtfully as the creature approached, not bothering to turn his shaggy head towards him or even grace the man with a nod. He paced along on four patient paws

until he stood at Vincent's side, then stared down at his friend sadly.

"Vin--"

"Go away."

Nanaki blinked hard at the two growled words. He backed up a pace or two at the fury behind them. "Vincent, I just wanted to tell you that I understand, I know you can't help what's going on, I don't want you to feel guilty."

That was funny. Vincent rested his pale forearm over his eyes and laughed bitterly. "You don't know anything, Red. Just go the hell away or let me kill you now. Because it's going to happen eventually. Either myself or Cloud is going to end up killing every one of you. You don't even know. . . you can't even comprehend. Heh. Is that. . . is that Turk, that boy, going to die? Is he another casualty on the list of people I've killed?"

Nanaki shook his head, feeling Sephiroth's cool gaze on the both of them and uneasy at it. "No, it's Chaos that's killing, that's killed today. I know that and so does everyone else. Chaos and Jenova. Foreign forces, things you can't control, nor have ever been able to. I'm so, so sorry for what's happening. . . no one deserves this."

"I don't need your pity. I don't need anything now except for someone to kill that roaring devil inside of me. But no one will. . . you're all too cowardly, or maybe I'm too cowardly to do it myself. I should be dead now, Masamune split my heart, but SHE won't let it end so easily. Why can't I be what I was? Damn this all to hell."

Gritting his teeth, still covering his eyes, Vincent clawed the snow in fury. Nanaki watched him helplessly for a moment, then flinched as Sephiroth suddenly spoke.

"There's no time to listen to this man rave, "he said lowly, "You waited too long to summon my assistance and now time is short. If you still desire to save your Planet, we have to hurry." He sheathed his sword at his back and looked to Nanaki expectantly, totally ignoring the embittered Vincent.

Nanaki returned his gaze, swallowing hard upon seeing him so close, that same man who'd done so much so long ago, who'd nearly destroyed the world. Who was he to give orders now? "We can't leave Vincent, "Nanaki protested softly, "We came here to get he and Cloud. We messed up with Cloud, I don't have any idea. . . well, I have some idea where he's gone and if there was a way for us to fail, we have. But, but not with Vincent. We've gotten him back, defeated Chaos for now. But we can't have done that only to lose him again. Surely, sir, surely you know something we can do to help him. . . General."

Sephiroth eyed Nanaki, a strange expression on his face. He looked torn. And he felt torn. Yes, he wanted to help the man in the snow, but he also wanted to help that man who'd fled his aid, who was even now on his way to ruin all that he could in his insatiable need for revenge. "I'm not a scientist, "he began, crossing his arms after sheathing Masamune neatly at his back, "I'm not sure exactly what's been done to Mr. Valentine or why he's lost his humanity. I would assume that Hojo has somehow increased the number of Jenova cells he is cursed with, increasing their power and conversely increasing that demon's. I do know one thing. . . " Sephiroth paused and turned his green eyes down to the ground. He flicked his gaze up once towards the Highwind, desirous to know that the airship hadn't left without them. He'd seen the panic in the President's eyes, the frustration in the pilot, in that girl. He knew they wouldn't wait long before chasing after Cloud and that woman, Tifa. He doubted they'd delay long even for Nanaki, to hell with the summoned General. Nanaki looked up upon hearing his last words, hope painted thick in his lion-like features.

"What is it?" he demanded, cutting into the man with his glance, "What do you know?"

"You must look for Chieko. Mr. Valentine must find Chieko."

"What?" Vincent said the word bitterly, something like a laugh souring the syllable. "That monster. . . she'll kill us all, what help could she be to me?"

"I don't know. But I do know that your salvation lies with her."

"And how do you know that?" Nanaki asked, stepping forward, "And how do we trust you? I know that our options are ludicrously limited and Vincent is hardly in a position to question you, but you could easily be a trick, or, or a tool of Jenova. Your connections with that thing go back a long way."

"I can't make you trust me. All I can do is offer what I have. I'll give you the little power granted to me by the Planet and if you take it. . . I'm very grateful." Sephiroth looked away, seeming suddenly uneasy, "I'm a . . . damn this. I'm a very prideful man. I won't get down on my knees to you, to neither of you, none of you. I will not beg for you to accept my help or my apologies. But I would advise you, as the former General of the greatest army on the Planet, that it would be in your best interest to trust me. I'm an ally. And whether you cooperate with me or not, I'll be spending the next few hours fighting the greatest threat this Planet has ever faced. Yes, greater than the one I presented thirteen years before. If you fight alongside me, and again, I'd advise it, than that only makes my task a bit easier. And a bit more fulfilling."

Sephiroth looked away, not meeting Nanaki's gaze. After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat and declared,

"Cloud has gone North. To find Jenova's remains. That woman, er, Miss Lockhart? She's gone after him, on a golden chocobo, I saw her leave as Chaos was distracting the rest of you. Cloud is our first priority, the greatest threat. I think that Mr. Valentine realizes that. And I think he realizes that he can help himself. Hojo seemed very adamant about that fact. Valentine can help himself, those were his words."

"Hojo?" Nanaki shook his furry head, lowering his brow in confusion, "When did you talk with him? He's dead."

"Yes he is. I talked to him before I was summoned. It was. . . an enlightening conversation." Sephiroth hoped that was enough of an explanation. He began walking away towards the Highwind. He could hear the airship's massive engines beginning to whir, the sound floated to his ears on the breeze.

"There's nothing you can do, "Vincent's gasp tore through the distant sound of machinery. His voice was resentful for reasons he couldn't even explain. "Nothing, "he repeated, "Cloud doesn't care what he has to do to get his revenge but he'll do it. He's gone North to give himself to Jenova, bring her back, return the cells that Professor Hojo lent him eighteen years ago. There's nothing you can do now. I'll be up there soon enough, and she'll grab herself out of me too. Then Death, the real Death that the human race has avoided these past two thousand years, that the Cetra spared us of, will be revived and she'll tear through this Planet, through all of you. . . there's nothing you can do. . . "

"That's not you talking, Vincent, "Nanaki growled, the fur on his back and shoulders bristling, "I know that's not you."

"It doesn't matter either way, "Sephiroth cut in, turning from the airship briefly, "The truth is the truth. But he's wrong about one thing: there is something we can do. This is far from over." Frowning with determination, he set off through the snow towards the Highwind, his hair like a silver curtain in the breeze. He left a few last words in his wake, enough to set his own conscience a bit more at ease. "Your fate is in your own hands, Mr. Valentine. My father raved of it."

"My own hands. . . " Vincent muttered, "I don't even have my own hands, I don't have anything."

Nanaki lowered his head, as though feeling the woes of the entire world on top of it. The problems were heavy, they kept his ears from raising, his gaze from rising up to eye his friend there on the ground. Berk. He should go help Berk. As painful as it was to admit, there was nothing he could do for Vincent. Frowning deeply, his one eye burning with unshed tears, he turned and began to trudge after Sephiroth, the Highwind hanging there in the distant morning sky like a black paper cutout. Vincent heard him leaving and flung the concealing arm away from his face. The cold stung at the gouge in his left eye and had him shivering with pain.

"Red!" he called to his retreating friend. He swallowed hard, gritting his teeth. "You were right, that wasn't me. Listen, you can do this. I know you can. The only thing that keeps me from snapping is my repeating that over and over to myself. This has to end, we have to win. There's no other option. Failure is not an option. You do what you must and I'll do what I must and as long as we're working towards the same goal, we'll come out on common ground. Whether that ground's at the bottom of a bloody canyon or atop Mount Nibel, well, I suppose that that'll be up to those with some say in all of this. But we're on the same side and win or lose, we'll do it together. Right?"

Nanaki got as close to a smile as he was capable of, the skin wrinkling up around his eyes. He nodded and looked his friend dead on, hiding his repulsion of the wounds on his face.

"All right, "he said, slowly, his voice thick, "Okay. I'll see you later then."

He turned and trotted off on muffled paws, following Sephiroth's dark form into the blackness of the evergreen forest surrounding the town. Vincent watched him moving away, feeling as though it were important to see something so comforting as long as it was there. A friend. A reminder, a piece of his past, of better days. Sephiroth was there too and that was a damned strange sight but even in the silver-haired murderer's form, there was something bright, a shimmering link to something better. Vincent smiled softly and the bitter helplessness fled his face as he lost himself, for just a few brief seconds, in memories. But memories never lasted, they could never be as gorgeous as the original event. The recollections of a thousand stolen kisses, a passionate embrace, were so bloody inadequate and wan compared to the actual feel of her soft skin, lips against his, words meaning more than anything else he'd ever heard, that he balled his fist up in frustration and beat at the ground, a single savage blow that sent pain through every inch of his body. He should just shove the past away. Yeah, he always told himself that. But he never could. Never. He was obsessed with something dead and it wouldn't let him live.

A sudden flutter in his mind made Vincent look up, shoving the past away and confronting the present with a sickening feeling in his stomach. Chieko. She was near. . . somewhere close. Sephiroth said he should look for Chieko. He didn't know what that meant, nor why finding that murderous beast could be of any help to him, but he found himself anxious to follow the advice. He wasn't going to hang his hopes on something so insane but that statement stuck in his mind and made him sit up, cursing violently as wave after wave of merciless pain tore through his head and chest. He felt the sword wounds in his chest crawling like worms across him with his every movement; they throbbed and his left eye burned as though someone had embedded a heated poker in his head. Damned swiss army knife.

"Chieko!"

His first attempt at calling her name out was futile. His lungs just weren't complying with his orders. He coughed up a bit of blood, cleared his throat and tried again. His second shout was only a fraction better than the first but he refused to call out with his mind, Jenova would hear. He could feel that dark force's presence stronger here than he had anywhere else. In Midgar, it'd been like a whisper when she'd sent her words into his mind, and the image of her as that beautiful woman had been like a shadow. But here, those whispers turned to shouts, so deafening that they made anything else hard to hear. Her very spirit festered in the air, radiating in waves of unseen but very much felt energy from somewhere close by, somewhere North of there, hidden in those looming mountains. Whatever was left of her was somewhere up there, curled and hidden away, reformed after thirteen years of patience and concentration. She'd been strong enough to influence he and Cloud all the way in Midgar, to use her energy to kill sixteen guards, to heal Chieko as she'd lain on the floor of the mako room. Now that they were here, and soon to be basking in her very presence, Vincent just didn't want to know what she'd be capable of doing. Destruction, torture, death. Nothing at all pleasant.

After a few minutes of calling to Chieko, Vincent gave it up. The monster was there but not willing to show herself. He wondered why. He was easy prey, laying there injured in the snow, he knew she couldn't possibly fear him. Right?

Heh, there went the Highwind. After a bit of groaning, Vincent pushed himself to his feet and stood there, wavering slightly, head turned up to watch the airship as it took off and headed North. It moved slowly at first, as though hesitant, well-informed of what it was chasing, but then got a bit of a confidence boost and picked up speed. Vincent turned away, crossing his arms close around his chest against the cold, and then began to pace. Waiting.

What the hell else was there to do? As long as he was hurt, Chaos let him have control and suffer through it for him. But as soon as he was healed, the demon would snatch his body up and slam Vincent back in his cell. Until that happened, there was nothing to do but wait. He paced down the deserted Icicle Inn road and towards his boarded up cottage at the end of town, swinging his gaze around as he walked.

Most of the small village was gone. The fires played in the remains like bright buzzards let loose, leaping into the sky, fluttering wings of orange and yellows and then the black feathers they shed pluming upwards and spreading dirty into the sky. The town's main road was a mess, full of blood, human footprints, and then Chaos' immense claws. He walked past one of the latter and compared it with his own bare foot, an uneasy expression tip-toeing across his face. How could something like that, something so wrong and heartless and evil dwell inside of him? The thought that Hojo had ever seen him as comparable to such a monster left him uneasy, despite his certainty that it wasn't true. But still, Hojo had told him, in his dreams and in reality, that Vincent had been his own inspiration to create Chaos. Vincent as the inspiration for a devil. Huh. There had to be some truth to it, even Professor Hojo wasn't so screwed as to create something so vicious straight out of his own head. But what did it matter if it was true or not? Whatever he'd been as a naive young bastard had died long ago. Except he couldn't say that with true confidence because it really hadn't. It really really hadn't. Hojo hadn't let the Turk die, he'd made him immortal, given him claws, and named him Chaos.

"I doubt anyone's ever had the things they've done or the person they used to be come back and haunt them in such a physical manner," he whispered to himself blankly, "I suppose, if I want to add a touch more guilt to the pile on my back, I could argue that it's my fault Chaos was ever created. I had to be the Turk, I had to be the bad ass. Heh. But I won't even bother with that thought. I'm in no short supply of guilt."

How much longer? He kept trying to distract himself but that thought wouldn't let him be. How much longer did he have until Chaos came back? He didn't like to admit it to himself but he was scared. Scared of whenever that was. If it had been only himself that was suffering he'd have borne it without a single protesting thought but knowing that he was being used to kill a world, that made him wish so desperately, so heatedly that Sephiroth had killed him when he'd had the chance that he was nearly breathless with the desire. Why hadn't he? He'd been right there, it could have all ended so easily.

"Chieko! I know you're out there. You can hear me, I know it. Come out!"

Vincent coughed again, kicking snow up with his toes, ploughing a trail before him, nearly to his cottage. How much longer? His wounds were almost healed, the slitted gash from Masamune that'd cut clean through his heart was now barely there. He gave it a glance with his good eye and almost laughed, it was so damned weird.

Ah, there it was. He stopped dead in his tracks and frowned, the world beginning to spin in dizzying circles before his eyes. That familiar push, that insistent growl. Chaos crouched on the edge of his mind, longing to be free again. It didn't ever seem to get tired, or become satisfied. It was even more enthusiastic to escape now, it had vengeance to seek. It felt itself wronged and wanted to make up for it.

"Damn. . ." A weary sigh slipped past his lips and Vincent let himself fall to his knees. He was too tired to even put up much of a fight. Chaos would win out against him anyway, why bother? He was there now, roaring in his ears and

deafening him, trying to steal his regained human vision and dye it red, eager to swipe back control. And for reasons he couldn't even explain, stupid scientific reasons, genetic reasons, he would get control. . . and Vincent would disappear again.

It gets lonely, after a while, just sitting by yourself in the dark. It's all right at first, you even maybe think you prefer it to light; less to see, to think about, makes it easier to forget and live. Not forget and live and move on, just live. Living solely for yesterday as opposed to tomorrow, what a sick joke.

If I could, what would I do now? Where would I go? North? After Cloud and her? I would. I'm a just man and I'd go or no other reason, I wouldn't need it. But why really? Why do I give a damn if the world ends? If the human race is ground into the dirt? Where the hell do I get off having a conscience or caring? But I do. That's why Hojo did this. He wanted to make the misanthropist miss his humanity. He wanted the murderer keenly aware of his conscience. It is the perfect, ultimate irony for me, it works on so many god damned levels. Huh. The bastard taught me a last lesson, a couple of them. I'm human after all. Well, hell, I suspected as much.

A sudden movement, a swishing of snow from behind and a raspy breath made Vincent shake off his thoughts and snap about. Chieko was there, looking slightly nervous and extremely confused.

"What did you. . ." she began, looking behind her then squinting off to make out the Highwind moving beyond the roof-line of the buildings, "What were you calling me for, human?"

Vincent almost smiled at the great creature looking so much like a child, but gasped sharply instead, clutching at his chest and beginning to breath hard. "I was told that 'my salvation lies with you', Chieko, "he answered softly, "And I'm quite desperate for salvation right about now. Do you know why someone might say something like that?"

"No. . ." She paced a few steps, nervously looking North, and Vincent watched her keenly. He noticed the satchel around her neck suddenly and narrowed his eyes. There was something very familiar about it. Chieko saw him eyeing her burden and in uncharacteristic cooperation, she arched her neck up to let him see better, revealing her thick red throat and the worn torn leather satchel strapped about it. The thing had seen better days. The material was worn through and caked with blood but there were a few things still visible on its surface. The Shinra seal for one, and that in itself was bizarre. Reeve didn't use the red diamond symbol anymore, it had come to be too closely associated with all of the evil the corporation had committed. There was a strange yellow biochemical symbol on the satchel too, squarely sewn onto the top flap and this made Vincent realize just what the entire affair was: a transport case for chemicals, he'd often had to escort such things from building to building, floor to floor, as a Turk.

"What's in there?" he asked suspiciously, finally condescending to look Chieko in the eye. She shrugged and turned away again.

"Something of my father's. I was supposed to give it to you."

"Ah." Vincent leaned heavily against the side of his home, nearly able to hear Chaos' snapping jaws in his ear. He bent over a bit, fighting the burning in his chest and head, tapping a nervous melody against the blackened plank wall of his cottage. "Do you think you might then?"

"No. I hate you and I hate Cloud. You killed my father and if he'd been thinking straight he never would have asked me to deliver this to you. I saw a look in his face as he strapped this burden about my throat. This is something to appease his conscience."

"Hojo didn't have a conscience. Not one to speak of anyways."

Chieko scowled, a low growl tumbling from her tongue and into the coolness of the air. Vincent eyed her weakly, a hand to his head, distractedly tugging at his forelock.

"She's abandoned you, "he said simply but surely, "Jenova doesn't care for you anymore. You're worthless. Do you wish to confront her about it? I know where she is, exactly where she is. I'll take you to her. If you'll let me have that thing 'round your neck."

"How do you know where she is?" Chieko asked dubiously. She moved the satchel about, letting the yellow symbol on the top of it flutter around like a butterfly. She saw the man's eye watching it in desperation and nearly laughed, enjoying the sudden power.

"Just because she doesn't talk to you anymore doesn't mean she's abandoned her two 'favourites', "Vincent explained, wiping at the sweat standing out on his brow. He wanted to collapse right there in the snow, fighting off Chaos was like trying to pull a sword out of his stomach. "I know exactly where she is because she's right where I left her last. Do you want to go? No tricks, Chieko, I'll guide you there myself. You must be tired of trailing behind Cloud and I, hiding. Too scared to join us, to help, but too lost to go anywhere else."

"I am tired of this aimless wandering, "she admitted suddenly, glad to say the words, "I want to know what I should

do. You won't betray me, will you? I'm tired of being betrayed." She sounded like a frightened child and Vincent was quite serious when he answered.

"No, I won't betray you. I don't know what Chaos might do, but I never will."

"You promise?"

Vincent chuckled at the absurdity, running a shaking hand through his hair. "Whatever life I have to call my own, I swear by it."

"Alright."

He watched her suddenly looking around nervously, as though expecting something to come up, her dead father perhaps, and rebuke her for cooperating with this man. But there was no one there. Just snow and fire. Off in the nearby woods she could hear and smell the citizens of the destroyed town rustling about, their eyes pasted on the two of them. But she didn't care, she only wanted to see her mother again, to prove to her that Chieko could be just as lethal as Cloud or Vincent, could be just as useful, just as powerful. Chieko would give Jenova a reason to love her again, she'd make her love her.

Approaching Vincent quickly, she moved the strap close to his hand but instead of fiddling with the buckle, he severed it all with his claw. The worn leather collapsed into his grasp and in an effort to keep it from falling to the snow, he himself fell backwards, swearing softly at the weakness of his limbs. But he kept the satchel safe. Sitting with his legs tucked under him, he undid the straps that'd held the top flap down, revealing the dark interior and the glistening of sunlight off glass.

"What is this?" he murmured, moving his good hand through the vials inside carefully. They all were empty or shattered but one, a tiny glass tube with a cork stopper. There was a syringe at the very bottom of the bag and then a wadded up, tattered, slightly damp piece of paper. Manipulating his claw carefully, he unfolded it, making a face at the dark blood dried onto the edges and the crimson fingerprints scattered along the thing like the grisly footprints of a monster.

Something from Hojo. . . it could be anything but Vincent doubted it was anything good, no matter what Sephiroth had spoken of. Still, when you were hanging by a noose, your only options were to fall and choke, or try climbing the rope. He grit his teeth and forced his blurred vision to focus on the letter in his hand. The writing was hard to make out but he recognized it as Hojo's in an instant. His uninjured eye scanned it quickly.

"Vincent, how badly do you desire your freedom? By now, I'm sure you desire it deeply. But you're trapped in more than Chaos and you know I speak the truth. But I won't ramble, I can't allow myself the luxury. . .

"This chemical is the only thing that's been proven to neutralize and kill Jenova cells. I've kept it for a long time, close to me, as it's hard to come by. It was made by . . . oh damn, I'm sure you don't care and I'm rambling again. It's mainly high level mako, that's all you need to know. Mako, life, will kill Jenova, death. You can use this to kill a number of the cloned Jenova cells in your blood. And the way I manipulated your body, Chaos will die with them. You cannot normally kill Jenova cells but what I did to you yesterday I made intentionally temporary. I knew she would turn against me, I was never THAT naive. I don't resent her greed, it's too much like mine and I refuse to be a hypocrite, but I resent her cruelty. Even I was never that cruel. I am doing this now to prove that I think. And to close the book on the past. Those days are dead. I have to let them die. So do you.

"But Vincent, again, how badly do you desire your freedom? This chemical's testing was very limited and the side effects are unknown to me. Hell, it could easily kill you. But what does that matter? You're barely even alive anymore. Are you ready to return to what you were so long ago? I remember you. I remember me. I remember her. I told you before that what I did to you was a kindness in a way. And it was, I think you'll realize that now. A suffering outside, a physical suffering to match the pain in your heart. A link to her. You may hate me for it, but I know you so well.

"That chemical is far from a cure, but it should give you a chance. The rest is up to you.

"I'm not even fucking sure why I'm doing this. The last of Hojo's little games, I suppose, like that letter in the mansion, but -- I don't know. I'm running out of room and this damned pen's getting hard to hold. Mr. Valentine, Vincent of the Turks, if the philosophers and the priests are right after all, I look forward to meeting you again in the LifeStream. Fondest regards, Hojo, M.D.."

No postscript. It ended there. Vincent let his hand drop into his lap and the letter fluttered in the breeze, making little crackling sounds with the shifting of the winds. Chieko sat licking her paws clean, wondering why the man had grown so suddenly quiet. There was a look on his face as though someone had slapped him.

"Hojo. . ." he finally whispered, smiling weakly, "Even when you attempt a righteous act it comes out twisted and wicked. Heh-- !" The start of a laugh stuck sharply in his throat and was immediately replaced by a groan as Chaos did everything in his power to try and take over before his old master could go through with the deed. Chieko skipped

backwards, eyes widening as Vincent began to writhe against the burn of transformation, clenching his fists, biting his lip, tensing every muscle to keep himself in his own possession. He jerked out with a violently shaking hand and grabbed for the green-filled vial, immediately filling the syringe and amazingly getting most of the liquid into the tube despite his trembling arm.

"I don't care if it kills me, I don't give a damn! You bastard, after over forty years, now it's my turn," he snarled, laughing at the same time, watching the syringe in his hand with a wicked gleam in his good eye, "Heartless, soulless, and the cause of more pain than I care to think about. You laughed at my misfortunes then caused me more when I couldn't fight you anymore. You're the remains of that dark day, and my dark past, and you're part of the reason I can't forget."

With a wild eye, he looked over his pale forearm and found a vein. "How badly do I desire my freedom, Professor?" he asked passionately, "Only you really know. 'Cause you're the one who held the keys to the cage. For so long, so damn long. . ."

This was it. He stared at the silver needle, so flawless, so smooth, ready to slide right through his skin and end over forty years of physical and mental torture. It could kill Chaos. That letter said it could kill him. It could be a lie, Hojo could have been lying through his teeth, but Vincent didn't care, when you were hanging, choking, ready to die anyway, what did it hurt to kick your feet? Maybe you'd just be breaking your neck, but there could be a ledge down there, something to set the toe of your shoe on, something to keep you alive. He rested his thumb on the plunger, and stared at the needle, unblinking.

But did he . . . want it dead? That question made him pause.

"Can I really end it so easily? The scars are all I have left, Chaos is all I've had. That and those hollow memories that don't mean a god damned thing anymore. If I kill the pain of Jenova, then what the hell do I have left. . . to remind me?"

But why did he need to be reminded? Or even punished anymore? Would it be so terrible if he tried to live a normal life, if he stopped going to that cave every year, if he perhaps left Icicle Inn. . . and lived in the world as though he weren't some faded spectre of a man? "I know why I'm hesitating. . ." he whispered, voice faint with shock, "I'm still hiding. If I can't use Chaos as an excuse to. . . to stay with my head buried in the snow, then I'll have to admit I'm really hiding. . . away. Pretty pathetic." Vincent laughed to himself and dropped the syringe into the snow, resting his forehead on his hand and shutting his eyes. "What do I do? What the hell do I do? Lucrecia. . . tell me. My life is yours, tell me what to do with it."

Chieko watched the conflict before her cool brown gaze in total apathy. Her eyes widened as Vincent suddenly shot to his feet, clutching his sides, eyeing the syringe on the ground with an enraged intensity. "You want control, Chaos? You wanna kill something else, you damned devil? Where did you come from? Tell me! You're not me! You're not! I kept you caged because you're evil and dangerous, not because I was hiding from you! I know that. . . that's common sense. Maybe I did hide from other things, maybe I used you as an excuse for it. I didn't want to go on as though nothing had happened, I couldn't do that, I couldn't force myself. I tried it and it was like living in a movie. I followed a script but none of it was real. The past, those old dead days and that dead woman, that murdered love is all that was real. I never felt alive except when I was in that cave. You want to know why? Do you, Chaos? Because I should have died with Lucrecia. That coffin should've been buried with a corpse inside, not this shell, this monster that eventually broke out again. Where am I? Because I don't know anymore! That thing that I was, that Turk, is he really dead? If that's so, what am I? I don't want to be the, the remains of something. But I can't build a new life. I can only hide away like a coward and remember what I used to be. You can't live on memories. I'm tired of trying. . .

My life doesn't mean anything. What am I doing to add something to the world? I'm not doing anything. Just surviving. Just "getting by". Maybe I deserve to be made to watch as these things all die around me, as I kill them. Instead of punishment for sitting by as Hojo killed his wife, this is my punishment for sitting by as my obsession obliterates my life. My punishment for the last thirteen years of hiding.

"But punishment is supposed to help you learn your mistakes, right? Yeah. And so now, I think I've learned."

Before Chaos could dull his purpose, Vincent lunged for the syringe and took it up, trying to hold it steady in his good hand. His hand. It was true, his life was in his own hands, so was his salvation. Salvation from more than Chaos or Hojo or Jenova's cruelty. Salvation from himself and a lifetime of torture. Shaking his head in disbelief, doubled over in pain, he jabbed the needle fiercely into his arm, pressing down on the plunger with a fiery determination and filling his veins with a healing poison, as though jamming the detonator of a bomb. Only he wouldn't be running and hiding from the blast this time, he'd sit there and let it explode in his face.

He sat frozen for a moment after jerking out the needle and flinging it away. He stared at his arm and inside, Chaos was quiet, shocked, frightened into submission. A single bright bead of red marked the spot and Vincent clenched his fist to make the bead well up and run sideways down his arm. He could feel the chemical burning through his veins, a cleansing fire. Hojo, science had manipulated the divine elements again.

"Are you all right?"

Chieko didn't sound concerned as much as impatient. She stamped a fore paw petulantly and arched her wings, eager to jump onto the back of the wind and let it carry her to her mother's arms. She wanted something, a purpose, just. . . something. It didn't even have to be anything specific, just a reason for her to put one paw in front of the other, a reason for anything.

"Damn. . . I'd suspected this would hurt. . ."

Chieko blinked quickly and backed away as Vincent staggered towards her, then straight past without a second glance. Giving a cry, he fell against the front door of his house and immediately tore the doorknob out, flinging it with a curse into the snow. Splinters of wood clung to his fingers and he shook them off, then stumbled inside, leaving Chieko to look after him with her jaw hanging half-open in surprise. It was a few minutes but he emerged again, changed into clean, warm clothes, a red bandanna wrapped around his head and covering his gory, half-healed, left eye, and three different guns slung over his shoulders. He couldn't walk straight, he moved bent nearly double, his tattered hair in his face. The world was swimming, his vision blackening, and he wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to keep going before the pain tearing through him had him collapsed in a heap in the snow. What the hell had been in that vial? Why did it insist upon hurting him so? Whatever it was, was it killing him? Was that was this was?

"Doesn't matter. . ." he mumbled, standing there trying to catch his breath, "Because it's killing Chaos too."

The demon was roaring and it hurt his head. Roaring out against death. The chemicals, Hojo's mako, was burning the additional Jenova cells away. Not real cells but clones that Hojo had concocted, cells that he'd transferred energy into and granted to Chaos a few nights earlier. The demon's dark consciousness depended upon them to survive. And now they were being exterminated.

Matches. . . Vincent fumbled with them clumsily, blinking away unconsciousness, falling against Chieko's warm sides and fighting to keep on his feet. He took a match from the box in his hand, as Chieko moved her head around to sniff his clothes.

"You smell like turpentine," she remarked, half-suspicious.

"Mineral spirits actually. But good enough. . . dammit. . ." A lit match fell from his hand and Vincent's eyes slipped shut. And then Chaos was there, snapping at him, clawing his heart. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to die and let Vincent still be alive, it just didn't seem fair. "It's never fair, is it, demon?" he whispered shakily, "Burn in hell now. Leave me and everyone else alone." Chaos continued to use the energy of Jenova's cells to batter his insides, desperate to take the man down to hell with him. Nearly conquered, Vincent would have collapsed backwards and to the ground but the owner of Icicle Inn's lone tavern was there to catch him. The barkeep tried to prop him up, ask what was wrong but Chieko immediately lunged and grabbed Vincent out of his arms, sending the older man flying back into the snow.

"We are going," she insisted to herself and to the newly arrived humans. Before Vincent could even a swing a protesting claw her way, she grabbed him in her teeth and flung him on her back. Breathing hard, grabbing at the base of one of Chieko's wings, he forced an eye open and saw the barkeep standing on the ground at the monster's side, staring at them both, Arik Bivs five steps behind. Vincent briefly wondered how much the two men had seen. Did they know it had been Chaos who'd destroyed the town? Did they know who Chaos was? Were they scared? Did they hate him, feel poor for him, what?

"Vincent. . ." The barkeep began as Chieko spread her great leathery wings wide. The older man dropped his arms at his sides in helplessness, at a loss for words. He wasn't even sure why he'd run out here from the safety of the trees. Maybe he felt the need to do something, see something wholesome amidst the wreckage of the world. His words were simple and heartfelt and very human. "Is there anything ya need, neighbor?"

Using the last of his strength, Vincent flung the box of matches towards him. He gestured to his cottage with his claw.

"Please burn it."

And as Arik and the barkeep looked on, Chieko was suddenly gone in a flash of fiery red and black, the air filled with the thunder of her immense wings slapping against it. The bartender held the box of matches lightly in his hands, and stared at them a moment, ignoring Arik's calls at his back.

"I told you, dammit, I told you twelve years ago when he first came here that there was something wrong with the sonnuvabitch, but you didn't listen to me. Oh, he's eccentric, oh, he's just a sober sort of fellow, oh, he's a bit of hermit. But what the hell did we just see? He changed from a murdering fuck of a monster to a man. He ain't human, he's evil, a damned spawn of satan! We've had that in our town! Our town!! What the hell's happened to Icicle Inn? The god damned chocobo man's blasted it all away!"

Balling his fists at his sides, Arik jumped up and down, piercing the air with a fat finger and pointing up at Chieko's

retreating form, snarling his words, "You bastard, look what you've done! He killed Ghel! And smashed my home, my god damned shop! Where's the Ericksons, eh? They were at home and their home isn't there anymore! Look at all of this, it's gone! Damn it!! Damn, damn Vincent Valentine to hell!!"

Arik ripped his snapping black eyes from the clouds and looked to his friend, whipping an arm out in a helpless gesture, wishing he could sweep the flames, the blood, the horror out of his vision forever. Giving a shuddering sigh, the barkeep ignored him and stepped forward into the darkness of Vincent's home, the broken front door opening before his hand with a creak.

It was dim inside and smelled strongly of mineral spirits. The stuff had been hurriedly, sloppily splashed on the walls and floor. The door to the stable slammed against the wall in the back of the one main room and the barkeep saw that the stable beyond was empty, the main gate outside flung open and the chocobo's loosed and gone. The paintings customarily leaning against the walls inside had been ripped apart. Quick claw marks had torn most of the canvases to scraps hanging loosely off their frames. The interior was a mess, as though the owner had tried to delete the last thirteen years of his life. Only one painting hadn't been touched. The barkeep approached it and knelt at the portrait's side. A woman's profile. She sat in a garden, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes looking up to a beautiful sky.

"Who is that?"

Arik was suddenly standing behind him. His voice broke the stillness harshly, and nearly had the barkeep jumping a foot in the air. The man turned slowly around and shook his head, taking a match from the box in his hand. "I don't know, "he muttered finally, tearing his eyes from the painting, momentarily running his gaze over some of the more frightening works laying torn to ribbons on the floor. He shook his head again, feeling very old. "I don't know what any of this is or what's happened today. I don't really want to know. But I have a feeling, Arik, that for better or worse, Vincent won't be coming back to Icicle Inn."

The match flared up in his hand.

And the cottage burned for a long time.

~\*~

Onward to Part Nine: Descent

Man alive, was this chapter a bitch to write. I nearly gave up on the whole fic out of frustration and after suffering through it, you're probably able to see why. The last two parts will be much better, scout's honor. Anyways, I always welcome comments, criticisms, you know the drill ^\_^ just email me. Later~~