



Part Nine:
DESCENT

CLAUDIUS

But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son--

HAMLET

A little more than kin, and less than kind.

CLAUDIUS

How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

HAMLET

Not so, my lord, I am too much i'th' sun.

Hamlet
Act 1. Scene 2

"Where the bleeding fuck is Barret? What the hell do you mean he "won't come back"? What do you take us all for, a lotta gullible idiots?! You've killed 'im, haven't you? You have! Jus' like years ago, you've cut his throat or floated down outta the blue and stuck your sword through 'im, haven't you, Sephiroth?! Haven't you?!"

Cid lunged forward, teeth bared, and it took both Reeve and Nanaki to hold him back. The Shinra President grunted and swore, doing his best to keep his friend's two tensed arms down while Nanaki stood in front and barred his legs, leaning heavily against him. Cid struggled, swearing blue fire, smoke rising from his cigarette like steam rising from his head. "I'll kill 'im! Whose side are you two on, huh?? Help me send 'im back to hell! Let go a me!"

The Highwind's control room echoed with its master's cries. Sephiroth wished the incensed pilot would shut up, his shouts were giving him a headache. Coolly indifferent, the summoned General stood with crossed arms against a bulkhead and eyed the three before him quite stoically.

"Cid, c'mon, have some sense!" Reeve hollered, struggling to keep his friend sane, "You can't just go and attack him! How do we know he isn't telling the truth?!"

"How do we know? How do we know?" Cid quit his fighting for a minute to stare Reeve in his eyes as though he'd gone absolutely insane, "If I have to answer that question, catman, than you're a bigger asshole than I thought! That's fucking Sephiroth! Seph-ee-roth! Murderer, madman, megalomaniacal lunatic! Killed Aeris, killed President Shinra, killed everything that wasn't nailed down thirteen years ago. . . I mean. . . come on here."

"We're all aware, "Nanaki retorted, "But he's dead, that thing we fought. This is the Sephiroth of before, this is the General, before Jenova drove him mad and made him what we feared."

"Well, "Sephiroth broke in, raising an eyebrow, "That's not entirely true."

"I'm trying to make this simple for Cid, "Nanaki snapped irritably. Practically spitting in his fury, Cid kicked him in the ribs.

"You don't need to "make it simple for me", you overgrown sack of cat shit! I understand exactly what that thing is. And that's why I'm upset! Barret summoned ya, yeah, fine, I'll believe that simply 'cause Marlene told us it was true. And fine, we appreciate the way you pulled Chaos off that Berk kid, very decent of ya, yadda yadda yadda. But what you were summoned to kill is dead now, we're all safe, relatively, and you've served your purpose. So now you skee-daddle back to the LifeStream and let Barret return. Now, dammit!"

With a violent flailing of his arms, Cid broke free of Reeve, sending him flying back into a wall with a frustrated grunt, then leapt over Nanaki, landing squarely in front of the apathetic General. The two eyed each other, one seething, the other with an expression as calm as an afternoon sky. "You bring Barret back. . . "Cid ordered in a low, dangerous tone, "Or I'll make you."

Sephiroth cleared his throat, suppressing a sneer, then responded as tactfully as he could. "Mr. Highwind, I cannot leave yet. As I was attempting to explain before, I was not summoned to kill Chaos. Chaos stood in my way and thusly was

disposed of, but he was not my true foe. Your comrade Mr. Wallace summoned me for a different reason. And I cannot leave until I've accomplished it."

"Don't try that explanation crap on me, Captain Planet, "Cid began heatedly, "Your explanations don't mean crap to me, the entire fuckin' world's about run outta reason. None of this is makin' any sense. I mean, I mean, the fact that Barret summoned ya at all . . . just about floors me. Either for once in his life he's decided to trust somethin' related to Shinra, you namely, or he's finally gone off the deep end of cowardice and has decided to hide until all of this is done with, leaving you in his place. But that's besides the point. Barret needs to come back. We need him, as unwilling, as damned obnoxiously annoying as he is. We don't need you."

Sephiroth smirked and leaned forward fearlessly into Cid's face. His breaths tickled the man's eyelashes. "The fact that you can't see how badly you need me is hilarious. Mr. Highwind."

"Oh, you sonnuvabitch. . ." Grinning in fury and disbelief, Cid drew his arm back and slugged Sephiroth square in his proud jaw. One blow, one smack with a rock hard fist. With a little grunt, Sephiroth took it, stumbling to one side, eyes wide in surprise. When he'd straightened, he felt a line of red trickling from his nose and wiped it away, numbly, unable to do anything but stand there. The entire bridge was suddenly quiet, still, stifled. Nanaki took a step backwards, glancing to Reeve who could only gibber mindlessly, expecting armageddon. Cid had just jacked Sephiroth's jaw. Like, he. . . he'd just frigging sucker punched Sephiroth.

"Ya wanna 'nother one?" Cid stepped forward, arm bent, fingers wriggling, trying to loosen up his knuckles, "All throughout that shit thirteen years ago, all I wanted was to get in a good ole fashioned brawl with you, god-boy. I figured if I could do that, it was all you needed. A few smacks around with the ole Highwind fists and you'd snap right outta your insanity and that'd be that. It feels damned good to punch ya now. C'mon, then. Tell me ya wanna nother one. Please."

Sephiroth straightened, wiping the blood from his nose, then looked down at the smear of red across his black glove, dumbstruck. And not only was he bleeding, that'd actually hurt. Go figure. Shaking his head slightly, he dropped his arm and looked towards Cid, too amazed to be angry. "Yes, "he muttered, "Hit me again."

Cid obliged, socking him another good one in the jaw. Sephiroth stumbled back under the impact, neck snapping about painfully, a grin on his face. It was like being alive again, like being sixteen and back in training, being beaten to a pulp by a superior officer. It hadn't been the best time of his life, but he'd been alive. It took him back to that. Heh.

"Thank you, Mr. Highwind, "he murmured, rubbing his jaw and standing straight. He worked his mouth around gingerly, a crooked smile dominating his fine features.

"Hey, any time, "Cid returned, sticking his fists in his pockets, "You sure you don't wanna 'nother one? Free of charge. Hell, I'll pay you. Hell, we could sell tickets, two hundred gil a piece. Slug Sephiroth, he enjoys it. Damn, we'd be rich."

"Hmm." Sephiroth crossed his arms again and resumed his apathy, leaning back against the bulkhead and taking a deep breath. Cid stepped forward, a bit calmer now, but still demanding the return of Barret.

"Now, are you going to bring my buddy back?" he asked, watching Sephiroth through lowered lids, "Or do I put my fists away and bring out my spear? I doubt you'd ask for second helpings of Venus Gospel."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot leave and he mayn't return until what I've been summoned to destroy is destroyed. It is a matter that is in the Planet's hands, not in my own."

"Alright then, Captain Planet, if not Chaos, what're you gonna kill?"

"Jenova of course. The real threat. Barret Wallace summoned me to stop Jenova. That was my purpose and my desire anyway, but his direct command has now made them more. . . immediate ones."

"Why would he do that though?" Cid demanded, pouting, "He hates you and wouldn't trust your damned ghost or whatever anymore'n me."

"He's your friend, "Sephiroth returned, shrugging carelessly and running his eyes over the rest of the dim control room, "I would assume you'd know. But it doesn't matter, what's done is done. And done for the better too, might I add. Only I know of the way to halt this insanity, to still the Beast of Death before her murders become too numerous and her power too grand."

"Well ain't you cocky?" Cid snapped, turning and beginning to pace the room. He stared at the floor with troubled eyes, scowling intensely. "I don't trust ya, "he suddenly declared flat out, "And I'll never trust ya, not if you give me a kidney or a million gil check or put one a my kids through college. You're Sephiroth, a murderer, and dead or alive, summoned or what the hell ever, ain't nothing gonna change that fact. So I don't trust ya. But I do know from Marlene that Barret, like a damned idiot, summoned you. And it seems we're stuck with you until Jenova is a smear of shit on the bottom of the Northern Crater. Again. So the way I see it, we'll do everything we can to get that bitch deader than dead so that you, ya great murdering, psychotic asshole, can go back inside yer little materia like the blessed adorable little genie

you are. And then Barret can come back and I can split him open, stuff him full of candy, and use him as a pinata at Amelia's next birthday party. Sound good? Sound like a plan?"

Sephiroth stared for a moment, blinking slowly. He set two slender fingers to his chin and stared at Cid like an especially interesting monkey at the zoo. "Are you the comic relief?" he asked finally.

"Hey bitch! Don't you get arrogant and smart with me again or I'll kick you where it counts, you hear me?" Cid stalked up and spit his words in Sephiroth's face. The General returned his vicious stare, suddenly tired of the insults and tired of the threats.

"The next time you touch me, Mr. Highwind, "he said coolly, "I may have to touch back."

Cid snorted but walked away, slightly unnerved by the measured fury in Sephiroth's unearthly voice. "Reeve!" he suddenly barked, snapping about to his friend, "What d'you think? Dammit, what's wrong with you? You been just standing there like a statue. Hey, Red, you too, snap outta it!"

Reeve blinked hard, shaking his head a bit, a hand automatically going up to straighten his tie. "I'm. . . I'm sorry, Cid, "he breathed, stumbling back, "I'm still not believing you punched him. . ." Putting a hand to his head, he sighed and cleared his throat. "Um, yeah sure, I mean, we're all after the same thing, right? So we may as well help each other out. Cid, we do need help, you have to admit it. We've been just getting royally smacked at every bend."

"Speak for yourself, "Cid snapped bitterly, approaching his airships controls and checking on his auto-pilot. He didn't trust the thing with all these mountain peaks about and that storm brewing to the North. "I was up here, in the sky, during most of your little spats with Jenova. And as for Chaos, I would have appreciated it you'd told me beforehand that he was nigh invulnerable. I charged him and then got my ass whipped and my nose busted. I could have saved myself the hassle if I'd known, ya know?"

"Yeah, sorry. But still, you have to admit, with enemies like that, we are, well. . . outclassed. Our best fighters are the ones we're fighting. Er, yeah." Reeve fell back against the wall, sighing heavily, unable to believe just all that was happening. That scene in the snow, it was screwing with his head. Red against white, Chaos' claws and screams, the demon's madness as it had writhed there in the road and then Sephiroth with that sword in his hand. . . gods, it was the stuff of nightmares but he was really living it. His mind balked against the recent memories and his eyes stung to see Sephiroth still before them, standing casual as anything here in the bridge. And Cid was there and Nanaki and CJ and Ifalna were in back with Marlene and Bugah was with Berk. His friends, his employees, his worst enemy. . . relationships were smearing over and it was giving him a headache. Which only mounted to a migraine as he recalled what Midgar now looked like. What he'd left Icicle Inn looking like. And when he remembered that they'd left poor Vincent half-dead in that burning town to chase after Cloud who'd become an enemy and then poor Tifa who'd become a mystery. . . Reeve had to grip a nearby counter to steady himself.

"We're going North, are we not?"

Nanaki stepped forward, shaking off the silent contemplation he'd been entangled in. His tail flickered expectantly as Cid looked up from the controls of his airship. The pilot snorted, snapping random switches, adjusting their course just a hair, then nodded soberly, a few strands of blonde slipping past his pushed-up flight goggles and sticking irritably in his eyes.

"We're going North, "he answered adamantly, "We're going into that Crater."

"But how do you know that's where we should be going?" Nanaki asked, cocking his head to one side.

"I just know. And you do too, don't play dumb, or logical, or optimistic with me, Red. Of course that's where Cloud's headed. And of course that's where Tifa's gone. It rather pisses me off that she's abandoned us. . . I mean, doesn't she think we're a help? Doesn't she think we can help them? Dammit, I'm going to get in a fight with her next time I see her."

"But why the Northern Crater?" Reeve demanded quietly, "Is it because that's where. . ."

"Yes, "Sephiroth confirmed, "That is where your group left her thirteen years ago, thinking she was dead. She's gone no where else, but has been there ever since. Waiting."

"And Cloud's gone to her. . ." Reeve shook his head sadly, the beginnings of a lump forming in his throat. "He's gone to her like her little follower, her little murderer. How. . . how could he betray us like that? Damn this, I don't want to have to fight him. I don't. And I will not."

The bridge was silent and Reeve ground his molars together, biting down hard on the insides of his mouth. It couldn't end like that, not after all they'd done. But. . . what other choice was there anymore?

"But we're going to have to start fighting him, "Nanaki said quietly. He didn't look up though he felt Reeve's dark eyes upon him, "We can't let him resurrect Jenova."

"Re-ressurect her?" The tips of Reeve's fingers got suddenly cold. He slammed them in his pockets, eyes wide, "What. . . what makes you think he'll do that? Or, or that he can. . .?"

"That creature is like a puzzle, "Sephiroth explained, his mouth a hard line of control, "She's reformed the parts remaining in her possession, all that she needs to gain the power to resurface are those parts stolen from her. Those parts stolen and put into other people. She takes back enough of her cells and she'll be whole enough to become that demon of pure destruction that the Cetra sealed for us."

"How evil is she?" Cid asked lowly, gripping the Highwind's controls like a comforting anchor. He shook his head suddenly, laughing at himself. "That sounded stupid. I mean. . . damn, what do I mean? I guess I'm just wondering what the hell she really is."

"The Planet's counter, "Sephiroth answered simply. "The opposite of Life. If she's allowed to come to full power, if she's allowed to return to her nearly whole form, humanity and the entire world will be sentenced to death by her hands. This is very serious, Mr. Highwind. I'm not sure any of you realize just how serious."

"I do, "Nanaki said, "I think I have ever since the very beginning."

"That's true, "Reeve mumbled, dropping a hand down and placing it atop his friend's head comfortingly, humbly, "I think you're probably the only one of us who hasn't had his head up his ass throughout this. You and Marlene anyways. Heh." The Shinra President scratched at his hairline and rubbed at the corners of his eyes, realizing he was finally coming down off his caffeine/adrenaline high. "Well, General, since you said you know how to handle her, let's gather and let you fill us in. Cid, what's our ETA?"

The pilot glanced up and shrugged. "With this fog and the snow as thick as it is, I'm having a hard time keeping us from an unfriendly encounter with these damn peaks. I'm thinking my visibility here is about negative one hundred feet. A half an hour I suppose? That is, if I dock us at that outcropping of rock we used last time."

"Dammit. . . " Reeve scratched his rough chin thoughtfully, "Tifa's going to be way faster on her chocobo. I hope someone's watching out for her. I. . . I don't know who, but, heh. . . someone. I wish she'd waited on us, I wish she hadn't gotten all hotheaded. . . she promised me last night. She promised me she realized how foolish she'd been these past few days. And then she goes off on her own."

"It'll be all right, Reeve, "Nanaki assured him, trying to lighten the atmosphere, "Tifa can handle Cloud better than any of us, better than Cloud can handle Cloud. And she knows that and that's why she's left."

"You can rationalize it out your ass, Red, "Cid called cheerfully, "But Tifa left because she was mad. You weren't sitting there. Chaos dropped Cloud's weddin' ring in her lap. It was like a challenge, a final slap in the face. If it wasn't before, it's utterly personal now. I almost feel bad for Jenova. She doesn't know what she's gotten herself into, pissing Tifa off." Cid laughed to himself, then swore softly and swerved the Highwind just in time to keep the massive ship from scraping its silver hull against the side of a sudden mountain. The jagged peaks were all around, like mines bobbing in the ocean, and he couldn't see a damn one until he was ten feet or so from it.

"I don't care why she's gone off, "Reeve muttered, "I just hope she doesn't get herself killed. I don't know what I'd do. With the kids, ya know?"

"Don't even think that, you idiot, "Cid commanded sharply, "You just hope for the best."

"And prepare for the worst, "Sephiroth cut in, straightening abruptly and uncrossing his arms. He was growing tired of listening to the fruitless conversation. It was actions that counted, not words. Hoping that that woman wouldn't die would not keep her alive, but going down and assisting her with their enemy, that would. "A half an hour is hardly adequate time to prepare, but it will have to do. Now assemble your group and I'll explain what must be done."

Without another word, he stalked out of the bridge and towards the airship's conference room, his footsteps loud and reverberating through the stillness he left in his wake. Reeve and Nanaki stared after him, both still uneasy with his presence, but Cid only kicked at the base of the control panel before him irritably and heaved fifty sighs.

"If you'd told me thirteen years ago that Sephiroth would one day be riding on my airship. . . "he began, addressing no one in particular, "I probably would have told you you'd had one too many." Cid sighed quietly, blue eyes pasted out the fore window, arms tense on the controls. Reeve shook his head and stalked after the summoned warrior, deep gray bags beneath his eyes and twin ravines running down from his nose and acting as frown lines. He didn't bother looking up as Cid continued.

"Look at that. . . "

Reeve ignored the command and left the bridge, but Nanaki obeyed, following his friend's gaze. The view on the other side of the Highwind's grimy fore window wasn't pleasant. The looming peaks of the Northern Mountain chain pierced the snow-choked skies like prongs of the Planet's bloody tiara. Clouds and fog and the freezing ice shards of the blizzard

wrapped the points in white, the Highwind entering it all like a fat clumsy pigeon attempting to fly in the most imposing of heavens. Nanaki blinked hard, then squinted in an attempt to make out their destination beyond all the obscuring mists, sitting up and muttering, "I don't think Jenova could have picked a-- "

". . . More intimidating place. . . " Cid finished for him sharply. The two friends looked at each other and grimaced. The pilot kicked at the controls again, then muttered, "Get outta here and go see what Captain Planet has to say. Tell 'em if it wouldn't be too much trouble, could they possibly frigging talk in the bridge so I could possibly friggin hear? Someone has to do something productive, like. . . fly the friggin airship, eh?" Cid muttered something foul beneath his breath and Nanaki rolled his one eye and padded off, leaving the fuming pilot alone with his controls. The bridge was silent with them all gone and Cid was glad. He doubted he'd get another such moment to himself before the shit really hit the fan. He stared outside, his blue eyes firm on the horizon, and dared Jenova to do her worst.

The air here smelled strange. Tifa thought it must be more than just the sharpness of the chill as it stung the insides of her nostrils, this scent permeated each breath she took and left her dizzy. Had it smelled like this thirteen years before? Smelled so. . . dead?

Yunata chirped uneasily, startled by the solemnity and sadness of both her mistress and their surroundings as the two of them skirted the narrow walkway spiraling down into the Crater and infiltrated the imposing blackness of the void opened before them. It was black, Tifa couldn't see the bottom. Her booted feet struck the rocky ground with a hollow sound that echoed back, echoed back empty. She was so sick of echoes. Echoes coming back to her mockingly, her best intentions, her own wholesome footfalls desirous to help, becoming tainted by the wrongness of her surroundings and made evil, frightening, wrong. That's what all of it had been like. . . Tifa, Cloud, their children, everyone involved getting their emotions twisted around by the intruding, wrong presence that'd settled over their lives. Jenova. . . to hell with Jenova, just that evilness, was screwing everything over; that interloping element, that wickedness, that wrongness, it didn't matter that it was a sentient creature, it could have been anything unwanted and evil; a natural catastrophe, a flood, a madman, anything. . . it was evil that'd come to wreck their lives for the sake of destruction. And Tifa, no matter how she wracked her brains, could not understand how a single one of them deserved it. No one deserved this, not she, not CJ, not Ifalna, not Vincent, not Reeve, and certainly, certainly, certainly not Cloud.

Have I missed something? Did we somehow wrong something at some point in our lives to deserve this now? Thirteen years ago was bad enough, but now this? Could those years of happiness and redemption even compare, even begin to compensate for the price they we're paying for them now?

No.

They were being overcharged, they were being screwed. Unfairly billed for thirteen years of love and it made Tifa so angry she clenched her one fist wrapped around Yunata's reins and then grit her teeth so hard it hurt her jaw and gave her a headache. The chocobo warked as Tifa yanked her roughly forward. The woman advanced into that blackness without a single trace of fear in her features, not a single tear. Just indescribable anger and hatred. She wasn't even cold. Snow billowed about her body in harsh white swirls but she didn't feel it, warmed instead by the fire of her fury.

"Wanna jacket?"

Breath catching in her throat, Tifa snapped about at the sound of the voice. A little boy's voice. The chirping of an angel.

"Jeek. . . "

The boy was sitting on an outcropping of rock, indian-style, his short black hair blowing in the faint breeze, flakes of white sitting but not melting on his bright red cheeks. He gazed at Tifa with friendly concern in his eyes that changed to gentle surprise after she'd spoken.

"Hey, ya remember my name, lady. Cool."

Tifa put a hand on Yunata's neck to calm her and keep the chocobo from circling and falling right off the narrow cliff they were both perched on, at the same time, flinging her hair behind her head with her other hand. The wind whipped at her, biting with freshly sharpened fangs, sticking her bangs into her eyes. Jeek watched with an iciness matched only by the air.

"Kinda cold for you to be here, "he said softly as Tifa eyed him, "I mean, Mr. Cloud wouldn't want you t'be gettin' sick out here."

"Where is he?" Tifa hissed, pressing against the icy rock wall behind her, pushing Yunata back away from the edge, "He's come here, right? You don't even need to answer, I just know it. She's made him come here. . . "

Jeek shrugged and answered, "No one's made anyone do anythin'. . . " The little spectre of a boy looked saddened for a moment, glancing over the lip of the rock he was sitting on and downwards, black eyes piercing the blacker blackness below, that void that disappeared into shadows and obscurity. "No bullies here, lady, "he muttered, "But you shouldn't be here. Mr. Cloud doesn't want you to get hurt, you should go."

"How do you know what he does and doesn't want? What are you, you little bastard? Are you another form of Jenova, or what? I'm tired of all her little games, her little tricks and jokes and fantasies. Why won't she face me as she is?"

"I'm not sure what I am, lady, "Jeek answered, "All I know is that Mr. Cloud doesn't want you to be there when he dies."

"What?!"

Tifa stepped forward, then gasped as the rocks at the edge of the walkway crumbled beneath her boots and she nearly lost her footing. Regaining her composure with an embarrassed sniff, she pressed back and glared at Jeek intensely. "Nothing more's going to happen to Cloud, "she whispered, "That's why I'm here. Your torturing him's going to end. I'm taking him home. . . he won't be your weapon anymore."

Jeek shrugged again, honestly not understanding. "My mom's gonna take care of him, you don't need t'worry about it, man. It's all okay. Go home, lady. Cloud really wants ya to. It makes him sad knowin' you're seein' him do all the stuff he's gotta do. Ya really shouldn't try t'stop him, you'll just get hurt."

"Cloud won't hurt me. He didn't before, he won't now."

Jeek smiled faintly and looked towards Tifa in genuine compassion. "Don't it make more sense, "he began, "Ta remember him like ya want, like that guy that ya like. . . instead of as the guy everyone hates, like he is now? He's gonna do stuff that's gotta be done, stuff he knows has to happen, stuff me and Jenova knows has to happen. He really really doesn't want ya to see. If you keep walkin' now, lady, Mr. Cloud might hafta keep you from seeing. So it'd be better if you go back and tell yer friends that. Just go. . . it's easier for everyone that way. . . "

Jeek was almost pleading with her. Tifa narrowed her eyes at his seeming sincerity.

"I'll ask you again. . . Jeek, "she said softly, not sure what to call him, not really, "What are you? Why do you care?"

"I don't care! Not really! Screw you sayin' I do!" Jeek flew to his feet in a rage, balling his little fists at his sides, black eyes snapping above a wide frown, "I don't care about any of it! Just go away, lady! Or you'll die too!"

"No one's going to die!" She screamed the words, desperate to believe, "Especially not anyone I care about! Only you, you vicious little monsters. . . that's all. . . "

"Yeah, that's right. . . " Jeek muttered, loosening his hands, the frown flying off his features as though a swift breeze had come to brush it away. He smiled at her, his expression softening, "You got it, lady. Only us vicious little monsters'll die. So go home now. And let us die."

"No--!"

But he was gone. Eyes wide, Tifa scoured the face of the flat boulder he'd been standing upon and didn't see so much as a shadow. That boy. . . she wanted to see him again, there was something familiar about him. . . she couldn't say what it was. Yet what had he meant. . . ? And just what the hell was he?

"Cloud. . . ?" Tifa found herself whispering out loud. The words were a comfort to her ears, something soft but real. She could comfort herself if everything else refused to. "I'm coming after you, Cloud. Hold out until then, baby."

Yunata made a few impatient coos into her ears and she turned about slowly and gave the chocobo a soft smile and a friendly pat on the side. Jaw set, loose hair falling over her shoulders, warming her somewhat, Tifa continued her descent, careful to watch her treads, wincing every time Yunata's sharp claws struck the ground and shattered the stillness. The stillness, the quiet of the Northern Crater was stifling. But the echoes were the worst. Tifa would take the silence over the echoes without a single word of complaint. You could fill the silence; with a laugh, a scream, a sob. But the echoes were like corpses; spent, fruitless. The air was full of the dead.

"I'm scared, Cloud. . . "she whispered, huddling close to her chocobo as they both made their way into the Crater's blackness, "Don't leave without me. . . don't leave at all, I don't want you to. We're going to start over, when we're together again. Nothing else in the world matters as long as we're all together. Didn't you and I always say that in the old days? Isn't that what we said that night under the Highwind? As long as we were with each other, we could be the only things that we each needed. You could be the only man I needed, I could be the only woman you needed. We'll leave to wherever we need to go. You, me, CJ, Ifalna. . . we're a family, and we'll stay a family, your family, my family. That love's all

that matters. You've just lost it is all. That evil's stolen it from you. All I need, Cloud. . . is to return it. And you'll see just how wrong you've been."

The blackness, the cold, the ice of the crater was overwhelming. Tifa felt lost in it, even Yunata seemed far away though the chocobo's downy throat was the only warmth touching her at all, a small shiver of warm underneath her palm. Tifa filled the thick silence with her words, pushed the echoes away with her hopes.

"We'll find a place where it won't matter what you've done. Midgar was wrong for us anyway, we should've never tried to make life out of that death. Neither should've Reeve or anyone. No one else stayed there, we shouldn't have either, it was foolish. The four of us will go somewhere better, somewhere evil doesn't have a place, where Jenova and madmen can't find us. There's a place like that somewhere. We'll find our own piece of heaven. And it won't matter what you've done, it won't matter. . ."

Tifa repeated the words softly, convincing herself of the fact. The cold blasted at her, the white flurries of snow scraped at the shining strands of her untamed hair, Yunata bucked against the cold and the way downwards grew steeper, more treacherous, studded with loose stones and sliding slabs of rock. But through all that cold, she felt what she was looking for somewhere far down below, enshrouded in the ice and dark. So she put one foot in front of the other in stubborn determination, yanking Yunata forward, the both of them shivering with the cruelty of the storm. "Don't you leave for heaven without me, Cloud. Your heaven's here. I'll show you where. . . just wait for me. . ."

He was so pale.

A lump like a rock in her throat, Marlene ran her gaze over Berk's motionless features, that one observation taking hold of her mind. So pale. So pale and hurt and nearly dead because he'd felt some flaming desire to save her life. Her stupid life. . . worth no more than his. So why? her calculating mind screamed out against the partitions of her brain, Why did he throw himself at your feet like that?

"A watched pot never boils."

"What?"

Marlene jerked her head up with a painful snap as Bugah bustled by, then clunked her chin back down in her hands with a sigh. The Highwind's forecastle was disgustingly small; four bunks slammed into the walls and a lone chair. All in a room more like a closet than actual sleeping quarters. The roar of the heavy snowstorm outside drifted to Marlene's ears muffled but threatening, mixing with the hum of the airship's engines. If she hadn't been so worried, so anxious and so pissed, she probably would've let the sounds knock her out. "What do you mean "A watched pot never boils", Elder?" she asked finally, sitting back in her hard chair with a groan, looking away from Berk for the first time since they'd taken off.

"I mean, that young fellow isn't going to wake up any faster with your staring at him, Marlene, "the old man answered with a sniff, setting himself down delicately on the edge of one of the bunks, "And he might take longer just to spite your impatient eyes. Why don't you go and do something productive, let me handle Mr. Berk?"

"Thank you, Elder, but I'd rather not. I feel somewhat responsible, you know. Um. . . are you sure, truly sure there's nothing else we can do for him?"

"We've done everything we can, child. He'll wake up when he's ready. A shock to the system, having your lungs pierced by a demon's horns. Or so I would imagine. He had a close call, closer still because you were foolish enough to attempt to heal him yourself. Really, Marlene, that was thoughtless of you. You may be able to diagram the workings of a materia stone on a sheet of paper, but you lack the experience to use your knowledge effectively. You're book smart, girl, but very young and quite unschooled. Real power and the wisdom to use it properly come with age."

"Wow. Then, you must be like. . . like Einstein then, Mr. Bugah. . ."

CJ dashed into the forecastle, Ifalna on his heels, and flung himself onto an empty bed. He scratched his nose absently then sat up on his elbows and eyed the two adults with an obnoxious grin. Bugah returned his less than polite greeting with a gloomy frown.

"I'm not that old, "he protested solemnly.

"But your head looks like a prune, "Ifalna disagreed cheerily, "S'all wrinkly like when ya stay in the pool too long." She sat daintily down next to CJ and crossed her hands in her lap, blowing irritating blonde bangs from her eyes. CJ pushed her hard in the shoulder.

"Better not make him mad, Eef, Nanaki says he gets real long-winded when he gets mad."

Mouth hanging half open, Bugah sat up in his seat. He threw Marlene a pleading stare then turned back to the kids, his face a mix of hurt and anger and indignant. "Nanaki would never say such a thing," he began, "And if he would, it'd only be out of frustration. The workings of the Planet are complicated, they cannot be explained in a sentence or two, even a book or two; they're involving and intertwined, their workings and content the stuff of a millennia of study. To try and break such complexities down into a few sound bytes, an easily grasped summary. . . any aspects of our Planet, why, that's foolhardy. Dangerous too. Like trying to compress the enormity of creation into a carry-on bag. . ."

CJ looked to Marlene as Bugah continued to babble. The kid giggled.

"I don't think Nanaki meant anything by it," Marlene cut in, abruptly shutting her Elder up, and then eager to change the subject. She turned to the newly arrived kids and called, "Hey, CJ, I thought you and Ifalna were looking out the windows in the war room for your mom. Get bored?"

"Nah. . ." the boy sighed, uneasy, "It's too snowy out, it's like we're flying through a box of cornflakes. I couldn't see anything so I gave it up. Besides. . . that dude wandered in there. . . ya know, that guy."

"Oh. . ." Marlene crossed her arms and sat forward in her seat, resting her elbows on her knees. She tossed a glance to Berk, frowned, then turned back to CJ. "I would've thought you'd think he was a pretty cool fellow. I thought you were into fighters, into guys that can 'whoop up'."

CJ shrugged, eyes on the ground. The thought of the man he'd just left cool, indifferent and sad in the war room, heavy on his mind. "Not this guy. He just creeps me out," he answered, "He looks like he'd spread me on a piece a bread and eat me like a peanut butter sandwich if I gave him the chance, ya know? And besides, he did stuff to my dad, he was a jerk to him years ago, I heard the stories. I don't want nothin' to do with 'im."

"Me neither," Ifalna threw in, sitting up a little, "Seph'roth's a meanie."

Marlene sighed lightly and turned back to staring at Berk, unsure what to add to such a conversation. There were a few minutes of quiet in the forecabin then and CJ used them to examine the back of Marlene's head, turning to watch Bugah's hair blow around in the breeze from the heater once he got bored. Really thin hairs on the old guy. Kinda like fishing twine. Weird.

"Seph'roth's got a cool sword though. . ."

CJ said the words before he even realized it, making Ifalna pop him a good one in the shoulder and shout his name. The kid flinched, looking guilty.

"He does though! It's taller than I am, it's real cool!"

CJ sat up noisily in the bunk and swung his stubby legs out over the edge, daring someone to deny the fact that Masamune was damned cool. No one seemed willing. "Ya know, I don't blame anyone for wantin' him to help," he continued, little brow wrinkled up in a frown, "I mean, it ain't like I can do anythin'. Or anyone else. So we got him. Makes sense, I get it."

"You can't do nothin', Ceej," Ifalna agreed, making her brother grimace. The anger and defensiveness in his violet eyes faded away and defeat seeped in at her words.

"I know that. . ." he admitted sadly, "So ya got that Sephiroth guy. And mom left us here. I can't do nothin'. Just sit in the airship and wait. Who knows if mom or dad'll come back. Why would they wanna? I'm just a dumb kid without a sword or a gun, or any power or anything. Even my dumb glove's fake. Mom didn't trust me to have anythin' real. Didn't trust me with Ultima Weapon, or even a dumb little glove. I get it."

"Now that's not true, CJ," Marlene said suddenly, looking at the little guy in concern, "Your mom and dad'll come back just for the both of you. And her leaving, your mom's leaving, that's got nothing to do with anything you can help. Don't beat yourself up, CJ, you're only ten years old, you can't be expected to save the world."

"But I'll be eleven in two months!"

"Don't be a dork, Ceej," Ifalna said softly, "We're just kids."

"Speak for yourself, pigtails, I'm a warrior in training! I'm gonna get a sword, a chocobo and some armor and one day I'll kick butt. And when we find Jenova, I'll smack her around. Heh, yeah."

"You just don't worry about it," Marlene interrupted, "You just let your mom and us handle it, all right?"

"Like ya been handlin' it?" CJ asked, scoffing, "Yeah, sure. Ya handled it real good when the Shinra building squished Sector Three. And real good when Midgar went ka-blooie. Man, this is like one of those end of the world movies. Kinda cool, kinda scary. But without the popcorn. I know just how it's gonna end too, they all end the same way. Dad's gonna blow the Planet up. And he'll get blamed and we'll have to move or something and man. . . this is just going to keep sucking more and more, I know it. More and more till the credits roll. I. . . I wanna go bug Cid to hurry up, t'get this dumb airship

movin'. I got a bad feelin'. . . "

"Tifa let's you watch too much tv is all, "Marlene sighed, "But maybe you should go bug Cid. Rattle your commands in his ear, he needs something to take his mind off Barret." Saying her father's name, Marlene eyes went suddenly distant, and she pointed the vacant gaze to the ground. "It's funny, "she thought aloud, "I don't feel at all uneasy about his being gone. Dad knew what he was doing, more than I ever did with that stupid materia. He knows we need Sephiroth's help, knew it even though his brain told him how dangerous it was. He followed his gut, just like dad. . . Now if only he trusted me like I trust him. . . "

"Yeah, whatever, "CJ snarled impatiently, giving Marlene a skeptical glance, "I'll take Cid's mind offa Barret. I'll yell at him for goin' so slow. He told me he was the best pilot in the world. I want proof! I wanna see this airship move! Gotta get t'mom and dad now! Before they do something stupid like die! Dumb airship ain't worth nothin'. . . . " CJ hopped off the bunk and jammed his hands in his pockets, stalking out of the musty, tiny forecandle with a hurricane's worth of storm clouds stacked on his brow. Ifalna tried to shuffle after him but he pushed her away, faint tears of frustration in his eyes, "You stay here, Eef! "he commanded, "I'm fed up with pansyin' around. I'm gonna go tell Cid to hurry up, to get his butt in gear. We're gonna find mom and dad and go home! It's cold up here and too snowy and they're out there and cold and probably hurt and I gotta help 'em. I'm just as big a wuss as Barret and makes me wanna punch myself!"

"CJ. . . "Marlene called, sitting up, reaching a hand out towards him. He pulled away, muttering maledictions, and stormed from the room, leaving an uncomfortable silence and a teary-eyed Ifalna.

"Big dork. . . "the little girl mumbled, then climbed back onto the bed and buried her head in the mattress. Marlene whispered her name, tried to sound friendly, even got half out of her chair and laid a hand on her trembling little back, but Ifalna ignored her, content to cry into the cot.

"Say something!" Bugah hissed, his old watery eyes full of discomfort at the sounds of the child's sobs. Marlene snapped about and glared at him, then shrugged, at a loss. She didn't know what to say to comfort a kid who'd been abandoned by her parents. Was there really anything possible to say that wouldn't sound lame as shit and false as hell, even to a five year old? Parents were all a kid really ever had, what was left when they'd gone? Marlene didn't have an answer, not a clue how to make her feel better. She hadn't known what to say to CJ either. They were both stranded; on their way to becoming orphans if their parents didn't get their acts together.

"I wanna go home. . . " Ifalna sniffled suddenly, her voice muffled through the mattress, "I don't like this place!"

"We'll go home as soon as we find your mom and dad, alright, Ifalna?" Marlene asked softly, hoping she'd sit up and agree with her and behave. But the little girl ignored the half-hearted words and only wedged herself between the bunk and wall, face turned away, but quieter now. With a helpless sigh, Marlene sat back in her chair as Bugah stared through the air with uneasy features, feeling horribly old and inadequate.

"Why did Tifa leave?"

His question was sudden and though it didn't sound like it, accusing. It made Marlene jerk her gaze up and around to face him with startled dark eyes. Was he going to start rebuking her now? Didn't he know how well aware she was of all she'd done? Marlene shook her heavy head then bowed it, feeling a pressure like a thousand jabbing elbows in the base of her brain. This was Bugah's way of blaming her. That one question was an accusation, a way to twist his rebuke so that she herself had to speak aloud what she'd done. That was how her Elder punished her. It'd been the same since she was a child, and didn't change, whether she forgot a formula or broke a vial. This time though, her crimes were ever so much more serious.

"Why did Tifa leave?"

He asked again, firmer, maybe desirous to fill the air with something besides Ifalna's sniffles. Marlene answered him quietly, surrendering herself to what she knew she deserved.

"It was probably because I summoned Sephiroth, "she whispered, "It panicked her. But there was no other choice, Elder. You know that, don't you?"

"But he's very likely the reason that Tifa ran away, correct."

"I didn't know that she'd do that. I thought we'd explained the materia to her."

"Explanations are nothing against blind instinct, child. By the gods, Marlene. . . " Bugah sighed slowly, working his Elderly indignation up. "I know how difficult things are right now for everyone; how horrible a situation this is. But you, my girl, are Marlene Wallace, and skilled beyond belief. Yet you seem to have forgotten your lessons and your teachings, and your amazing gift for reasoning, the very thing that makes you so skilled. You're acting too much on impulse and not thinking. Or thinking the wrong thoughts! Twice, you've summoned a madman. Twice! The first time we were lucky, but now we're stuck with him. And now we've lost your father. Now, I didn't tell the others, but I know Barret must have used

that materia only because you were so set on it and he wouldn't have you taking the responsibility. Very rash, very ignorant, and very selfish of you to make your father do such a self-sacrificing thing just to stop your unthinking actions. It's a harsh thing to be told but you must begin thinking of others. I shouldn't have to tell you that. I was under the impression that logic was something you were well schooled in. But you've forgotten it, it seems. I don't know if it was that week in Midgar, your new job, the company you've been keeping. . . I just don't understand."

Marlene bowed her head further under the rebuke, knowing that Bugah was venting on her because of his own aggravation, but that didn't keep the words from stinging any less. She turned her face away from him and back to Berk. He'd yelled at her too, the day before. Yelled at her about her superiority complex, even though Marlene was almost certain she didn't have one. But she was wrong about everything. Everything was blowing up in their faces and she'd lit the fuse.

"Yes, that man, I'm sorry to say, is another casualty of yours, Marlene," Bugah barked, watching her gazing at Berk with saddened eyes, "Maybe what happened in Icicle Inn was a god-send. Maybe now you'll begin to act in a more calculating manner when in such situations. Some lessons are very hard to learn. They won't stick between your ears with anything less than solder."

Bugah harrumphed, feeling self-righteous and unexplainably smug. He noticed his student veritably crying at his words and nearly felt like some thoughtless old man but then, with a stroke of his own ego, he pushed that irritating notion away and crossed his arms in defiance of it. He glanced once towards Ifalna, then back to Marlene, sunken jaw set with his indignance.

"Will you quit your immaturity now, young miss?" he asked quietly, "There are already two children aboard this airship, we don't need a third."

Marlene scratched at the corner of one eye, nearly gouging it from the socket, her hands shaking in her attempts at self control. But she managed to maintain it, feeling five years old again, feeling so guilty it almost physically hurt.

"I'm sorry. . . Elder. . ." she whispered, ready to fling herself down besides Ifalna and join her in her tears. "I just don't know how to deal with these things. . . I'm just doing my best."

"Yes, well, sorry doesn't always heal everything," Bugah said sagely, his anger dulling away, "But so long as you've learned, the mistakes you've made aren't totally useless, eh?" He chuckled to himself when Marlene didn't answer, then folded his wrinkly warm hands together in his lap and sighed, a wan smile running over his chapped, thin lips, sure that he'd fulfilled his Elderly duties towards Marlene. Someone had to teach the child that actions carried consequences.

"Bull. . . shit. . ."

"Huh?"

Elder Bugah's gaze snapped towards Marlene as the word rolled softly, roughly in the stifled fore-castle air. Face drained, the young woman stood from her chair and approached the side of the bunk Berk was collapsed in. She knelt down, placing two eager hands at the lip of the bed, grasping at the sheets.

"Berk?" she breathed, her face close to his, looking for any signs of movement. He seemed just as pale as ever, his features gray, his eyes sealed, his dark brown hair matted with sweat and melted snow. She put a finger out and tapped him gently in the forehead.

"Whatcha poking me for?" he asked, eyes still closed. Marlene smiled wide at the sound of his raspy voice, a bit of lead rolling from her soul, a tingly warmth that spread down to her toes replacing it.

"Just seeing if you were alive or not," she answered, "Are you?"

A grin tugged the corner of his dry lips up and with the greatest of efforts, he opened his eyes into black slits, squinting fiercely at the brightness of the light. "I guess. . ." he began, his voice barely audible, more like a painful whisper, "I guess I hafta be alive if it hurts this bad. Not that I'm complaining. . . mind you. Just answering your question."

Marlene laughed a bit; laughed in relief and then just because Berk was pretty funny. Before she could really convince herself that the man who'd nearly sacrificed himself for her was all right though, an irritated flat palm slapped her in the shoulder and she had to move aside, standing, to let Bugah have a look at his patient. Frowning in all seriousness, eyes narrowed, the Elder prodded Berk's chest a bit, felt his forehead, and more or less bugged the young Turk so much he was ready to bean him a good one in the head.

"Does that hurt?" Bugah asked, pressing into his sternum.

"Ow! Yes!"

"What about here?"

"Damn you!"

"And here?"

"Get the clue. . . ya old bastard. Refer to my previous answers!"

With surprising strength, Berk shoved the old man away, then his entire body stiffened and he began to cough uncontrollably, clenching his teeth, running his trembling fingers through his hair and feeling generally shitty. He'd never felt so dead tired before, not even last night. He could barely make his arm move to claw at his chest as it throbbed, even though there was suddenly this desire to know that what'd happened back in Icicle Inn hadn't been a nightmare. But it'd been real. His fingers brushed his wrapped torso, the touch sending thrills of pain throughout his body. He recalled the feel of those pronged horns stuck through his lungs and cringed, falling back into the bunk with a moan.

"Are you all right?" Marlene pushed Bugah aside and knelt down over Berk again, almost desperate to keep him from being in pain. She'd been the cause of his suffering after all, his injuries. She hadn't stayed in the airship, she'd rushed out into Icicle Inn as though she'd owned the place, practically throwing herself in Chaos' lap. And this guy, he'd plucked her out again. That hole in his chest only so recently healed, she'd put that there.

"I'm okay," he groaned, "Just tired and aggravated Busted up two times by Chaos, it ain't fair."

"Both times because of me. . ." Marlene said the words before she could stop herself, cheeks reddening in shame. Berk cracked his eyes open and looked at her intensely.

"Whatever," he said easily, "I was just doing my job. Protect the brainiacs, Reno said. So I have been. Or at least trying to."

"Marlene doesn't make it easy," Bugah interjected, poking at Berk's chest again, "Does this hu--"

"If you touch me again. . . God damn it, just assume that everything hurts, okay?"

"And maybe I should just assume that these wounds will heal by themselves. . . ?" Bugah asked irritably, taking out a green materia and rolling it absently in his hand. Berk tossed him the meanest scowl he could manage, but found he couldn't maintain it. Just furrowing his brows gave him a headache. "Really, young man, I'm only trying to help you. It's the least I can do after you saved Marlene's life. . ."

"I didn't save no one's life. . ." Berk muttered, "I just was protecting the interests of Shinra. Miss Wallace is a valuable comrade and her knowledge is very useful to the company's cause. That's all. Her use outweighs my own so I acted according to that fact, nothin' more."

"Your reasons are immaterial, boy. You saved my student and we're both very grateful."

"Yeah. . . that and eighty gil will buy me lunch."

Berk shoved Bugah away again and sat up in the bunk, smacking his head against the bed above him, swearing, then breaking down into more coughs. Marlene cringed at his scowl and at the pain he was obviously in, gritting her teeth against guilty tears. Maybe if she could just get Bugah to leave, it'd make Berk take it easy. She could do that for him, if nothing else. "Elder. . ." she began hesitantly, gazing on the old man pleadingly, "Why don't you go and see if Cid or Reeve need anything? Let me handle Mr. Berk, alright?"

Berk eyed her suspiciously as she shot pleas to her Elder but didn't say anything, trying instead to take an actual deep breath. There was air all around him but his lungs felt empty, the end of his fingers and toes hollow and cold with a want of oxygen. His attempts to give his body what it needed though, only made him break down into fiercer coughs, a fire flaring in his chest. Bugah listened to his hacking with a skeptic puckering of his lips, but then shrugged his bony shoulders and made for the door.

"That young man won't be grateful or accept gratefulness," he muttered, clasping his hands behind his back, "The both of you are children. . ."

"Now you shut the fuck up!"

Bugah snapped about to see Berk suddenly sitting hunched over, grasping his chest but trembling in rage, fists balled at his sides. "I laid there for a while before I got the strength to actually talk, just listening to you bash Miss Marlene. You just shut up, Bugah, quit taking out your own inadequacies on other people. The next time I. . . I. . ."

Gritting his teeth, Berk broke down into coughs, grabbing himself so tightly that tears rolled down his cheeks. Marlene stood hurriedly and almost forcibly pushed Bugah from the forecandle, shutting the heavy steel door behind him, oblivious to his harsh words and half-confused scoldings. As soon as he was gone, she whipped around and placed two firm palms on Berk's trembling shoulders, pushing him back to a flat position on the bunk.

"You were nearly killed," she hissed, not looking him in the eyes, flinching every time he coughed, "You can't start yelling at Elder Bugah just yet, Mr. Berk."

He glared at her but was still, smearing his bare arm across his mouth, looking with wide eyes at the bright red there.

"Shit. . . " he muttered slowly, "Ain't I better yet?"

Marlene grimaced, her conscience taking bites out of her heart, then dug around behind her and snagged a dirty towel from off the floor. She wiped Berk's arm and the corners of his mouth for him, a firm frown line nearly cutting her face in half. "I'm sorry," she whispered, folding the towel and looking away, taking a seat back in the wooden chair. "I ruined your chance for a full recovery because I was stupid and tried to heal you myself."

"Oh. . . " The Turk swallowed hard, making a face at the rusty blood on his tongue, "Well, don't worry about it. I can deal with a little blood."

"Yeah. "

He tried to sit up again, to put her mind more at ease. He could see the guilt in her face and it clawed at him, twisting into him harder than those demon horns had been able to. Marlene turned and pushed him down again, beginning to get angry at his stubbornness.

"Don't try and act better than you feel, Mr. Berk," she demanded quietly, "I know just how badly Chaos gored you, you can't fool me."

"I'm not trying to fool you!" he snapped, suddenly angry himself but still coughing between his words, "I'm just trying to get the hell outta this bed and be some help. I don't wanna be stuck in here. Where the hell is everyone anyway? How'd we get back on the airship?"

"Reeve and Cid carried you. We left Chaos back in Icicle Inn, now we're after Cloud and Tifa."

"Tifa?" Berk echoed, bright eyes wide, "What's up with Tifa?"

"She ran off after Cloud. To the Northern Crater."

"Well, that doesn't sound promising. . . "

Berk hacked again, snatching the towel from Marlene and pressing it to his mouth, sweat beading on his pale cheeks as a fiery pain wracked him.

"Why. . . god dammit. . . why can't ya just cast another spell and finish this up. . . ?" he growled, holding the towel so tightly it oozed out between his fingers, "I mean, what the hell is materia good for if ya can't fix me up with it, eh?"

"I tried to, I did, I. . . I cast a heal and then Bugah did some technical manipulating with spells, enough to keep you alive. You're okay, Mr. Berk, just. . . your lungs are still a little tore up is all."

There was a brief quiet as he digested the words, getting control of his coughing and looking down at the towel, turning a little green. Marlene took it from him, eager to do something with her hands. She folded it a few times then set it in her lap, suddenly unable to look him in the face.

"Ya can call me Berk, ya know."

"Hmm?"

Berk eyed his bare feet, wriggling his toes beneath the sheets, the rustling loud in the quiet room. "You can call me just Berk, I said. No one calls me "mister". Except maybe my doctor."

"Really? I guess you should just call me Marlene too. Pretty stupid to keep up formalities with everything going on. Besides. . . besides your being so respectful to me is silly after. . . what you did."

"What I did?" Berk blinked hard, honestly not understanding for a moment. But then it hit him. Duh. Funny though, he didn't think his saving her life like that had been any kind of a big deal. Even though the guy wasn't one to go putting his life on the line for kicks, even though he was one of the safer members of the Turks, his jumping out in front of Chaos didn't seem like that big a deal when he thought back on it. Of course he'd done it. What else could he do?

"You shouldn't. . . "Marlene's voice trailed off and she squirmed as Berk eyed her, his own thoughts whirring through his head, "You shouldn't have yelled at Elder Bugah like that. You don't understand where he's coming from or what I am. He's put a lot of effort into my education. I have too. I have to live up to that and stop acting like. . . well, damn, like Barret."

"Sorry then," Berk apologized, actually meaning it, "But I like to name pricks as I see them. And your old Elder man there is the newest member on my own personal roster of pricks I happen to be acquainted with. You shouldn't let him yell at you like that. Your summoning Sephiroth, or rather, Mr. Wallace summonin' him, that saved us. It did the time before too. Ya impressed the hell outta me. Screw Bugah."

Marlene grinned, glancing up and meeting Berk's gaze. They stared at each other for a while, each wondering who the bigger bullshitter was.

"Well, anyway, you'll be okay," Marlene finally blurted, feeling like she had the brain of a wooden post, "You shake off

injuries like leaves from your shoulders. I suppose Turks are just tough like that."

Berk shrugged, again trying to sit up and Marlene let him this time, not about to go putting her bare hands on his bare shoulders again. Stifling a groan, he swung his legs out over the edge of the bed and sat there for a moment, catching his breath, fluttering his fingers over his bandages. Marlene watched him, her dark eyes running up and down his chest, across his protruding collarbones, that little notch at the base of his throat, then hovering near his abs. He had quite a nice build. The thought made her cheeks flame red and she coughed, covering her mouth and face to hide the traces of her blushing.

"Seems it's contagious," Berk chuckled.

"What?"

"You coughed, I mean. . . heh. "

"Oh. Er. . . yeah."

She got up from the chair, the bloodied towel falling from her lap and fluttering to the ground like a bullet-riddled dove from the sky. The sight made her uneasy, that sudden image, that sudden comparison. She stood there, staring at the cloth, the rattling of the Highwind coming up through the soles of her shoes and running cold and jarring up her calves. Ack, why did she see omens in everything? She just thought too much was all. . .

"What's the matter?" Berk demanded, seeing the sudden unease tip-toeing across her features. He sat up a little further, jutting his chin forward to peer closer at her face through the dim light of the tiny forecabin. Berk didn't want to see her hurt anymore. Seeing that guilt before, it made him nearly regret saving her life. As foolish as that sounded. The pain of his injuries, the consequence of his jumping out in front of Chaos like an idiot, that was nothing. But that piercing guilt that darted from Marlene's eyes and straight into his heart, zapped the air from his lungs. She should never ever feel guilty over him. Not over someone as meaningless as a cowered, controlled Shinra Turk.

"You should get some sleep," she suggested suddenly, turning abruptly towards him, "I hear the others outside, they're going to want to talk. I'll tell President Reeve you've passed out so he'll leave you alone, all right?"

"No, I told you, I want back into the fight."

To prove his point, Berk tried to stand up. The moment he attempted to put any weight on his feet though, his entire lower body crumbled like a collapsible chair and he sunk to the ground with a sharp intake of breath, cursing himself as a weak idiot. He could feel Marlene looking at him and his cheeks burned red in shame.

"Damn fuckin' stupid ass Chaos. . ." he swore, "Doing this to me. . ."

He laid there, trying his best to push himself up but was overcome by dizziness and nausea, coughs spraying from his mouth so violently he was sure his throat would cave in. Blood and curses poured over his lips and he turned his face away so Marlene couldn't see him.

"You don't have to try and be so tough, Berk."

Two hands under his arms then, pulling him up as gently as they could but still trembling under his weight. Berk put a palm out to help, sucking in air, shutting his eyes and ready to pass out but then the blissful firmness of the bunk was underneath him, cool fabric tickling his back and he sank down, glad to quit the straining. "I'm fine though. . ." he insisted, eyes closed, "Stupid demon had nothing on me."

"Of course not," Marlene said in total agreement, pulling the sheets over his chest, watching his face and wiping the blood from his lips again, almost tenderly, "Stop being so damned stubborn, you bastard," she whispered, "And quit talking so much, it's not good for you."

"I don't talk that much," he disagreed, feebly shaking his head, "Only when Reno or Rude aren't around. See, you don't know me, Marlene. Not really."

"Well, no one ever really knows anyone else," she answered lightly, eager to wipe the seriousness she heard beginning in his voice away. She could hear the others outside, Nanaki's growling voice snapping at CJ as the kid insisted they hurry. They needed to hurry, the world was pressing, Jenova was waiting, horror was seeping in from the blacker parts of reality, threatening to send them all to hell. . . Marlene couldn't let Berk start spilling his guts to her. Not here, not now.

"Well, that's deep."

"Huh?"

"What you said. . . aw, just jokin' though," Berk laughed, "Just jokin'. . . god damn, I don't feel good. Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"This is my fault," she told him plainly, "So I'm going to fix that. You don't worry, you lay here and I'll have you feeling better. A day of rest and we can cast another heal and you'll be good as new. I'll have Bugah cast it, he's so strong with materia. You'll feel better than before Chaos hurt you, you'll see. . ."

"Don't say that."

"What?"

"That it's your fault. I jumped in front of Chaos, it was my own decision to help ya out. You didn't twist my arm, no one did. So don't say this is your fault."

That was stupid. Berk's logic was stupid and Marlene was half-tempted to tell him so. Yet she didn't want to. It was a nicer logic than hers. But still. . . dammit, it only presented another issue to be answered. One she didn't want to approach. There wasn't time to deal with this, there really really wasn't. So many things waiting for them, no time for a Shinra Turk and a Shinra scientist to sit up in an airship and argue with each other

But if they didn't clear it up now, they might very well die out there in the next hour or two and never clear it up.

Clear what up? she screamed at herself, suddenly panicked, What in god's name am I talking about?!

"Are you all right, Marlene?" Berk asked, looking concerned, "You're not going to cry or anything, are you? Listen to me, you shouldn't feel bad. I was just doing my job as a Turk, and protecting my charge. Mr. Reno would've kicked my ass if I showed up and told him you'd gotten impaled by a big fuckin' demon, ya know? I get paid for saving you, I'll get a paycheck for it. Turks only work when they're getting paid for it. I can't remember what number that is in the list of Turk rules, but heh. . . that's how it is. So don't feel guilty, let me. I'll cry all the way to the bank." Berk laughed heartily through his coughs, the words stinging him more than the wounds but he had to get that guilty look off her face, it was tearing him up.

"Marlene!"

Reeve's voice. It made the both of them look up and towards the forecastle door.

"Marlene, c'mon! The General has some things to tell us! Get out here! CJ, don't bug me now, pal."

Marlene's cheeks paled as the sound of her President and CJ squabbling drifted in from outside. Could she go out there?

No.

Not with this sudden emotion scratching at her conscience. There was something she needed to know first, Jenova be damned.

Jaw firm with her decision, she stood from Berk's bedside suddenly, laying the towel in his hand, then stepped briskly over to the forecastle door and pulled it open, leaning outside. Reeve looked towards her with a smile, trying to pry CJ's fingers from around his wrist.

"Hey, Bugah said Berk's awake," he called, stepping forward from the metal catwalk, leaving the conversation he, Nanaki, and CJ had been absorbed in, features strained with worry and his attempt to keep his spirits high. He examined Marlene's features cautiously, having some idea how she might be feeling.

"He still doesn't look too great. . . "the young woman answered, not meeting his gaze, "I think he's going to sit this one out. I'll be with you in a minute though, all right?"

"All right," Reeve responded, his voice a hesitant waver. He quit his approach and crossed his arms, staring at Marlene through narrowed, thoughtful eyes. "Everything okay in there?"

"Oh, yes, sir," Marlene said hurriedly, just before slamming the door shut in his face.

"Marlene, er. . . what're you doin'?"

Berk was sitting up again and his clueless gaze infuriated Marlene so suddenly it took both of their breaths away.

"Don't try that shit on me," she hissed, stepping forward, trying to keep her voice low, "I want this settled right now before I go out there, before I have to deal with this. Why did you save me today? Why were you looking towards me and not towards the fight as I was coming into the village? Yesterday. . . why did you jump on Chaos' back? Why did you push me outta the way when I was coming up out of the chute? You don't do these things for Elder Bugah, for Nanaki. . . why am I so special? Why are you always watching me? Always running those dark eyes of yours up and down my legs? Do you think I'm blind? I'm not!"

Berk leaned back against the wall, wishing he could sink into it. Marlene's snapping eyes filled his vision, her half-mocking voice ringing down like an angry goddess'. And she wouldn't stop.

"I'm not stupid either," she muttered, "You have a thing for me, is that it? Or don't you? Yesterday you talked to me as though you'd never met a more disgusting girl, as though I made you sick. And my father. . . you treat him like dirt. Why then do you keep going out of your way to keep me alive? Want to look at the doll a bit longer? Hell, I'll give you a snapshot and you can look at me all you want."

He was a joke. She thought he was a joke. And damn it all, but his stupid feelings probably were a joke. What feelings did he have that would mean anything to this woman? Just a lust, just an admiration that he didn't want to admit to, just a longing to make her his. But Berk was sure he could have that with anyone, he wasn't going to put up with shit from Marlene Wallace just to feel satisfied.

"You're fucked," he stated coldly, voice so even, so controlled it surprised him, "I told you, I was doing my job these past few days. As for looking at you, yeah, you got a nice ass. But don't go thinking I want to lay you or anything. Don't go giving yourself so much credit, just because Neto wanted you, doesn't mean every other guy in Shinra does too. I don't give two shits for you, you're. . ." Berk's voice died away, his aggression somewhat dulled by the tears welling in Marlene's eyes. He swallowed hard but made his voice boom forth. "You're conceited and ya think you're so damned smart. You are smart. But you're stupid too. And I don't dig stupid chicks."

"I wouldn't. . . I-- I wouldn't spit on you if you were on fire, you unfeeling Turk bastard." Marlene made her voice just as icy, just as indifferent, clawing the tears from her eyes, "If you ever try to give your life to me again, I swear to god I'll wad it up and throw it back in your face! Just stay away from me! Whatever your damned reasons are for what you do. . . I don't know if it's some sort of sick twisted pleasure you get. . . toying with my feelings like that, maybe you get off on guilt, I don't know what your frigging problem is, but you stay away from me. . ."

Oh, gods, he'd made her cry again. . . Berk's face fell to the floor as Marlene turned away, a fist to her pursed lips. He smacked a hand against his forehead, dizzy and so confused that it hurt. Why was she crying? Why had she cried before, as he'd lain dying in the snow? She didn't. . . Marlene didn't really care what he thought, right? How could she after yelling at him like that, after using that tone of voice, so cold, so cutting, so damned mocking that it made his teeth hurt? Gods, she made him feel like an insect and little mewling flies had no business buzzing up around the swans, right? Right. She didn't give two shits for him, she was obvious with it. He wasn't such a damned uneducated Turk asshole not to understand that after she'd painted it out so clearly for him. So he couldn't let her know that he cared, that. . . that those tears in his eyes. . . he so so dearly wished they were shed for him, and not because of him.

"Why dontcha kiss?"

Marlene's watery gaze refocused towards the voice and saw Ifalna sitting up in one of the bunks, watching the two of them intently. She'd forgotten the little girl was even still in there.

"Kiss?" Marlene asked, voice cracking in the middle of the syllable, "Kisses aren't something that you hand out like Halloween candy, Ifalna."

"Dad always kisses mama when they fight. . ." the little girl mumbled, rubbing a fist into her eyes sleepily, "And that stops it." She giggled suddenly, remembering something. "Mama says that's okay 'cause dad kisses better than he argues. . ."

Marlene turned away from the kid, looking at the closed fore-castle door, ready to fling it open and flee the stifling hold of the hot and musty room, the unfeeling eyes of that man on the bed. Why did it matter what the hell he thought anyways. . . she didn't care. She didn't, she didn't. Berk was just some insensitive Turk. Just another jerk, another bastard with a forked tongue. And she shake him off just as easily as she could anyone else.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Berk," she muttered, not turning around and heading for the door, "Whatever your intentions are towards me, forget them and for the rest of the time we work together, just treat me as another comrade. That's all I should be to you and according to what you told me, that's all I truly am. You're nothing to me either, I only barely met you. This entire conversation was probably just a waste of breath and time and I'm sorry for starting it. I was wrong. I thank you very much for your assistance to me these past few days, it's very gallant of you, whether you're being paid or not. But now please stop. I already owe you too much, and I refuse to pay you in what you want. . ."

"What?!"

Berk catapulted to his feet at that last sentence, forgetting any pain still hanging around, and nearly climbed on Marlene's back he shot forward so fast. "What the fuck're you talking about? You think I help you cause I want you to sleep with me? Do you know how disgusting that is? How in the fuck can you go around thinking I'm some kind of perverted animal like that? I-- I. . ." he stuttered, at a complete loss, "I'm not like that at all! At all! God dammit, ya know what your problem is? You don't know shit about shit! You don't know how to handle a guy actually liking you, so you turn him into a bastard and give yourself a reason to dismiss 'im! Yeah, you can't handle it! Sleep with you, my ass! I would've been satisfied with a smile. . ." Berk's mouth hung mid open as he realized what he'd said. "Oh, fuck."

"You do like me then. . ." Marlene whispered, blinking quickly, dropping the hand that had been poised to open the door and set her free from this sudden confrontation, "Then why do you say those things?"

"Er. . . well, because they're true. I haven't known you that long, just a coupla days, but you're really rather obvious."

And because, you're right. I'm damned insensitive. A jerk."

"Berk the jerk."

"Heh, like I didn't hear that all through junior high. But I guess it stuck, because I grew up to be one." Berk squirmed, wishing Marlene would turn around and look at him, but at the same time so glad she wouldn't that it frightened him. He couldn't believe he was being so damned frank all of a sudden. What was it? Hell, maybe the shit of the past few days had gone a long ways towards growing him a little backbone. Maybe he didn't want to get older and become another Reno, too engulfed in his own pride and his own stupid ego to ever admit he'd been wrong or weak or foolish, to ever apologize. "Listen, Marlene, I shouldn't've kept looking at you like I've been. . . er, thinking of you like I've been doing lately without saying something to let ya know how I feel. It's almost like I was stealing pieces of you without paying, like a stupid punk snatching chocolates outta the sweet shoppe. I apologize for that right now. Maybe my flaming desire to keep saving your ass was my stupid way of trying to pay without having to come out and beg you to notice me, I dunno. But I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

Marlene had barely heard the words. Her brain felt numbed, her tongue like a useless plank in her mouth. She absently pulled a strand of hair from her eyes, unsure if her cue to speak had come yet. Berk was quiet, the words had stopped, so she guessed so.

"I'm not sure I like what you said. . . "she breathed, "About my defenses. I'm not sure I like someone I barely know psychoanalyzing me, seeing things in me that my best friends, people I've known all my life, have never bothered to clue me in on. And I'm not sure I believe you about them. Berk, you're a nice guy and an amazing fighter. You're. . . heh, you're cute too, but I barely know you. A little more time, let me get to know you better, you get to know me, and we'll see what happens, all right?"

"You're talkin' like I just proposed to you. . . "Berk said lightly, cracking a smile, "I haven't even asked ya out yet. I like you, Marlene, hell I'll admit it. I like ya and I'm not even sure why. I mean, don't get me wrong, I could compliment you for days, anything you may see in me you can beat me by by like, a thousand times, but I knew that you were something special the first time I saw the back of your braided little head. You turned around then and your face was icing on the cake but you just have a glow about you. . . sounds corny, I know, but . . . well, fuck, whatever. I can't explain it and I'm not genius enough to try."

Marlene laughed a little, and suddenly some of the tension in the air lifted a bit. Compliments went a long way with her. Still, she wasn't going to force something on herself. As she'd said, she barely knew Berk. It was nice to know there was something there behind the cool, cocky Turk mask, but still, just how much was there? And would she like all of it?

"Thank you. . . "she said genuinely, slowly turning about to face him, "You're really sweet, Berk. But still, let's see what happens, all right? As you said so delicately, I'm a calculating "mako genius" and I have to work things out for myself before I feel right about anything. I want to get to know, I hate to. . . to. . . "

To what?

To. . .

They were facing each other now, only inches apart. Marlene's face was flushed with her arguments, her consternation, her complete misunderstanding and her utter embarrassment. It was a combination that had her cheeks burning, her lips parted with her rapid breaths. She breathed a little quicker as each and every one of her reasons drifted straight out of her head. What was there to rush in and replace them. . . just, just Berk. Just this Turk bastard with the stupid grin on his face. Those dark green eyes watching her in complete joy, seeing the look he'd tossed her way the past few days finally coming back at him just a bit.

Marlene didn't know why she couldn't talk anymore, why reasoning this out suddenly didn't matter, or even why Berk's warm gaze was making her tremble like a drop of water at the end of someone's finger. This guy seemed to know her better than Barret, better than Nanaki, better than Bugah, or anyone else. After a few days, he'd labeled her as an arrogant princess, a selfish brat. But he still liked her, despite the observations, liked her enough to nearly die for her. Twice.

Was that reason enough then? Logic enough? Her brain uttered a few half-hearted protests, screaming a lot of worthless crap about the end of the world, but as it had been tending to lately, Marlene's heart hollered louder. And then Berk's warm, flushed lips shouted a raucous cry, backing up her heart's encouragements, and then his beautiful eyes whispered louder than anything else. They were beautiful, when they weren't mocking something, or cursing something out, or bowed submissively under Reno or Rude's scrutiny.

Berk bent his face downwards a bit, cocking his head to one side with a practiced ease that made Marlene grin at her own inexperience. Ifalna gazed upon them from the bunk, her knees pulled up to her chin, her fingers wrapping in the long

blonde strands of her pigtails as she watched her two grown-up friends kissing.

"Jus' like mom and dad," she whispered, "I told 'em." The little girl laughed silently to herself, even as Reeve started pounding on the forecastle door.

It had been almost a half an hour and he was still alive. Vincent figured Hojo's little chemicals wouldn't kill him after all
"Are you through bleeding, human?"

But by hell, they were coming uncomfortably close.

"I'm sorry. . . Chieko. . ." he sputtered, spitting red from his mouth in distaste. He'd made the creature land so he wouldn't have to muss her back fur up with his own dark blood. He kept throwing the stuff up and wasn't really sure what that meant. He wasn't very sure of anything. Just a lot of pain, a lot of dizziness, a lot of questions. What had been in that vial? "Mako", the letter had said, "And other things." Vincent knew all about Hojo's "other things". They'd rather been the scientist's specialties.

Chieko pawed the ground, stamping puffs of dust beneath her claws, her hoary head turned up to sniff the sky, taste the cold breeze, catch the occasional snowflake on her tongue. Her keen brown eyes scanned their surroundings, alternately widening and narrowing as the blackness of the Crater, the blue of the heavens above them, and the deathly cold of the air combined to assault her uncaringly. Or maybe. . . not as uncaringly as she would've liked to believe. There was something unmistakably vicious and cunning about the atmosphere here. The feeling made the hairs on her back stand on end, prickled her whiskers, set her rapid heartbeat thumping even faster.

"What is this place we're in?" she demanded quietly of Vincent, "There's something wrong about the air, as though the atmosphere itself is dead. Hard to breathe. . . the air sits in the throat, heavy, like it's frozen, weighed down. . . I don't like it."

"This is the Northern Crater," Vincent answered, stepping forward from the looming boulder he'd been propped against. He swiped at his hair, then brushed a gloved hand against his cloak, straightening it. He could feel the wrongness of the air too. It made something within him stir. "Your mother is here, Chieko. That wretched thing you call a mother. That thing that is so evil, it stands against any connotations the word "mother" carries with it. But that's besides the point. . ." Vincent laughed to himself, smearing blood from the corners of his mouth and taking a deep breath of the wicked air. He was lightheaded, like he'd been breathing paint fumes too long. Damned Hojo. . .

"Will you be able to keep moving? I'd rather you not die before you've done as you've said you will." Chieko cocked a cold eyebrow up as Vincent collapsed mid-stride, clenching his fists when he hit the hard ground on his knees.

"Makes no difference," he answered, "Let's just get going. Don't you hear?"

"What? Where're we going? Into there?"

Chieko peered down into the depths of the Crater, fear consuming her features despite her attempts to shove it away. She could feel Jenova somewhere down there and that subtle, artful calling nearly made her heart soar in anticipation. Yet. . . she was so scared of what would greet her below, that mother she'd always known existed but had never been shown, that it made her hesitant to proceed. What would Jenova say? What would the monster do? A reunion that Chieko so desperately desired but so mindlessly feared all at the same time.

"You're afraid. . ."

Vincent made the observation casually. Chieko snapped at him but he stood from the stone-littered ground, unflinching.

"You're afraid too," she snarled back, piqued. She didn't like this small man passing such judgments, judging, even. . . rebuking such a mighty marvel as Chieko. She'd kill him if he persisted, she'd stifle that unfeeling voice no matter the consequences.

"Maybe I am afraid. . ." he relented right off, a smile tugging at one side of his mouth, "But what difference does that make? You "love" your dear dear Mother Jenova. Why should you be so terribly frightened of her? Heh. . . but I'm sorry, Chieko, it's not your fault. You're just another of the deluded fools, this world's full of them. But there'll be one less after today. There's one less now. Now I'm just a regular sort of fool. There's a comfort in that."

"Don't mock me. . ." Chieko snarled quietly, lowering her head, mane slapping her neck in the cold breeze. Vincent shrugged, trying his best to stand straight, then peered at her through his one good eye.

"You're not very bright, are you?" he asked, "I'm mocking myself, Chieko. Quite the difference."

"Don't look at me like that. . . "

"Like what?" Vincent lowered black brows, easy grin fading away as Chieko looked upon him in unease. He adjusted a strap keeping one of his rifles up, scratching at the bandanna covering what had been his left eye absently.

"You're looking at me as though you know everything about me. . . but you don't know anything. Only Hojo knew. . . only he knew, cared, anything. . . now he's dead and I don't have anyone but Jenova. We must go to her, you must take me there."

"I am," Vincent replied coolly, moving forward with crooked steps, rocks rolling away beneath his feet, "And you're right. I don't know anything about you. I don't want to either. We all have our own problems and we all must deal with them as best we can. I won't lay mine on you, you please return the favor and keep yours from me. Individual concerns have no place here anyway, I've realized that. We're all quite, quite trivial. Though some far more than others. . . " Vincent smiled a little sadly, crossing his arms against the lethal chill that blew straight past his shirtfront and into his sore flesh. But then he shook the thoughts that began to creep within him off like a thorny crown and shouldered his two rifles, smacking the uzi tucked in his cloak reassuringly.

Can't help but wonder if maybe Cloud doesn't have the right idea, he thought to himself, smouldering red eye piercing the depths of the crater spread before him. The sight brought back memories, brought back nightmares that had no place under that all consuming morning sky above his head. Maybe it should all get blown to hell. Black below, sky above. Heaven and hell. Seems I'm standing at the girding line now. I'll throw myself down to hell there without a qualm. Why? When Jenova could be so right in her desires to destroy humanity?

"Why do I hate them?" he asked himself beneath his breath, "Because I know what they're thinking, what they'd do, what they take from each other at every opportunity? Hell, it doesn't matter, it's hardly my place to judge anyone."

"What are you muttering, human?" Chieko demanded, growing impatient, growing anxious.

"Nothing," Vincent replied grimly, swinging himself with difficulty onto her broad red shoulders, "I'm just thinking like a demon. Again. Seems it's not as dead as I'd hoped. Seems I'm a fool who hasn't learned his lessons yet. I wonder what Hojo, fate, whatever will do to try and teach me further."

The words were bitter but he couldn't retract them. As Chieko mumbled curses, mumbled fears and spread her great leathery wings out to the skies, preparing to dive into that hell, Vincent looked down numbly at the red pinprick in his forearm, head swimming with the physical results of the injection, imagination roaring, wondering just what Hojo's final intentions had been. Was that dead man somewhere laughing right now? Laughing at Vincent for trusting that letter, for blindly going through with something so foolish out of simple desperation? Hojo probably thought it was god damned hilarious that he'd put his hopes for salvation into the hands of the very man who'd damned him. And Vincent thought it was pretty funny too. Hell, it was all a riot.

But because of Hojo, what would he be when he stopped laughing? Dead? A demon? Vincent? Or perhaps the worst of all: what he'd always been. All three.

"Price gouging? 500 gil?! Do you know how fuckin' sick that is?!" Reno slammed the carton of smokes down on the counter so that the package crumpled beneath the impact. He stuck a trembling finger up into the shopkeeper's face, as though to individually poke each of his eyes out, "You sick sick sick sack of shit!!! I'll fuckin' shoot you in the head, take you out back, dry your dead carcass in the sun, stick ya in a meat grinder and roll my own god damned cigarettes outta yer ass! What d'ya say dickless? How d'ya think you'd taste menthol?"

The shopkeeper gibbered, two pudgy hands held out before him in supplication to the fiery-haired Shinra employee. "Please! sir! I'm just trying to make a profit! You. . . you gotta understand!"

"Makin' a profit offa other people's suffering. . . that's sick. Sick and sad and wrong as hell." Reno flung about, releasing the carton of cigs petulantly, then paced in a quick, infuriated circle in front of the counter, half glad that that counter was there or he knew he wouldn't be able to keep from lunging at the jerk's throat and slamming Mr. Voltage up his nose. Gods, it was bad enough that Kalm was completely dry, not a drop of liquor left in the one horse town with the city load of refugees flooding the streets and stores, just as thirsty as him, but smokes. . . he had to have smokes! He'd smoked at least a pack a day for the last ten years and now it'd been nearly thirteen hours since he'd last lit up. God, the craving was making him jittery and nervous and ready to hurt something.

"500 gil. . . "he sneered, facing the fat shopkeeper again, words growled through clenched teeth, "I make that much money in an hour, you know that? Paying you 500 gil isn't shit to me. . . "

"So er. . . why you making a fuss, sir?"

"Heh. . . " Reno smiled evilly, snatching at the cigarettes and throwing gil at the guy, "Principle, ya prick. I hope ya choke on your 500 gil. I hope ya have nightmares and have t'go to therapy because these little friggin gil marks keep snappin' at ya in your dreams. . . "

"And I hope you enjoy your cigarettes. . . sir." The shopkeeper gave Reno a smug glance and plopped the gil in the register. And then he smiled and that was his mistake.

"Woah!! Hold it there, Reno!"

The ex-Turk suddenly felt a pair of strong hands on his right arm as he lifted it in the beginnings of an uppercut to the bastard shopkeeper's jaw. Whoever that was was going to get a royal spanking, he growled to himself, whatever sonnuvabitch was holding him back was going to get what this fatass shop keep had coming time ten plus two squared. He jerked around, snatching his arm away and was confronted with a face he hadn't seen in years.

"Elena. . . ?" he murmured, anger immediately fading. He didn't even hear the shopkeeper scurrying away from behind the counter.

"Morning, Reno, "the woman returned cheerily, releasing his arm and smiling, "I heard Midgar went all to hell without me."

"Elena." Reno said the name a little firmer now, remembering to breath, remembering that he didn't enjoy looking like an idiot. Frowning, he straightened his collar, and muttered casually, "Go get fucked, Elena."

"Is that an offer?"

As she stared, Reno grunted, got a hold of himself, got a hold of his carton of smokes, and hauled himself out of the tiny tobacco store and into Kalm's bustling morning streets, leaving the woman to eye his narrow back and frown. After a moment she sighed and ran out into the harsh sunlight after him. The air was a nearly tangible haze of steamy nastiness and the countless swarms of people that insisted upon knocking into Elena at every bend were nothing more than the flies buzzing in the filth. She mumbled unmentionables as, already far ahead of her, Reno paced quickly towards the inn, not bothering to be casual about the fact that he was ignoring her.

"Reno! Renooooo! Don't brush me off like this!"

Without turning around, he flipped a casual bird over his shoulder, then yanked the door to the Kalm Inn open and breezed inside. Elena dashed forward and caught the door before it could close, jogging into the lobby, sweating beneath her dress suit, glad she'd double-layered the deodorant that morning.

"Miss Elena!"

The voice was like a sob and belonged to Commander Ikari. The young man darted to her side the moment he spied her entering the tiny inn and from the look on his face, Elena thought he might start covering her with kisses. She turned away from him quickly to watch Reno trudging upstairs, still not bothering to give her a glance, and then tried to follow, but Ikari latched onto her arm and poured harsh whispers in her ear.

"Thank God you've come. . . "he hissed, "But how did you know? President Reeve is gone, he left Mr. Reno in charge but every time I ask him for orders he makes like he'll bludgeon me with that nightstick of his! I don't know what to do, there're papers to be signed, responsibilities to be taken, things to do, so many things and there's no one to give orders! Mr. Reno won't do anything but sit up there and rave!"

"Sounds like Reno. . . "Elena breathed to herself, wiping her sweat-plastered blonde bangs from her forehead, "Ikari, I'll be down in a minute, I'll go talk to him."

"Why are you here though, ma'am?" Ikari asked, looking slightly relieved but curious beyond belief. Elena hadn't worked for Shinra since the days of Meteor, when Ikari had been a peon little foot soldier pouring coffee for the Turks and brushing the sand from their shoes. "Was that your chopper I heard a few minutes ago? Is Wutai all right?"

"Wutai's fine, "Elena breathed, taking a step towards the stairs, "And that's why I came. Something that dickhead pilot Highwind said stuck with me and's been bothering me since he left. So, here I am. And then I find out that Rude's gotten himself killed. Makes me wish I hadn't come."

"It's sad, I know, ma'am, "Ikari muttered, eyes hard, "And there's nothing for it but to keep going. That's exactly what President Reeve told me. And then something about a train or, or something. . . I wish the President had been able to talk properly with Mr. Reno before he had to leave. . . "

"So he is gone?"

"Yes, ma'am, after Jenova. That creature's moved off --"

"No!" Elena spat suddenly, shaking her head hard and making Ikari take a slight step backwards, "I don't want to know anything about it, I just want to find out why Reno isn't out doing his job. A Turk doesn't abandon Shinra."

Ikari was about to mutter something about Elena being a hypocrite because she herself had abandoned the company after Meteor, but sensing her mounting fury, he wisely held his tongue.

"Reno!" she hollered, resolution firm, leaving the pale commander to stare at her back as she stalked towards the stairs, "I know you can hear me up there! Don't hide from me, you sonnuvabitch! This is Elena! I know you better than your shrink! And I'll tear you apart if you try to hide from me and all of this!"

There wasn't any reply but the harsh slam of a wooden door. And then a single gunshot. It echoed in the air and wouldn't die away, making Elena dart a trembling, anxious hand to her mouth.

"Oh, my god. . . what is he doing?"

"You don't think..?" Ikari looked to the woman and the both of them paled. It was so suddenly quiet upstairs. An uncaring set of fingers prodded Elena in the shoulder and she turned to see the Innkeeper standing and tapping his foot, fire in his eyes.

"You Shinra?" he demanded, eyeing her suit, "If your coworker's blown his brains out up there, you'll be paying the cleaning bill. . . "

Without a word of response, she darted up the stairs, her feet slipping out of her brand new creme-colored pumps and clattering behind her. Reno wouldn't do that, she told herself, Reno would never. It didn't matter how much he lost, Elena was certain that Reno just wasn't a quitter. For the few months she'd known he and Rude, she'd figured that much out. His guards, his job, his partner, his best friend. . . none of that would make him quit. Yet she couldn't slow her ascent, she couldn't make herself breathe properly. She was just so suddenly terrified.

Panting, she halted at the door to the inn's rooms and reached a white hand out, fluttering her fingers over the cold doorknob. She heard Ikari reassuring the innkeeper downstairs, the commander's voice sure and confident despite the fear she'd seen in his face at the sound of that gunshot. She heard her heart pumping hot blood in her ears. But she couldn't hear anything behind this damned door.

"Reno. . ." she called, turning the knob slowly, not breathing, praying she wouldn't see what she feared she'd see in the room beyond. The door parted from the wall with a meandering crack that never seemed to die. And when it did, much to Elena's ease, she was able to make out Reno's lankiness sprawled in the cubby space before the room's lone window, a fresh cigarette hanging from his lower lip, his drawn gun in his lap. From beneath strands of waving red hair, he watched his old friend give a shaky sigh of relief.

"I was sitting here figurin' this out, "he said lowly, frowning as she entered the room, "Two hundred cigs to a carton at five hundred gil a carton. . . that's almost three gil a smoke. Three gil . . ." he held up his smouldering fag and examined it carefully, features drawn. "For that much I could go down to Wall Market and get a bag of something a helluva lot more effective than nicotine from the pebble-pushers there, ya know that? Or at least, I coulda gone to Wall Market. . . not anymore. Not unless I wanna do a lot of digging."

"What the heck was that gunshot?"

Reno looked up, surprised at the question, even more surprised at the look of mixed relief and fury in Elena's hard blue eyes. He gestured off to a corner of the room carelessly and she saw a sizable red and gray puddle there that used to be a rat.

"Bugger kept me up all night. . ." he muttered, "Finally got a clean shot at 'im. Not bad aimin' for my left hand, eh?" Reno wriggled the hand in question towards her, waiting for a compliment. She only clenched her fists at her sides, digging her bright red nails into the palms of her hands. "What?" he questioned innocently. And then it hit him. And he laughed. "Hell, Elena. . . you didn't think I'd blown myself a new nostril, had ya? Hell. . . that's just silly."

He laughed some more, letting the sounds ripple off his lips, then replaced the cigarette in his mouth and leaned back a bit, watching his former co-worker grow steadily angrier and angrier. He loved to make her mad. And Reno hadn't seen that lovely furious face of hers in how long. . . what, five years or so? Reno wasn't too sure, but he knew it'd been a long, long time. But he didn't really care. She hadn't called and neither had he. Clean break, easiest way to end it. Clean break from Shinra, clean break from the Turks, clean break from him and any memories of Tseng she associated with him.

"Where's Reeve?" she finally demanded, locating her voice and aiming it in his face. She poked him in the chest with painful red fingernails.

"I dunno, "he answered carelessly, "And I don't give a damn. I'm through with fighting the end of the world. Let it come, I say. And let it hurry."

"End of the world. . . what kind of garbage is that? Is that what this is? Is-- I mean, what happened to Midgar, is that a sign?"

"I dunno." Reno shrugged his shoulders, letting warm smoke drift from his nose and into his eyes, "But it's all gonna burn. Remember Jenova? Well, the bitch is back. She's the reason Rude's. . . well, ya know."

"I heard it was poisoning or something. A cat?" Elena questioned softly. Her angered brows eased up as the hurt look returned to Reno's face. He shrugged again, tensing a bit.

"Something like that. Something fuckin' stupid like that, yeah. Don't make no sense. None at all. Fuck it, I don't wanna talk about it."

He stood violently from the window, ash spraying from the end of his smoke, and stalked across the room. He reached the opposite wall, kicked it harshly with the toe of his dress shoe, then turned and walked back and kicked the bit of wall under the window. Then he turned and repeated it. Pacing. Kicking. Swearing.

"Before we went up there, we were at my place, the night before, ya know? And we talked and I said it would be her or me, her or me, ya know? But then Rude, like a jerk, like the fuckin' bad ass he is, he goes "or me". And I laughed, I thought he was being a fuckin' riot. But I didn't know. I didn't know that'd really happen. It's my fault, mine."

"How do you figure that?" Elena demanded fiercely, crossing her arms, "I heard the story from one of the MPs, friend of mine. He told me what happened. There wasn't anything you could do. Reno, I understand if you're grieving but are you up here blaming yourself? That's ignorant, what's the point? You didn't do anything, Rude went up there because it was his job and he was getting paid for it. Hell, I never knew him that well, he never spoke more than two words at a time to me, to anyone but you really, but something tells me there's no other way he would've rather gone. He went out like a Turk, doing his job, fighting the opposition, protecting Shinra and Midgar and friends. That's really noble and you should be proud that you had a friend like that. I am."

"What the hell do you know, Elena?" Reno snapped violently. He flung himself around and stepped quickly towards her, spitting in her face with smoky breath as he spoke, "Why don't you go back the hell to Wutai, eh? Go screw Yuffie, eh?"

"That's a foul rumor."

Reno cracked a smile and blew hair from his eyes.

"You wanna know what they call you around Shinra?" he asked casually, "They call you traitor."

"Don't double this conversation back around onto me, Reno. Don't try to guilt trip me to get the attention off you. You wanna know what I call you? I call you a fucking coward. Why did you abandon your President? Why aren't you with Reeve?"

"Why aren't you with Yuffie?"

"She sent me here, you ass! After hearing about Midgar she's worried, she wants to know what the deal is and how it may impact Wutai. Mayor Kisaragi, as much as Shinra would love to think it, isn't a total idiot."

"Well then you can tell Miss Half-Idiot that she doesn't need to worry about Wutai, "Reno reassured with a dismissive wave of his hand, "'Cause it's all gonna go boom. And we pawns'll finally be outta our misery. Yee-friggin'-haw."

"You're just givin' up? Not even going to try and avenge Rude? That's sick, Reno. What the hell's happened to you?"

"Fuck off, Elena, "Reno sighed, approaching one of the room's rock hard beds and throwing himself down, "I don't need your mothering right now, alright? Just skeedaddle back to Wutai, tell Yuffie to start saying her prayers, and wait for it all to go. I can't tell you the sign to look for. I don't think it'll be a Meteor this time. I don't know what it'll be. Maybe the ground'll open up, the Planet'll implode. Maybe Chaos will just go from city to city, home to home, and systematically rip everything apart. Hell, who knows? It'll just have to be a surprise. One big final surprise to make everyone gasp before they're blown to bits. Hot damn, but I'm lookin' forward to it."

"Doesn't being a Turk mean anything to you anymore? Protecting Shinra, protecting the President?"

"Number one: I ain't a Turk no more. Number three: Shinra's deader than dead. And uh, Number eight: Reeve's a big boy. He can handle himself. Not that it matters. Ain't no one coming back alive and even if they do, they'll only be coming back to die once Jenova wins. Everyone keeps dying and there's a finite number of people. Planet's gotta start runnin' outta us eventually. And that's when the alien bitch'll be able to say checkmate finally. Yeah. After all us fucking little pawns are dead."

Reno quit his pacing and looked beyond Elena's stiffly starched shoulder and out the window, running sober eyes over the view of Kalm's blue rooftops outside. "You ain't been here the past week. It's been hard as hell. People dying all over the place. Good people, ones worth a helluva lot more'n me. Death's been splattered thick in the seams of everything,

swallowing everyone who tries to brush it away, fix things. . . "Reno frowned, and pulled his shades down over his eyes, "It's easy to ignore at first, you remember, don't you? You tried to ignore it when you first started for Shinra, I remember. But it started to get to ya after a while. Watching those people die when Meteor nearly hit. . . you had to leave the company after that. Because you couldn't fuckin' handle it no more. Now I. . . the casualties are hitting a little too close to home. I can't hide the losses in my blood lust anymore. 'Cause. . . fate ain't letting me get my revenge. I'm scared to try for it anymore. Rude, Tifa and I, we went up to the Sixty-Eighth floor together, I went to get my revenge on that Chieko and on Jenova for killing Howard, killing my guards. And I just got swiped from again. Rude. . . got fuckin' plucked right outta my hand. I keep fighting and who knows what the hell'll get taken. . ? Reeve or Berk or Cloud or even Tifa. I can't handle another death happening with me standing by to watch. I feel like that Valentine guy must. Just standing idly by while things get ripped apart right before my eyes."

"So you're scared?" Elena asked coldly, arms interlaced over her chest, "That's just great."

"M'not scared, ya loopy broad. . ."

"Well, it sure sounds like you are, Reno. You're scared of the risks of fighting. For a man who used to be a Turk to feel like that is hilarious. And very very sad."

Reno turned her way, features drawn, scars stark against pale skin. Elena was sure his eyes were wet behind those damned dark concealing sunglasses. He gave a sigh and turned back to the window, his tired lanky arms hanging dead at his sides. "All this frigging talk of counters and opposites and yin and yang lately. . ." he muttered, crooked smile drooping over his lips, "Rude was my counter. We use t'joke about that. I was fire, he was ice, heh. Guess I'll just burn myself out now. Pretty damn lame I was so dependent on the lug, eh? It was easy to be that way with Rude though, I was sure he'd never be going anywhere, he was as predictable as the tides."

"If you'd been the one to go first, he wouldn't be hanging around sulking, ya know that?"

"If I'd gone first. . ." Reno muttered, voice faint with other thoughts, "That's how it shoulda been. I'm the one always jumping at things, drinkin' like a fish, smokin' like a chimney, about as healthy as a can of Crisco. He punched me the other night for it. He said he didn't want to start eating lunch alone. Now I'll be eating lunch alone."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," Elena insisted quietly, taking a few deep breaths to stifle sympathetic tears, "And be Reno again. Go help Reeve and your friends, or you really will be eating lunch alone. Ya bastard."

"Help them. . . I don't even know where Reeve's dragged them all. It's pointless anyway, Elena, you haven't seen the things we're up against. Jenova. . . I don't even like to say that name anymore, it's worse'n any curse I know. And Chaos and Chieko and Cloud, I just. . . no one knows how to fight those things, those people. And Cloud wants us all dead and Chaos has a heart of stone and Chieko killed my goddamned best friend! Let Reeve scabble till the last but I'm not so damned clueless as to keep ignoring the fuckin' signs! Armageddon is a word that gets thrown around a lot. It didn't phase me at first. Well now it is."

"Okay, so now we've established that not only are you a coward, but you're a quitter too. I woulda rather had you shot yourself, Reno, than seen you like this. I'll bet Rude's disappointed as hell. I'll bet he's shaking his head and clucking his tongue and cursing himself for being friends with such a snakey coward as you for all these years. I'll talk with Reeve when he gets back, after he's disposed of what's threatening us. I'll have him fire your ass. I'll drag you to Wutai and you can work for me, I'll teach you how to be Reno of the Turks again. Because it seems you've forgotten. . ."

"Why are you bein' like this? Like this after knowing all that's happened to me?" Reno shook his head, honestly at a loss. Was just an ounce of sympathy too much to ask for? Just a drop? Gods, Elena didn't even know where he was coming from, she didn't know what it was like to lose so much in so short a time. His laughs were all used up, his distracting banter was dry. There was just the knowledge that his best friend was dead, that he wouldn't be coming back. No one to joke with, no one to back him up when he argued with Reeve or Cloud. No one. A void in the world where Rude had been. And nothing to fill it with. That small fact, innocent and evil all at once, seared the outter edges of his control. He'd built it up again, just a bit, after losing it all in front of Reeve the night before, but he didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep it strong. He would've liked to swing something hard and blunt at Elena's blonde head, shut her up, unleash his anger on something. But he couldn't. He couldn't. Weak as it was, the control was still there, the remnants of the cool Shinra bastard. So Reno bit at the insides of his mouth, he chewed his tongue, he waggled the burnt butt of his cigarette between two trembling lips.

"I'm going to go do your job," Elena said suddenly, watching him with a keen intensity in her blue eyes, "Yuffie said I was to do what was needed as soon as I was sure Wutai was safe."

"My job?" he spat, "What job? You mean manage the insolent little pricks wandering the streets? They don't know what's going on. . . let 'em keep wondering, let em suffer if it keeps em from thinking. Don't want a panic, ya know. I told Ikari something to that effect. Keep Midgar's forsaken suffering as long as it keeps 'em distracted. Nothing matters, it won't

be long now. Something tells me that."

"I'm not like you though, Reno, "Elena returned, moving towards the door, sick of the self-pity soaked into the atmosphere. It nauseated her. "I'm going to go help. I'm going to go help those poor people in the streets. I'm going to be Shinra again for a day. If we all die, there's nothing I can do about it. If Jenova or whatever the hell's threatening the Planet now really does achieve its aims, I'm helpless to stop it. I sat this fight out. And it's too late to get tagged in. But here you are, just sitting on your ass when you have the opportunity to go out and try to stop this! Do you know how many people out on the streets would kill for that chance? You've lost a lot and I won't be so cruel as to deny you that fact, but there're people out there who've lost a hell of a lot more. And there's nothing they can do about it. Because they're weak, they're common, they're nobodies. They just don't have the damn opportunity to strike out. But you. . ." Elena shook her head slowly, unable to understand it, "You're holed up here. Here. In an inn in some backwater town full of the damned. Do you want to die here, under this roof? Or do you want to die somewhere the sky can see you go? Can see you fighting till the end? You're a Turk, Reno, you'll always be a Turk, Shinra or no Shinra. Blue suit or black. And as a Turk, you know better than this."

Elena poised her hand on the doorknob, anger, frustration, and grief sitting deep and heavy in her chest. Cid had been right. The Turks had needed her. Rude was dead and Reno was a wreck. And around them all, the very sky was crumbling.

"I came back for you guys, ya know, "she whispered, hating herself the moment the words escaped her lips, "I mean, Yuffie made the suggestion, but I came back on my own. I just had a feeling, that same sort of feeling I had right before the phone rang that day Tseng died. Those womanly instincts you always mocked me for. They're more accurate than you'll ever know."

Reno grunted in reply, his hands hidden in his pockets, his eyes on her easily with a barrier of black plastic over them. "You're not going to confess your love for me, are ya babe?" he asked, half a smile running over unshaven features. Elena scowled and punched him. "I mean, 'cause I'd rather have you say, "Reno, the last coupla years have been hell without gettin' to see your sweet face every evening. Please forgive my foolish pride and take me back! Take me now, you hunk of Turk, don't let the world end before I've been held in your arms!"" Reno snorted, then broke into heavy laughter at his own joke. Grinning wide at Elena's expression, he smacked her chummily on the shoulder, stumbling forward a step. "I woulda preferred that, ya know. I coulda just laughed in your face. But no, ya gotta come in here and guilt trip me, yell at me, and tell me I'm an asshole. Hell, it feels like the old days."

"It is just like the old days. You giving me reasons to say the things I do." Elena turned the doorknob as Reno laughed again, preparing to stalk back to the bed, fling himself down and chain smoke for a couple hours. He'd sit up here and wait for it, wait for whatever came: death or renewal or whatever. For Reeve's return or Jenova's, for the moment when he'd know just how little the Planet cared.

The door came open and Elena's eyes narrowed, Reno's infuriating attitude draining away as something sudden and different grabbed her attention. "Do you hear that?" she asked and the fiery-haired ex-Turk raised an eyebrow. She stepped out into the hallway, her lips half-parted with concentration, trying to make the sound out again.

"Ikari's downstairs, he'll deal with it, "Reno said dismissively, turning away. But then he halted as the sound of breaking glass assaulted his ears. His and Elena's gazes met for an instant, eyes wide on both ends.

"Get down!"

The cry came from downstairs but Reno figured it was probably good advice. He pushed Elena to the ground than dove on top of her, just as the muffled roar of an explosion tore through the air. The rickety old wooden floor shook a bit beneath them under the impact of the blast, the walls creaking complaints, but then everything was still. Reno watched the dust motes floating before his eyes for a moment or two, tiny specks of gold glinting against the generally darker gloom of the second floor. But then Elena elbowed him and he climbed off her and to his feet, making for the stairs. He could hear things settling down below, and then saw the situation for himself upon clapping his feet in the lobby.

"Mr. Reno!" Ikari caught sight of his superior suddenly standing there and relief washed over his face, "A bomb, sir! From outside. It came through the window."

Reno coughed a bit at the kicked-up dust choking the air, absently hearing Elena clattering down the stairs behind him. Features drawn but curious, he surveyed the scant wreckage, running cool eyes over the foot wide hole in the middle of the lobby floor. "I'd hardly call that a bomb, "he muttered, "More like a firecracker. This come from outside, you say?"

"Yes, sir!"

Glass and chips of the plank floor crunching beneath his shoes, Reno stalked to the front window and glared outside. A clumping of citizens surrounded the building, ringing the place in with wide stares and grim frowns, belligerence thick in their features. The morning sun was bright behind them and Reno squinted to make out some of the faces, looking for

familiar ones. Nothing.

"Which one of you pricks did this?" he demanded, voice ringing loud in the empty air. He felt Elena's hand on his shoulder suddenly and knew she'd do everything she could to keep him anchored. But fuck anchors though, they weighed ya down.

"I asked a question, ya ungrateful scum!" he hollered, running from the window and flinging the front door of the inn open. The same sea of faces. Faces pleading, hating, wondering why. They stuck in Reno's eyes like needles, made his hand go for his gun. A million faces, a million nameless strangers and what was he but one of them? A stranger who happened to have a gun and work for Shinra and bring home large paychecks. He was a stranger who'd lost his job, his office, his partner, his best friend. Lost the people who meant anything to him, lost his sense of humor, his frigging reason to keep going. Just a stranger to these people with his own set of difficulties. Those people, they had problems too, maybe worse than his, maybe not so bad. He didn't know them, they didn't know him and no one was more important than the other.

"What d'you want from me?!" he screamed, stepping out onto the front porch of the old inn, gun arm loose at his side. His fingers gripped the handle so tight they made the pistol creak. Faces assaulted him, not understanding the question. So he repeated it. Then he repeated it again. "Shinra can't help you and I can't help you! Help yourselves! Don't make us the butt of yer frigging hatred! Don't throw your bombs our way! Reeve's out risking his life for you ungrateful pricks, show some respect!"

"Shinra's the reason Midgar's gone!"

A lone angry voice shouted the words out from the back of the crowd. Reno snapped his head around, eyes nearly closed they were slitted so hard. "No," he hissed, "It was Jenova. . . Jenova. . . We. . . we're humans, right?"

He got a couple of snickers from the crowd at that one though it wasn't a joke. He really needed to be reassured. His hooded eyes searched the faces, wanting to see something familiar. He turned back around to the inn and Elena was standing in the doorway, watching him like she might an uncaged panther: interest, caution, and awe playing alternately over her features. After he stared at her for a moment, she nodded, carefully.

"We're all humans, Reno," she assured, "Even when we don't act like it, it's somewhere inside of us."

"Yeah. . . yeah, it is. So you hear that, people? We're all humans and from what I've seen we all share one common fuckin' enemy. I think if we all hate her hard enough, we can hate her right out of existence. Is hatred all you fuckers have?" The crowd didn't respond, growing steadily uneasy as the lunatic Shinra employee ran his unhinged eyes over them all. But Reno wouldn't put up with that feigned ignorance, he wanted an answer. Expression suddenly cool, he raised his gun and aimed it before him, right into the heart of the massing of disgruntled citizens. A few of them tried to push backwards, gasping, clawing to get out of such dangerous positions, but they were packed too closely together and had to content themselves with staring down the muzzle of Reno's upraised glock. He moved his aim from right to left, targeting the random face, picking out bullseye shots between people's eyes. Elena watched him, an arm held out to prevent Ikari or any of the other Shinra brass from trying to dart outside and stop her friend. Elena knew him better than that. Reno would stop his little game when he was ready.

"Hatred is all ya got. It's all we humans have. I've just lost mine and ain't likin' what's rolled on in t'replace it. Fuck inevitability. Fuck layin' down cause it hurts too much t'stand. Fighting, that's all that matters, that's what I've always thought. You can kill anything. Well it ain't true. Some things don't die."

"Like that Jenova thing, right? That thing that killed our city?"

It was some punk that asked the questions, his voice firm. Reno darted his gun around and laid the cold barrel against the kid's forehead, sweat beading down both their faces under the heat of the harsh morning sun. Reno cocked his head to one side and looked at the guy through one eye.

"You're wrong, kid. I don't mean Jenova. I'm talkin' about heartache."

He grinned wide for a moment, teeth flashing white with the hugeness of the smile, then lowered his gun and turned back about towards the inn, the entire gathered crowd breathing a collective sigh of relief. Before pacing through the doorway, he called out behind him, "Anymore of you pricks try anything else and I'll personally burn this entire town to the ground. Ya should be thanking Shinra, ya should be on yer knees. Reeve's the reason any of y'all are still breathin'. So be grateful. And make 'im up a thank-you card or something. The guy deserves it."

Leaving an uncomfortable silence behind, Reno waltzed back inside Kalm's Inn, tucking his gun in his pants. "Ikari," he muttered, slamming the front door shut behind him. The commander, shaken and pale, attempted a salute but smacked himself in the nose.

"Y-yeah, Mr. Reno?"

"Get me a fuckin' helicopter. And be snappy about it."

Ikari blinked slowly in surprise, then smiled a bit, not too sure what to think. Actually, after a moment of contemplation, he decided he was thrilled with the order.

"So go already!" Reno barked, "I ain't like Reeve, I don't have a patient bone in my body! You don't have me a chopper gassed and ready to fly outside this building in the next three minutes and I'll fill yer ass with so much electricity we can use ya as a nightlight once Jenova blows out the sun!"

"Yes, sir!"

Ikari bolted and the few soldiers of his who'd been lounging around in the lobby went with him, leaving the place suddenly quiet. Reno stood there for a moment, eyeing the dusty floor, trying to set it on fire with his gaze.

"What was all that crap you spouted outside?"

Elena leaned back against the counter where the register sat, smiling smugly. She pushed her elbows up behind her and clasped her hands over her front, playing with her rings as Reno eyed her.

"Just that," he answered, "Crap. But are ya happy now? I'm gonna go die with Reeve as opposed to dyin' here. Don't see what the big difference is though."

"So why ya going?"

Reno laughed softly, so disgusted with himself he thought it was funny. "I don't really know. 'Cause I guess you were right. It's what Rude woulda done. If I'd gone first. Wherever he is now, I can't let the old bald bastard have the last laugh at my damned weakness, right?"

Elena shared his laughter, though hers was soft with concern, slight aggravation, as opposed to Reno's unhinged, defeated chuckle. She shook her head a bit, watching her old friend. "Why is it that you were able to talk yourself into fighting again while I couldn't? Damn you, Reno, but you know how to make a girl feel worthless."

He shrugged, leaning against the wall, red prison bars of bangs hanging over his face. After a moment of thought, he asked, "You'll stay here and handle things?"

"Yes. That's why I came. Listen. . . you'll be careful out there, right?"

"Of course not. You're talking to Reno, remember? I'll be honest with you, the Planet's going down, Jenova's stronger than anything we have to pitch against her. Twilight's come, sweetheart. Blessed blackness. So I guess I should say 'see ya' now while I can. I doubt we'll meet again in the hereafter."

"You're going to hell then?" Elena asked jokingly.

"To play poker with the devil." Reno grinned hard, sunglasses slipping a bit. "And the bastard had better watch out, Rude and I can really clean up at a card table."

"Sir! Your helicopter's waiting!"

Ikari ran in, panting hard, two guards on his heels. Reno straightened and snatched the keys out of the commanders cold hands. "North, sir," the guy added, saluting, "President Reeve left trailing that cat of his north."

"Well then. . ."

Reno flung the front door open and sauntered into the suddenly emptied streets. The chopper was already running, huge blades slicing the air to shreds and billowing his black suit jacket at his sides, sending his long banner of a ponytail streaming behind him. He approached the thing, flung the pilot-side door open, grabbed a hold of the young pilot, and flung him out into the dirt, climbing up into the seat himself.

"You know where you're going then?" Elena hollered above the roar of the chopper, stepping forward from the inn. Reno strapped himself in and grabbed at the controls, then flashed one of his stock of wicked grins back towards his old comrade.

"Gonna go kill me some bitch cat!" he yelled, "And some heartache while I'm at it!"

"Don't forget to come back when you're done!" Elena called out, a hint of desperation at the edge of her voice, giving away how much of a lie her smile was, "I don't think hell's ready for you yet!"

Reno saluted, slammed the round chopper door shut, then took off into the blue. Elena watched him until he was nothing more than a black speck hovering over the Northern horizon.

The air here was strange; thick, granular, and inundated with the stench of rot. Decay, it played a somber tune through

the atmosphere, it slithered over the rocks in invisible wisps, curling between everything, the very air no more than a garrison of lifeless snakes. They hissed, they wrapped around anything that might possibly hold some trace of life, of something they could feed off of, consume, then destroy and leave empty. The air breathed, but it was dead. It was the unreleased respirations from the lungs of a cadaver, it was that last gulp for oxygen forever held in the dead man's chest. It was stale. It was wrong. It was dead.

Could he feel it? Couldn't he, on the tips of his fingers? Fascinated with the field he was moving through, Cloud jabbed his right hand out, that hand pale, blue and trembling. He waved it slightly, amazed that this almost unbreatheable air didn't leave a residue on his skin. He seemed to feel a coating of it, a thin membrane covering his face. It made his flesh crawl, as though a swarm of gnats had settled over him, each insect doing its best to wedge its buzzing body into every pore.

"Ugh. . ."

He shook his head suddenly and ran hooked fingers over his cheeks and forehead, swallowing hard at that wicked sensation, expecting to see the crushed bodies of a lot of bugs in his hands when he pulled them away. But no. . . nothing there. . . of course not. Licking his lips, Cloud slid cold fingers over his brow, soft blonde eyebrows beneath his touch momentarily fascinating him. Giving a disgusted snort though, he suddenly flung the arm away and dropped his other hand into the pocket of his tattered rag of a jacket, shivers wracking him. It was so cold here, colder than he remembered. Snow fell in soft clumps and he halted in his descent into the Crater to watch. It fell so slow to the hard ground, so careless, not giving a single second thought to the deathly air it had to fall through to get there. Again he held his hand out, palm up, to catch a flake, glad there was no one around to see him acting like such a child.

The snowflake melted the moment it hit his skin, and he wrapped his fist around it. Sighing deeply, he leaned back, not caring if there was anything there to stop his fall or not. He felt a wall meet his shoulders and slumped against it, frozen gray rock sending waves of cold through the thin leather of his jacket and feeding his desolation.

This was it then, he thought. He was here, he'd really done it, he'd really come. The Northern Crater.

He'd been climbing down for about an hour, following that same path he and the others had taken thirteen years before. He'd seen some of their same footprints as he'd walked through a few of the caves and it'd made him feel like an alien trespasser on another planet. His purpose now was so different than what it had been before. Hell, did he even have a purpose? Cloud didn't want to question himself, didn't want to question how it was he'd even come this far. When he thought about it, things pounded at him. A voice that he immediately recognized as Jenova cooed and whispered, insisting his actions were just. That voice, strange enough, the voice he'd so often dreaded and fought, that voice now was his biggest comfort. It was his own voice, and Tifa's voice, that sent him to his knees. He couldn't understand it, how had he become his own worst enemy? Why did he berate himself, scream protests, when Cloud was so so sure that what he was doing was the only open, logical course? Wasn't it? Wasn't it just that a murderer should die for its crimes? Wasn't it just that the destruction of innocence should be avenged? He thought so. Standard moral codes backed him up; cold logic was his friend here. But still those voices called him a murderer, called him a fool. His own voice. And Tifa's.

He'd seen her. For just a brief beautiful second, he'd seen her, back there, in the village. There to stop him, to stop what he knew he had to do. Cloud had been so tempted to lay there in the snow and let her kill him. There could be no sweeter way to die than by her hands. He'd even fantasized of it for a few moments, that burning desire for a conclusion dulling his purposes. Tifa's lips on his just before she pulled a trigger to end his insanity. Sweet, hot death, he wished for nothing more. Dying in his wife's arms. He'd wanted to. He'd wanted to stay and listen to her lies about their children. He remembered them from Midgar, those lies of hers. Those gorgeous, gorgeous lies. He didn't blame her for them for a second, he only envied her talent to be so delusional. He'd lost the ability to lie to himself thirteen years before back in Mideel, in the LifeStream. He'd learned that day to trust nothing but his eyes and his heart. The mind played tricks, the mind couldn't be relied upon. His mind had fooled him into thinking he was a SOLDIER, a hero, a winner. But with his own eyes and heart he'd seen himself for the sniveling liar he really was; the delusional guinea pig who couldn't keep his own memories straight.

He wouldn't be that again. It'd hurt too much afterwards to know what a fool he'd been in front of Tifa, how weak he'd shown himself to be. Things were straight now, right? Yeah, as horrible as they were, as wretched as events had unfolded to be, Cloud knew they were straight in his mind. And so the consequential actions of fate and the Planet's apathy and cruelty, were clear. What he had to do was.

And so he kept up his descent.

Revenge. It was one of his favourite words. It made things make sense, gave him a purpose, gave him a reason. Jenova barely had to nudge him, he was all too willing to take something back for what had been stolen. It was only fair, it was only right. Lives for Lives. He'd wake the Planet up from its selfish, thoughtless slumber. And then he'd kill it. He was sure if

Tifa wasn't so delusional, she'd be proud of him. But she couldn't help her lies, Cloud knew that. She deserved them. Let her live in a fantasy world where the sky was always blue, she deserved perfection more than anyone he knew. He'd avenge the deaths for the both of them, without making her muss her pretty hands. He'd go to hell for her, he'd be the murderer for her, he'd sacrifice his soul for the honor and the memory of their two children. Something as petty, as common as his soul seemed hardly worthy, hardly enough, but it was all he had to give.

Colder. The deeper he went into the Crater, the icier it became. That foreignness to the air thickened as though freezing and moving his body through it was like moving through jelly. The view seemed clear before him, he walked a featureless sloping ledge hugging the side of a cliff face, plain stone wherever he glanced, nothing to break it up but lichen and cracks and the sheen of greenish ice. Yeah, it all seemed clear, looked clear, but then why did it feel as though this thick air should be visible as sand? When it wasn't? It was as clear as air ever was, nothing strange to see. Yet it was tangible, Cloud could almost scoop hunks of it out with his bare hand. The atmosphere tingled, and when he breathed it in, it filled his lungs like a fluid, until he felt he was slowly drowning. And the farther down he went, the more solid the air became.

What is this? It all seems dead. This air. . . the lichen, the plants, they're all nothing but brown. Everything here has died. . . Even the rocks seem hollow, sucked dry. When Jenova's finished, will it all look like this? Is life so meaningless that it can be taken so easily? Like money, or jewels, it just gets stolen because Jenova wants it. Where's the grand mysticism in that, eh? It isn't there. Because the Planet isn't god, it isn't holy. It's just something that controls us, contains us, without thought or feeling. It's no different than Jenova, just a different element. It doesn't care if we die, it doesn't care at all. It's concerned with itself and that's fucking it. Selfishness shouldn't go unpunished. Neither should unthinking apathy. That's evil, if you ask me. Watching a crime and doing nothing. . . that's just as terrible as committing it. Watching a murder and doing nothing makes you just as much the murderer. Why am I the only one to see this? Why do I have to be the fuckin' sacrificial lamb, the martyr? Why did Vincent have to die, he could have come with me. . . instead I'm alone with my beliefs. Alone with my revenge. And everyone knows how lonely revenge is.

"Heya, Mr. Cloud. . . "

Cloud gave a start and looked up, stopping in his tracks. The bitter winds blowing from the faraway sky overhead jabbed his bangs into his eyes and he brushed them away, the barren scenery of the Crater suddenly not so barren before him. That kid was at his side, the one from Sector Three. He hadn't seen him, he thought he'd ran away when Tifa'd come to him, scared. But here he was, that little black-haired kid with the pinky finger fetish. Go figure.

"Hey kid, "Cloud greeted, resuming his steady pace downwards, the kid walking faithfully beside him, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Thought you looked lonely, so I came t'keep ya company."

Cloud grunted in reply, his hands in his pockets again, his eyes attempting to pierce the growing blackness spreading before him. Deja vu tickled his senses, and caution made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. This far down, years before, this place had been crawling with monsters. They'd been attacked at every bend. But now it was empty and echoing, such a void. Even the weird thick air couldn't hope to muffle the echoes that grew from his every footfall. The sounds rang loud and rose far overhead, playing leapfrog off the gray Crater walls, until, like everything else in the area, they too died away.

"Where are ya goin', Mr. Cloud?" Jeek asked softly, hesitant to break the looming silence. Cloud looked down at the top of the kid's head, eyes strained and melancholy.

"To find a lady named Jenova."

"Izzat your girlfriend?"

Cloud chuckled humourlessly and shook his head. The world was fucked and he thought it was hilarious. "No, "he answered, "She's actually the enemy of man. I shouldn't be down here, I should be fighting off her influence and fighting off her power, but instead I've decided to say to hell with it and let her do with me as she will. There're two sides to this war, Jeek. The side I used to fight on, they screwed me over, betrayed me after years of faithful service. So I've changed camps."

"Oh."

The air was silent between them for a while, the light growing dimmer as their footsteps took them further and further from the surface. Strange groans, as though the Planet was heaving, drifted to Cloud's ears. The very walls seemed buckling under a tense pressure. He held his breath, listening, heartbeat quickening in a mix of terror and anticipation.

"Why do you have to fight at all?" Jeek asked suddenly, pale little lips pursed together, perplexed. Cloud shook his head to clear it of the sounds and gave the kid a glance.

"Because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time eighteen years ago, "he whispered, "It's that simple. I've been

fighting ever since. Fighting to live my own life despite the warring elements. Fighting to find love in a world that only wants to hate. Fighting to keep others safe, fighting to kill those who'd hurt them. I'm a warrior, kid, I became one a long time ago. I had no choice in the matter. I've killed a lotta things in my career and done a lotta things for a lotta people. I took a lotta shit, a lot of shit for a long long time before I finally had anything given back to me. And then I had it taken it away. So now I'm still fighting, just for different reasons. I'm still a warrior. I was still in the wrong place at the wrong time, still often am. Bad luck, is all. Rotten, rotten luck."

Cloud watched the toes of his boots kicking at the ground, quick flashes of black leather, his bangs falling before his eyes and adding intermittent flashes of blonde. He saw Jeek's little sneakers, blue and white high tops just like CJ used to wear, kicking the ground in step with him, and suddenly looked up, staring the kid in the face. Jeek stared back, biting at his pinky nail.

"Kid. . . "Cloud breathed, tired eyes narrowed, "Who are you?"

"My name's Jeek, Mr. Cloud, "the boy replied quietly.

"I know but. . . why're you here? You said that your mom was off helping people or something, right? Shouldn't you be back. . . wherever, waiting for her or something? Instead of walking around with me?"

"She's still helping people, "Jeek answered, "There're more'n she thought there'd be. She doesn't need me. 'Sides, you should have someone to talk to. A long trip down here t'make it by yerself."

"You're a nice little guy, "Cloud remarked, the creaking in the air louder, a buzzing beginning behind it all, "Who's side are you on, eh?"

Jeek shrugged. "Whichever side you're on, Mister."

The boy's words died away into a whisper, blasted to dust, drowned to nothing beneath the sounds up ahead, and the uncanny thickness of the tangible air. Cloud put a hand on the kid's shoulder, suddenly so terrified he had a hard time keeping himself from closing his eyes. This was it, he felt it. . . this was where they'd killed Sephiroth, where they'd killed Jenova. The remnants of that destruction lay scattered at his feet, sliding slabs of rocks, toppled pillars of stone, soot marks, old, blackened bloodstains. It had been alive and glowing, pulsing with power and anger thirteen years before. But now it was as they'd left it. . . drained, destroyed, silent. Still, he could feel her. He could feel her as though she were blowing in his ear. So close now, closer than ever, closer than when she'd punched him in that alley or tortured him in Hojo's lab. Jenova.

Cloud. . .

Hearing his own name had never frightened him so much. She called it in such sweet tones though, called it as though she were flirting with him from across the room, called it with a coquettish turn of the tongue, an inviting lilt. He sloshed through the dead air, footsteps hollow and loud on the rocks, the pressing, damning heights of the Crater walls reaching up to the sky around him. That sky was only a memory now. He'd left the last of the light behind, now so immersed in the Northern Crater's depths that any filtered light from above was drowned and dispersed, conquered by the blackness. Cloud heard Jeek at his side but couldn't see him anymore, just a dim boy-shaped outline.

Cloud, my love. It's been so long since I saw you last, saw you with my own eyes. I didn't enjoy the sight for long before you were cutting me apart, but while you were there, blazing in righteous indignation, blue eyes burning with the power of your beloved Planet, I cherished it. You are a work of art, Cloud. A masterpiece of weaponry. You were then. You are now. How fortunate I have been to wield you these past days. I have enjoyed it very much.

Cloud bore the words with no expression on his face. He could just barely see a faint violet illumination, a soft glow, from far ahead in the darkness. The closer he got to it, the more fiercely his chest burned, his head throbbed. The louder that vicious voice became, until it slammed into his skull like a sledgehammer. He was petrified, more scared than he'd ever been of anything in his life, but he kept walking, slow heavy steps. His hands were cold at his sides and he curled them into fists, pressing them into his hips.

You look tired, Cloud. You probably are. Who could blame you for a bit of honest exhaustion? You should sleep. You've come to me to sleep, haven't you? You've run away here to let me handle the rest of your task. Well, you'd like to think that anyway, but the glaring truth is, I've called you here and you came. It is my turn, there's not denying that. You rolled the dice, now I will. With your help. Step forward, Cloud, keep walking. A few more steps and I'll let you collapse and I'll let you die. You've earned your right to die after your faithfulness to me. You managed just as much. . . no, more, than your predecessor. That's something you can be proud of. But I learned with him that this task isn't one to be left up to humans. Humans are weak and will fail because they cannot truly destroy that which they came from. You've done as much as you could on your way to hand the reins to me. And I'm very grateful. But now it is my turn. Step forward, Cloud, my love. And give me what is mine. Return those cells you curse, surrender them back to me. And then I'll ask no more of you. I

promise."

A promise. An ending. Release. The words were sweet and good to Cloud's ears. They were wrong, they were cowardly, but then, he told himself, so was he. He couldn't really do it though, could he? Even. . . even after what happened, as much as he wanted the evil of the Planet to die. . . could he allow Jenova to resurrect? He'd fought-- they'd all fought so hard to halt her years ago. They'd been willing to give their lives to stop her and Sephiroth. Could he undo that now? Could he so easily say to hell with those battles, that strife they lived through, and let it all burn away now?

"Why do you hesitate? Hear my voice, I only want what you want. Step forward and give yourself to me. It can end, you want it over. . . I'll end it for you. Please, Cloud. . . please. . ."

Maybe just for a moment he could step inside and see who owned that marvelous voice, who it was that seemed to care so much about him. It almost sounded like Tifa. . . almost. . . just as heavenly. He took a few more steps forward, Jeek lagging behind, fear plain in his young features. The strange violet glow was coming from a fissure in the rock, a crack there in the very living stone, pouring out like purple oozing magma. There was something inside, hidden away, secreted away, tired of waiting, ready to be free. It was what was making that beautiful hazy light, what was speaking so softly, so lovingly to him. But it was evil. . . a small voice tried to remind him but he didn't listen. Just a look, just a peek at what had brought him this far. If he decided he didn't want to go through with it, he could turn right back around and go destroy the Planet himself. He didn't have to do what that voice said, as much as he wanted to, as easy as it would be. . .

"That's right, Cloud. Come to me, I've waited so long. . . step inside. . . come to me. . ."

That fissure, something like a cave entrance, was now before him, bathing his face and body in the lovely violet glow. But it was too bright, he couldn't see what was inside. His chest burnt so badly he thought he might die. If he went inside it might stop. . . it might. It wouldn't hurt to look, to peek. Just for a moment. See what had called him here, what loved him so much . . . loved him enough to help him get his revenge and stop the hurt.

"After thirteen years, my love. . . come inside. Give me my strength. . ."

Trembling, Cloud obeyed. Inside was Jenova.

The blizzard was picking up. It rocked the creaking old airship like a cradle containing children it didn't particularly care for. His warm breaths fogging the cold glass before his eyes, Sephiroth looked outside, watching each furious flake of white that screamed past, listening to the howls of the November wind. November or not, the Northern Crater was an icy hell. On the other side of the Highwind's thin hull, the atmosphere, the aura of the Crater hummed and throbbed. The summoned General could feel it in the back of his teeth. Green eyes touched with just the faintest hint of anxiety, he narrowed his gaze to try and make out the darker ground below, peering past the white, wondering if they were too late or not.

"Reeve."

The Shinra President looked away from Sephiroth, that tall, black form stark against the Highwind's fore window a difficult sight to tear his eyes from. Cid, natural obnoxiousness slightly diminished by the solemnity in the air, gazed at his friend askance, flicking his cigarette up and down between his lips. "Another ten minutes," he breathed, hands firm and unyielding on his airship's controls. Reeve nodded then Cid turned back to the view outside, keeping his reflexes as sharp as he could, fearful of the looming crags that appeared with no warning through the obscurity of the white.

Both men turned suddenly as Marlene and Nanaki entered the bridge, Bugah only a step behind. They paced briskly towards them, Marlene smiling slightly, cheeks flushed.

"How's Berk doing?" Reeve asked, concern in his faint voice. The young woman grinned, crossing her arms and leaning back on the heels of her feet.

"He's feeling a lot better," she giggled, "He'll be in in a minute, he's throwing on some pants, er, I mean, a shirt, er. . . clothes, yeah. Sorry." Marlene reddened as Bugah gave her a severe look that she promptly ignored. "I heard Cid say ten minutes?" she added quickly, desperate to change the subject, "What's the plan?"

Reeve looked to Sephiroth again, and Marlene and the others followed his gaze. The man still had his back to them, eyes pasted outside, shoulders squared as though against the heaviest of burdens. "It's up to him," Reeve whispered finally, "He's the only one of us who seems to have any sort of confidence in our actions. I guess that makes sense. Unlike we scabbling humans, General Sephiroth there actually has some semblance of a clue as to what's going on."

"Have you tried calling Tifa on her PHS?" Nanaki asked suddenly and Reeve glanced down at his friend. He shook his

head after a moment, absently.

"Hers was smashed in Midgar, she doesn't have another. I'm just trusting that she'll do what's right until we can get to her. Tifa's an intelligent woman, rash, but intelligent. I'm trying to have a little faith in her. Heh. Seems since she's decided that strength is love, she's become bound and determined to be as strong as she can. That's Tifa, taking everything to an extreme, god love her."

"Just like Cloud," Cid cut in, "That's why they fit."

"What about Vincent?" Nanaki asked then. He looked around to his friends, yellow eye sober, "Any word from him?"

"I doubt he's Vincent anymore," Reeve said brusquely, "So I'm not worrying about it. We worry about Chaos next time we see him, Vincent will have to fend for himself till then. Why do you ask, Red? Why'd you think we'd've heard of him since you guys went in the back?"

"Oh, no reason," Nanaki said easily, trying to sound casual, "Sephiroth said something before, back in the snow, back in Icicle Inn. . . I was just hoping something would come of it. But never mind, it doesn't matter."

"That choice is coming. . . isn't it, Nanaki?"

"What?"

Marlene smiled a bit sadly, her eyes down to the floor of the airship. "Where we choose what we're fighting for. . . for our friends, or for our Planet. . . I don't want to choose."

"And you won't have to," Cid reassured, "Don't make me get all pissed like Reno did. Don't make me start yelling my head off, 'cause I'll do it. There's no choosing. What fuckin' right would we have to choose anyway? That'd be putting us on the same level as that Jenova bitch, dishing out life and death and condemning people. It ain't up to us to choose. We keep fighting for both, Cloud, Vince, and the Planet and we don't let up till we've done what we were aimin' t'do. Ya see, Marlene, we're heroes and we do stuff like that. You keep hanging around with us, and you'll start to see how it all works."

Cid chuckled and Marlene tossed him a half grateful, half dubious sort of smile. It was honestly just a hell of a lot easier not to think about it. Let fate get the ulcer, Marlene decided she'd ride the wind and see where they all wound up.

"He's getting closer. . ."

Sephiroth's low voice swiped through their heads like a switchblade. They all turned to eye him as he continued, still gazing out the fore window, a black-gloved hand lightly touching the glass. "He's nearly there. We've waited too long. You all, you waited too long to call me."

"Don't pin this on us, Cap'n Planet," Cid snapped, "We little Planetees did our friggin' best. How were we to know that you weren't anything but the murdering little psycho ya were thirteen years ago? We still ain't sure just what you are, so stop throwing accusations our way, will ya?"

Reeve laid a hand on the piqued pilot's shoulder, silencing him with a glare. Whatever he was, Sephiroth seemed their only hope, it wouldn't do to go and piss him off. Cid's words didn't seem to matter though, Sephiroth turned away from the window and approached them all quickly, something like fear in his noble features.

"The time has come," he muttered hurriedly, yet imperially, "Jenova is below us and will soon rise again. I must tell you what she is and what she can do. You do not truly comprehend."

"That's the understatement of the year," Reeve moaned, leaning against the edge of the airship's control panel, "I mean, we've just been plodding along blindly, really. I never thought Jenova could go so far on her own. Could do so much single-handedly. But she's more than we thought, isn't she?"

"She is Death," Sephiroth replied simply, watching them through dark hooded eyes, "And killing is her function. She will exterminate this Planet when she resurrects."

"Sorta like you tried to do, right?" Cid winked at Sephiroth easily, and the silver-haired warrior fidgeted.

"Yes," he relented, "Only thirteen years ago she was content to use me to fulfill her aims. Luckily, I wasn't powerful enough, only human and subject to the same weaknesses as any human. As is Cloud now, despite his strength. That is why she will reclaim her cells from him and kill you all herself. Her own strength is much more powerful than anything she grants to her servants. She'll decimate the Planet with it."

Sephiroth turned away, something making him look outside again, strain to see past the white. Reeve and the others eyed him nervously, his words sitting heavy in their ears.

"Where did she come from?" the Shinra President finally asked, forcing himself to speak. He had to remain strong, he had to keep his head. He would keep his head.

"She's been in the Northern Crater. . ."

"No, I mean, before that, "Reeve corrected, swiping at his hair distractedly, "Who made her, or, or what fucking planet did she descend from? She's evil, fine. Death, fine. But where is she from?"

Sephiroth was silent a moment, contemplating the question. It wasn't an easy one to respond to. He wasn't even sure of an answer. "I think. . ." he began, the last word dying away into a pregnant pause, "That she's older than any of us can understand. Old in the way that the stars are old, or our own Planet. Without beginning and without end."

"Like fuckin' god?" Cid asked, eyes wide, "Jenova's hardly a god."

"I agree, "Sephiroth said quickly, "But for all practical intents and purposes, she is."

"So the question is, "Nanaki cut in, standing and beginning to pace, "How do we go about killing a god?"

"No!" Cid objected, anger flashing in his eyes, "Don't start calling the bitch that. Not even for practical friggin' reasons or whatever. No god would go and do the things Jenova's done. Finito. Leave it at that."

"God does have an opposite, you know. . ." Marlene whispered, two fingers up and tapping at her lower lip in thought. Her friends were silent around her. "Perhaps we should recognize her as that opposite."

"Yeah, fucking Satan, "Cid blurted, exasperated, "You smart bastards and your damn labels, get over it. Let's just kill the bitch and go home."

"There's no time for contemplation anyway, "Sephiroth said soberly, "Listen to me and listen well. Dragon Weapon, is it functional?"

"What?"

The name of the forgotten WDD weapon had everyone blinking hard and giving the summoned General strange looks. The thing had been sitting in the Highwind's hold since Cid had retrieved it from Wutai; a glistening marvel of technological engineering, Dr. Neto's pride and joy, the last project of Shinra's Weapon Development Department.

"I suppose it works, "Marlene answered, looking around for confirmation, "We were going to use it to break the barrier around the Shinra building but it wound up unnecessary."

"Do ya have to bring that up?" Cid growled, "I went through hell to get that sucker and we never even needed it. Plus every day we have it, it's costing us a god damned materia orb in rent. Anyone remember whose idea it was to use it, to get me t'leave the fight and fly to Wutai? If I'd been in Midgar, I mighta been able to keep y'all from screwing things up so badly."

Reeve scoffed and Cid glared heatedly at him, smacking the controls of his ship and sending the Highwind veering sharply to starboard, sending everyone but him to the floor. He maintained his footing with years of skill and made a point of giving Reeve a little kick with his shoe as he struggled to stand.

"But yeah, Seph, Dragon Weapon works, "the pilot finished with a sniff, "So said Mayor Yuffie."

"The alterations, have they been completed?" Sephiroth asked, voice tight with control as he struggled to stand atop the airship's tilting deck. He would have liked to punch the pilot.

"What alterations? You mean the ones we were going to do to make it mako elemental?" Marlene asked, business-like, "No, as I said, they were never necessary. But why do you ask? Can Dragon Weapon really be used against Jenova? What good would it be, you've said we can't destroy her."

"And we cannot, "Sephiroth said darkly, "But she can be contained. I must ask you all to trust me. Trust myself and trust the Planet, for the Planet, whatever its selfish reasons, will put a stop to Jenova's cruelty and destruction herself. But she does need our assistance. Jenova is too strong, she's always been too strong and has outclassed the Planet in that regard. That is why the Planet has humans; we bolster her strength with ours. For two thousand years, the Planet grew fat off life as Jenova lay sealed. That is not how the balance should be. That was wrong and the Cetra were foolish in what they did. They tipped the scales, tipped them towards a more favourable balance for ourselves, but tipped them nonetheless. Thusly, when Jenova was discovered and awakened some forty odd years ago, she felt the push to correct the error. Weakened, she did what she could and dispersed what remained to her among servants capable of helping her in her task. I was the result of Hojo's desire to create the ultimate servant for Jenova. He knew no better. He paid for his foolishness and his loyalty to the counterbalance of Life. I paid as well, am still paying, for my own selfishness and the crimes I committed that can never be atoned for. But Jenova, because of what she is, cannot be like us. She cannot die. She cannot truly pay."

"So now that she's got the power again, she'll renew her attempts to correct the balance, is that correct?" Bugah asked, speaking slow and waveringly, feeling out of place in the conversation. His own faith in their Planet had been shaken the past couple of days, he wasn't sure if what he thought he was so well-versed in was of any use anymore or not. It all seemed to be wrong anyways. "But I don't understand. She acts now to such an extreme, as though not to correct a simple

unbalance, but to kill us all. . . "

"That's her aim, "Sephiroth confirmed with a slight nod of his head, "As magnificent as her powers are, her truest threat to us is her mind. Jenova thinks, Jenova feels, Jenova desires. The Planet's sentience is vague, and its personality lies dispersed among us, it flows in the LifeStream and flows through us; many faceted, an infinite, inexhaustible well of emotions and identities. But Jenova, despite her ability to exist in divided segments, in scattered cells, owns only one personality. A vengeful, greedy personality, as you've all seen. I grew to know her well, too well, years ago. She has no conscience, never has, not since the beginning of her existence a millennia ago. A conscience, or wholesome feelings, would be a hindrance to her in her functions. Destruction cannot have a heart, that would be ludicrous. It is that lack of a heart that is our biggest concern. Because with nothing fueling her mind but a desire to destroy this Planet, there is no way we can reason with her to stop. She'll see no excuse to."

"So we won't be inviting her to tea then, eh?" Reeve asked, smiling weakly, "Remind me to cancel the caterer."

"Well, I never realistically expected to be able to reason with her, "Cid added, shoving the Shinra President in the shoulder chummily, "But I never thought that she had a mind enough to reason with. That's certainly damned intriguing there though. When all's said'n done, we're just fightin' another baddie with a desire for revenge, izzat right?"

"Yes, she is doing this because the Cetra imprisoned her, isn't she?" Marlene asked, eyes brightening with the notion. Sephiroth nodded again, turning his face away, long silvery bangs hiding his expression from them all.

"The Cetra wronged her, "he replied softly, "And our race wronged her thirteen years ago. She fights now because of that. The balance means nothing to her anymore. She is the element of Death let loose to wreak her havoc. It is up to us to stop her. And to save your friends."

"And we'll be using Dragon Weapon for this?" Marlene asked in slight confusion, still unsure how that could be done. "You said that the Planet would take care of her, I don't--"

"Ssh!!"

Sephiroth shushed her suddenly with a petulant hand, his head cocked up, his eyes swiftly closing as though listening to something far away. After a moment of silence on the Highwind's bridge, he finally lowered his hand and turned to the group, features grim.

"Time is so short, "he whispered, "The air here is full of her stench and Cloud is already below. I can hear them. . . listen. Listen to me. You must alter the Weapon as you were planning to to enter Shinra Headquarters, you must give it as much materia as you have, an eight slot link-up. Do it. I don't care that it's been proven impossible, the Planet will assist you and adjust the materia as necessary. You must make that Weapon as powerful as you can, more powerful than the Sister Ray ever was. The Planet will help you, will lend its power. Jenova must be weakened before she can be contained. She will soon be whole, for the first time in over two thousand years. And her thirst will be great. But if we can strike before she does, there's a chance. Pilot! how much longer?"

"Another minute or two, "Cid grumbled, not appreciating Sephiroth's tone of voice, "You can just make out the ledge in the distance there, through this damn snow, the same ledge as before, didn't change a-- whoa. That doesn't look good, does it?"

Cid squinted out the fore window, his cigarette hanging off his lower lip as his mouth came half open in surprise. The others turned and followed his gaze, taking in the sight outside with expressions just as amazed.

The circular shape of the Northern Crater loomed far below, a black ring rising up from the surrounding mountains, a burst boil. Through the flurrying snow, filling the air like the molted feathers of the world's fallen angels, they peered to make out the ominous scar and the weird fucking things it was doing to the sky.

"What is that?" Reeve breathed, taking an unconscious step forward, a hand going up to loosen his tie, feeling as though it and everything else was on the verge of strangling him. "I've never seen anything so damned ugly. . . "

"The sky, "said Bugah, narrowing his watery old eyes into a hard gaze, "That's the color of a dying sky."

Dying sky. The words fit together strangely but nothing could've better described what the group now found themselves staring at. The sky was the color of old blood, darkening to total blackness just over the crater, fading away into dull, dirty green then to the normal pale blue at the edges. A force radiated upwards from the Crater, pulsating in short sharp blasts that sent the Highwind rocking in the skies, pummeled again and again from underneath with the blows. Even inside the airship, the air was thicker and hard to breath, grainy and dead and disgusting.

Putting a hand to her throat, Marlene stepped backwards, horror grasping a cold hold of her features as the sight from outside consumed her eyes. She knocked into something soft and gave a cry turning around to see Berk standing there, looking just as shaken as the rest of them.

"What the fuck is that?" he asked softly, looking past her and outside. No one had an answer to give. It even took

Sephiroth a moment to regain himself.

"It's already begun," he murmured, "Do you see why we must hurry? You there, and you," he spat, pointing hurriedly to Marlene and Bugah, "Go and see about the Weapon. The rest of you come with me. Land this flying crate. Now. Or by the Gods, you're all dead."

"Wait a minute!" Reeve protested, "What the hell are we going out there to?! I'm not letting anyone outside or putting anyone in further danger until you tell us exactly what the frig you and this bastard of a Planet are planning! As you said, General Sephiroth, we must hurry. So there's no time for your secrets or your games."

Sephiroth looked slightly surprised at the words, halting abruptly in his exit. He glanced at Reeve with a hint of respect in his bright, anxious eyes, then answered crisply. "Once Jenova rises from her nest, we strike with Dragon Weapon. We strike with the power of this "bastard Planet" and we weaken her. Weaken her enough so that the Planet can dispose of her."

"What's the Planet going to do?" Cid insisted, not looking towards them, slightly distracted with attempting to land his jarring airship amidst the warring elements raging outside, "Another little LifeStream finale? Why didn't it fuckin' do that t'begin with? I hate this miserable rock."

No one answered him and Sephiroth gave a snort, turning away with a flip of his head. "Come with me, I will show you how to arrange Dragon Weapon so that it will serve our purposes. There's no time to curse the elements and second guess the General."

"Second guess you?" Cid snarled, whipping around in real fury now, so frustrated with the entire situation he could cry, "Who the fuck's second guessing you?! You're god damned Sephiroth, summoned from the god damned LifeStream here to save the god damned day! God fuckin' forbid we do anything but what you say!"

Sephiroth looked onward as Cid seethed, his own expression cool. "I wasn't talking about me," he corrected softly, his words the exact opposite of the pilot's rage, "I am not in charge. The Planet and Jenova, they are the ones at war and we --"

"Are either the puppets or the corpses," Reeve finished for him, frowning, "I remember what you said. I-- I. . ." His voice trailed away for a moment, eyes half shutting then dropping to watch the ground, "I wish we didn't have to be either. You don't have any real control either way."

"You have as much as control as you're willing to give yourself," Sephiroth contradicted stonily, "My not knowing that thirteen years ago damned me for an eternity. You can't blame stronger powers for your own actions. Whether the stronger powers are god or devils, it doesn't matter. Everything you do in your life is your own choice, to hell with coercion. Coercion is an excuse. For the weak-minded."

Sephiroth stared Reeve down, the Shinra President not necessarily too cowered to return the stare, just feeling too defeated by those very warring elements to feel it worth his strength to bother. Berk watched them both with an uneasy look in his face. Grabbing his wounds with one shaky hand, waving around a three foot long katana clutched in his other, he hollered, "Well, I for one am not weak. Let's go kick some Jenova ass, eh? You guys haven't seen the kinda punch that Dragon Weapon packs. That thing broke my arm, that thing is powerful. Jenova'll fall beneath it like a card house, piece of cake. Especially after Marlene messes with it."

The young Turk tossed a grin out and Marlene caught it, forcing a smile on her own weary features. "We're fighting for the Planet," she insisted, "As aggravating as it is, it's ours. And it's us. I don't want to be a corpse and I don't see us as puppets. The Planet isn't controlling us, we are the Planet. Jenova is out to destroy us. Now, it's time to act in our own defense. And in defense of those pieces of the Planet that Jenova has right now: Cloud, Vincent, Tifa. . . our friends. I want to save them. It's been too long. . . they've suffered too long and now it's our job as their friends to help them. And we have to stop Jenova to do it. So let's get going."

"Kids. . ." Cid snorted, bringing the Highwind as low as he dared over the black lip of the Crater, "But they have a point, Prez. . ."

"I know they do," Reeve sighed, looking up from the ground and wiping hard at his eyes, clenching his teeth, "And I have friends to fight for too. Friends to avenge. And friends to keep from dying."

They were silent again, each lost in thought, as the Highwind rocked beneath their feet, the wind shear and energy waves from the Crater striking harder now that it was nearer. The airship creaked ominously, distant things giving groans that hadn't had reasons to groan since the ship had battled the Crater's winds thirteen years before. The confrontation was waiting, pressing, screaming, a promise there on the horizon. And no one was eager to run out and embrace it.

Marlene finally spoke up, moving quickly towards the exit of the bridge, her eyes meeting Berk's once before she turned to Reeve. "Bugah and I will go begin on the Weapon. We've already calculated most of the ratios and Bugah has his

materia with him. We'll begin the link-up."

Cid glanced up from his intense stare outside, then gave a little gush of relieved air and flicked a few switches on the controls. The distant humming to the Highwind's engines dulled a bit and the pilot spoke above the faraway sound. "That's it, me hearties. We're down. Winds seems a little calmer down here, the walls of the cliffs are blockin' some of the gales and snow. Anyone up for spreading a blanket outside and havin' a picnic?"

"Not with ants the size of Jenova crawlin' around, "Berk added with a laugh, trying to catch up on Cid's attempt at lightening the mood, "But then I love picnic food, heh heh. Oh, hey!" Suddenly remembering something, Berk jabbed a hand in his pocket and reached for something inside. He pulled out his pocketknife and tossed it lightly to Reeve who just barely caught it, pale hands coming up to grab the thing as it smacked him in the chest. "Mr. President sir, "Berk began respectfully, "I heard you lost yours. I thought you might want mine."

"Oh. . ." Reeve breathed weakly, turning the knife around in his hands numbly, "Yeah. . . heh heh, left mine stuck in Chaos." The Shinra president laughed suddenly, looking up and straightening his shoulders in steely determination. "I wonder if maybe Jenova'd like to see my technique. Reeve's 'Executive Decision' Limit Break. Heh heh. Chaos seemed t'like it."

"It was quite impressive, "Nanaki pitched in, "I don't think I'll ever be able to use a swiss army knife in same way again."

"Like ya could anyway, O ye of little thumbs, "Cid laughed, leaning hard on the controls.

"Must we start with the insults, Mr. Highwind?" Nanaki returned playfully. Cid looked innocent and shrugged.

"Who says that's an insult now, Red? I wish I didn't have any thumbs, it'd get me outta a lotta housework. But really, I woulda liked to have seen your action hero stint, Reeve. Seems I miss all the best stuff while I'm unconscious."

"Yeah, like your love life, "Reeve returned with a smile.

"President Reeve in one corner, Cid Highwind in the other, "Berk began in his best announcer voice, "Who will come out the victor? Oh, wait, who's the mysterious new opponent stepping into the ring. . ? Oh my good and gracious God, it's Berk the Turk! And look! he's got one of those cool collapsing chairs that breaks when ya hit someone with it!"

"Hardly, all you have is that sword. . ." Reeve disagreed between laughs, "Where'd you get that? Moving up from your standard issue Swiss army knife, eh?"

"A true Turk is skilled at more'n one weapon, sir, "Berk sniffed, "I fence in addition to shooting. I had this little beauty sitting in the forecastle waitin' for me. Since I can't seem to do dick with the old .44, I figure I'll switch over to steel. Chaos has a thing against Masamune, maybe he won't like old. . . old. . . dammit, my sword needs a sweet name."

Sephiroth unsheathed Masamune and gazed upon its seven foot length soberly, then looked towards Berk's rather pitiful looking, beat up blade. He smirked.

"I doubt a name would help any, boy, "he chuckled. But then seeing Berk's rather crestfallen look, he added generously, "But size isn't everything now, is it?"

Marlene shook her head slowly, grinning hard. "I never thought I'd hear a man say that, "she remarked as calmly as she could, then broke out into hard, choking laughter, yanking a very confused Bugah from the bridge and back towards the after hold. They all laughed at that one, grateful to do it, and the Highwind echoed in desperate mirth.

"Ha!" Reeve laughed defiantly, suddenly overjoyed, "If that fucking Jenova can't keep me from laughing here, she can't keep me from laughing anywhere! Let's see her try and bring me down again! Shinra don't say die! Humans never say die! Bring it on!"

"Careful what ya say there, catman, "Cid warned, stepping from the controls and grabbing Venus Gospel from the wall, "Icicle Inn put the fear a god into me, I ain't going out there all cocky again. What's the plan this round, Cap'n Planet?" he asked, turning to Sephiroth who frowned at the uncomplimentary title.

"I can feel it in the air. . ." he whispered, the recent humor forgotten, the direness of the situation settling in again. His eyes went distant as he spoke, "Cloud doesn't know what he's doing. . . and he can't help doing it. We must go to them, force Jenova from the Crater and into the open, in range of Dragon Weapon. A clean shot, eight slots of mastered materia and the subsequent mako should weaken her enough for the Planet to contribute its aid. We must keep her from leaving this site at all costs. You are fighting to preserve your world, do not forget that."

Reeve, Cid, Nanaki, and Berk all nodded, faces grim. Berk hefted his sword above his head and smiled wide, sighing a bit behind it. "I love that pre-battle rush. . ." he remarked, "But General, the Planet can go take a leap. My first priority is Mr. Strife and Tifa. Jenova or Chaos try anything and I'll cut 'em up. I'm nothing compared to you, sir, but I CAN be quite lethal with a blade."

"Uh-huh. . . "Sephiroth said dismissively, "But I agree with you. I am here for the humans wrongly involved in this struggle. That is my foremost concern as well. Now, I must go and see to Dragon Weapon. Meet me at the lip of the Crater in five minutes. And be prepared to die."

"Die?!?" Berk and Cid both echoed in unison. The old pilot shook his head, moving from the bridge, a line of smoke falling away behind him, "Speak for yourself, I ain't dyin' today. Shera would kill me. She said there was a big pot of Earl Grey warming on the stove for me when I get back to Rocket Town. I ain't gonna get killed with there's freaking tea on the line, man."

"Whatever happens is whatever happens, "Sephiroth said coldly, "But you must be prepared for it. Trust me, as one who speaks from experience."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, tall, dark and dead, "Cid sighed, "Reeve, c'mon and help me with the ladders."

The pilot stepped from the bridge, Sephiroth and the others on his heels. The rocking of the airship had subsided a good deal but the swaying was still there, a faint motion in the background, an unsteadiness beneath their feet.

The rocking was making CJ queasy as hell. He leaned with his little blonde head between his knees against a bulkhead in the Highwind's rear engine room. The sound of footsteps made him turn up, features drawn and pale and covered with sweat.

"You guys goin' outside?" he asked meekly to Cid and Reeve, glancing quickly to Sephiroth as he swept past and into the after hold, ignoring the kid completely which CJ did not mind at all. Cid nodded, kicking the boy fondly as he clacked past.

"And the plan for you's the same as it was this morning, kid. You and Ifalna stay in here, stay away from the window, be good. We're gonna go get your mom and dad."

"I wanna come!"

Reeve knelt down and gave the kid a hug he hadn't been expecting. CJ squirmed until Reeve let him go, smacking him upside the head fondly. "No, "the Shinra president answered, "In a coupla minutes, when you see Sephiroth leave the after hold, you go in there with Marlene and Elder Bugah, alright, Ceej? You keep an eye on Ifalna and we'll all be back and on our way home before you know it."

"Yeah, I've heard that before, "CJ grumbled, pushing himself to his feet, slightly green.

"Well gee, thanks for your confidence, punk, "Cid mumbled, "C'mon Reeve, let's get going. . . s'frikkin' freezin' outside, man. Damned Crater, why couldn't Cloud have led us to Costa del Sol or something?"

Cid and Reeve stalked out, the former cursing, the latter throwing the kid a last wave, both of their steps loud and clacking against the metal catwalk. CJ stared after his friends for a while, sticking his hands in his pockets, then stood shakily and stalked into the bridge to watch the ladders rolling down from the side of the ship. The Crater spread out beneath him and he shivered, hoping his mom and dad weren't being too dorky down there. It bothered him that he couldn't get a mental picture of his parents all of a sudden. He wanted so badly to see them again, especially his dad. Not his dad as he'd looked when he'd freed he and Ifalna from the cage on the sixty-eighth floor, but his dad. The guy who taught him how to fight and how to ride his bike. The guy who couldn't make breakfast on Sunday mornings to save his life. His dad.

Much to CJ's disgust, the tears returned. He beat his little fists against the wall, pretending the Highwind's silent bulkheads were Jenova, that invisible boogeyman hurting dad so badly and making him do all those things that had mom and the others so upset. If only he could go outside and help, beat up on Jenova, show that dumb evil monster that ya couldn't mess with the Strifes and get away with it, then maybe it could all end and they could go home. Phony glove or not, CJ wished he could help. Dad helped him, got hurt helping him, got a J in his face helping him and tore up by Chieko helping him. All those things and then he got taken away. . . helping him. What could CJ do but sit in the bridge and mourn the loss and look down into that black ugly Crater? Nothin'. Nothin' but beat his furious little fists into the wall and cry.

So that was exactly what he did.

".0000034. . . yeah, yeah, that was it. What's next?"

"The Knights of the Round summon, that was. . . oh, cripes, let me check my notes."

Muttering and cursing his memory, Bugah darted a white wrinkled hand into his satchel and pulled out the beat-up

notebook stuck inside. Marlene watched her Elder with impatient eyes, her heart roaring in anticipation of things to come. General Sephiroth had just left them, and his words to her echoed in her ears. He'd offered his explanation, a couple of curt directives that had sounded just lovely coming off his confident tongue but when Marlene thought back on them now, she suddenly realized that as much as she hated to admit it, she didn't understand what the hell he'd been talking about. But then, she wasn't really surprised. As she'd waited for it to do all her life, the Planet was showing its power to them and manipulative science had flown right out the window.

Marlene wasn't very sad to see it go. Not really.

It was an unbelievable comfort to know that a Higher Force was watching out for them all, that that Planet they'd doubted wasn't totally uncaring, even if it was fighting in its own defense. At least it was a weapon, a power to look to now that humanity had tried its damndest and failed miserably. Yeah, let the Planet step in, let Jenova's counter do its work, let life prevail. Marlene smiled softly to herself. Relinquishing control to that higher Power rolled a boulder from her soul she was only too glad to see go.

"Find it, Elder?" she asked suddenly, looking over the old man's shoulder and into his pages of scribbled calculations from their night of brainstorming in her apartment. He shook his head absently, tired old eyes skimming through the faint pencil, and she sat back, eyes once again darting to the exit that Sephiroth had left through a few minutes before. He'd asked her to return his summon materia, that rolling cold ball of red glass that'd been sitting in her pocket, and the request had knocked her back. It was her materia, right? Bugah'd given it to her, right? She'd wanted to keep it for reasons she could barely even explain but the cool anger in Sephiroth's eyes had unnerved her and before she'd been able to stop herself, she'd plopped the small sphere in his hand. Marlene figured he'd destroy it, keep it from being used again after Jenova was obliterated. She couldn't say she'd blame him for such an action, she didn't know if she personally would have liked random people constantly calling on her to beat up on random baddies. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she decided that being a summon would probably suck.

"Ah! 13.4500238. . . yes! That'll be with an error margin of about .0012 percent, not too shabby. What's next? Marlene?"

The wrinkles around his eyes bunching up into a scowl, Bugah looked to his former student impatiently, tugging on the cuff of her jeans. She was sitting up on Dragon Weapon's massive control panel, he was crouched at the launcher's base, the contraption's circuitry spreading about him like coils of brightly colored worms. "Pay attention, Marlene!" he insisted, tweaking a wire or two as he spoke, "There's no time for you to sit there and stare into space, not with what's waiting. The bomb could drop at any moment, we have to get this monstrosity in working order. Now, what's the next materia and setting number? Quickly, quickly. . ."

Marlene shook off her thoughts and did as the irritable old man demanded, hearing the very faint voices of her friends as they shouted to each other over the roar of the wind outside, making their way down the Highwind's rope ladders and onto the almost level platform of rock surrounding the abyss of the Northern Crater. She thought she could just barely make out Berk's voice among the others, swearing loudly, complaining about the snow, and threatening anything that offered itself with his sword. Marlene grinned softly. He'd insisted on going out there, even with his lungs so weak and torn and injured. And Marlene knew almost for certain that he was doing it to impress her. It felt wickedly wonderful to know someone cared enough about what she thought to do something so stupid; leaving the safety of the airship simply to get Marlene to see how tough he was. Heh. Yet. . . she wished he hadn't gone. Berk had escaped death twice already and what was that saying? Third time's the charm? Ah, well though, if he was confident about all of it, she'd be confident too, try trusting the cocky Turk bastard. Marlene refused to fall into her dad's bad habits, she found herself caring too much for Berk to ever hurt him the way Barret had hurt her.

Oh, no. What would dad think when he found out his daughter was most likely dating a Shinra Turk? The fur was going to fly over this one, though. . . he had told her to do what she knew was right regardless of what he thought. Marlene was just pretty positive that Barret hadn't known she'd apply that advice of his towards Berk. Hee hee, a slip up she'd grab in her teeth.

"What are you laughing at, Marlene?" Bugah demanded, burning his hand on Dragon Weapon's heated circuitry and shaking his fingers furiously to cool them, "The entire Planet's falling to pieces and you're laughing. I'll never understand. . ."

Marlene shrugged, not understanding it either.

"C'mon, Elder Bugah, "she sighed, resuming her tinkering with their weapon's innards, "Sephiroth said we have to hurry. What's there left to do? Another three materia, we finish reprogramming the core, adjust the synchronization modules, and if the Planet's in a good mood, maybe this'll work."

Bugah grunted in reply, clinking an Ultima materia into place. "We'll be using that moving loading platform to lower

this to the ground, correct?"

"Yes, sir. This'll work. . . in a minute or two, we'll mount this near that outcropping of rock that Sephiroth spoke of and we'll wait. We'll blast Jenova to soot. This'll work."

"And what makes you so certain?" Bugah asked irritably, flinging tired eyes towards the young woman. Marlene shrugged, hunching over the exposed circuitry before her with a pair of pliers and a soldering iron.

"I think it's that darned Shinra optimism, Elder," she replied, lips parting in a smile, "Pesky contagious stuff."

The creakings, the rattlings, the roars had died away the moment he'd entered the cave. Now it was just so quiet he could hear his own heart beating in his ears. It hadn't been so blissfully still inside his head for days; the sudden jarring silence was almost unsettling. It let Cloud breathe a little easier and untense his shoulders just the slightest bit. But the consuming darkness kept him from really relaxing.

That gorgeous violet glow had died along with the moaning of the power trapped inside the Crater as soon as he'd come inside the inviting fissure. He'd slipped his body sideways through the opening, Jeek on his heels, and that illumination had dissipated as though it had been nothing but a mirage there solely to draw him in, draw him closer like a moth to a flame, and then with its purpose completed, had vanished. Now it all was only blackness. It stretched about him infinitely.

"J--jenova. . .?" Cloud whispered, a trembling hand reaching behind him, searching for a wall. He backed up a step, sure that the cave entrance would still be there, he'd only just stepped inside. Instead, he hit hard stone, a flat surface covered with a slick, wet residue that dampened and chilled his already half-frozen fingers. His barely audible whisper rattled in the atmosphere he now found himself in. This cave was bigger than he'd thought. He could hear that creature's name bouncing off walls hundreds of feet above his head. Sweat beading out on his forehead, running cold and ticklish down the sides of his face, Cloud backed up and pressed his body fully against that icy wall, wanting something solid to cling to. With this cave so immersed in unforgiving inky blackness, there was nothing tangible to fix his eyes upon. Just this void that spread away everywhere. It seemed it might swallow him if he didn't keep his guard up.

Where had that voice gone? The one that had called him inside? He couldn't sense any kind of a welcoming presence anymore, just an eager, murderous one. A darkness darker than the lack of light could make. It pulsed from very very close by, maybe twenty feet or so before him, a bit further into the cave. But Cloud flat out refused to take a single step towards it. Even if he wanted to, he doubted his legs would've listened. There was no way he was going to leave this wall, no how.

"Oh, fuck. . ."

Things were running down the rock behind him, unidentifiable oozing slime that dripped onto his shoulders, onto his bare chest through the open front of his jacket. He swiped at the crap, gritting his teeth against panic. The cold wound its way down, a lot of snakes wanting nothing more than to make him shiver in horror and fear at the unknown that they brought. In desperation, he flung his body from the cold wall and clawed his fingers over his chest and arms, shaking the disgusting stuff from him. In a flash, the terrible sensation was gone and Cloud stood panting, again reaching for the wall. But now that was gone too. His trembling fingers brushed air, and then more air and more blackness. The void surrounded him, this darkened cave, this lightless space that had seemed so welcoming just a moment or so before. Now it screamed and jabbed at him and he sank to his knees, desperately clinging to the ground. Just so long as it was something solid and real to keep the strangeness away. Gasping violently, he closed his eyes, the darkness there a thousand times more real than the consuming black around him, and wrapped his arms around himself, the burning in his body nearly unbearable now. He stayed like that for a few minutes, wishing something would happen, wishing a light would shine on an exit to this horrible place so he could leave and climb right out of that Crater again. He shouldn't have come in there, he shouldn't have trusted Jenova, no matter how easy it'd seemed.

"Mr. Cloud. . ." Jeek's voice was a whisper in his ear that made him nearly catapult out of his skin. He opened his eyes and stared at the kid with a desperate, half-mad gleam in his gaze. Jeek looked so sad, he thought, the kid looked so damn sad. Well of course, he should be, stuck in this dark with me. It's my fault, he was just keepin' me company and I led him into this mess. Just like CJ and Ifalna, my company for ten years until I led them into my own old dead shit and got 'em killed.

Cloud wiped at his eyes and nose roughly, sitting up a bit, unnerved by the blackness but glad that he could see Jeek, something real, among it. It didn't seem strange that Jeek was there before him, plain as day when there wasn't any light in the cave, Cloud didn't question it, he was just honestly glad.

"Hey, kid, "he murmured, trying his best to sound comforting, "It'll be okay, we'll get outta here. ."

Jeek sat down beside him, drawing his knees up to his chin, mimicking Cloud's position.

"Have you actually thought about what you've done?" the little boy asked softly, suddenly. Cloud looked down on him with a grimace, then turned away, running a hand up through his hair and leaning on his arm. The air was cold here, though not of that disgusting consistency it had been outside. It stung his lungs to breathe it in, adding to the pain already raging in his chest. So was it really necessary to add a pain in his heart into the mix? he demanded bitterly, tearfully, Did the pile just have to keep getting bigger and bigger?

"Yeah. . ."he choked, "Yeah, I've thought about it."

"Then why d'ya keep doin' it?"

"Because it feels right."

"But you know that's a lie, Mr. Cloud, "Jeek admonished gently, "That's not why."

"Yeah. . . I know it ain't. It keeps the other-- thing-- from hurting too much. It's revenge, I guess, nothin'. . . nothin' more n-noble, nothin'. . . more extravagant"

Turning from the boy, Cloud wept into the sleeve of his jacket, harsh broken tears that he'd been repressing for days. He pressed his arm into his eyes and cried for lives lost for nothing. His own two little lives and then all the lives he'd taken. None of it meant anything. No reasons behind any of it.

"It's not fair, "Jeek said, as though he could hear the man's thoughts. He shook his head, watching his folded hands and sighed. "But the world's not fair, is it? Never has been. People die everyday for no good reason. And it ain't fair."

"Is it-- too late? To. . . to stop?" Cloud asked in a passionate whisper. But then he shook his head violently, knowing the answer to his own question. There was no ending. He couldn't stop now, not after going so far. He wanted so so badly to go home but he knew there was no home anymore. Nothing but this dark cave and that accusing little boy. Just this freezing cold and the deaths stacked like slabs of lead atop his back.

"But ya don't deserve a home, Mr. Cloud, "Jeek said, glinting black eyes staring off into the darkness, "Because you're no better than what ya fought so long ago. And you're a hypocrite now, for ever fighting that evil at all."

Cloud cringed beneath the savage words mumbled in that soft, sweet little boy whisper. Why did the torture have to keep on, continue endlessly, perpetuated by everyone he met? It was his own fault, he deserved it. Murderers should be punished. "You know though, "he mumbled, "Maybe that evil I fought wasn't as evil as I figured."

"It's possible, "Jeek relented soberly, "But I doubt it."

A quiet roaring spread out in the void, a nearly tangible buzzing of silence. Cloud sat in the middle of it, a broken island, sunken Atlantis, and peered into the sea of darkness in complete desolation. The cold pressed against his flesh, an entity in itself, and made him tired. He felt his eyes slipping shut and tried to remember when the last time he'd slept had been. He couldn't recall, a long time before, he knew that much. Days, or hours, or who knew. . . time didn't seem to make a difference anymore.

"I'm tired too, "Jeek said suddenly. He stood up and looked to Cloud expectantly. "Let's go find yer lady friend, okay? And then let's leave."

Cloud was too defeated to disagree. He stood, moving awkwardly in the darkness, scared to step forward, unable to see to make out his footing. There could be a hundred foot drop in front of him or a stone wall, who knew? Jeek, impatient, swung a finger up into his mouth and started sucking away, running off ahead until his form faded into the dark, leaving Cloud alone.

"Hey, kid. . ."he protested softly, reaching a hand out, but Jeek was gone. An icy wind blasted at him suddenly and he drew his arm back close to his body, shivering, breezes swirling about his form until he could barely breathe with the cold. The only warmth was in his chest and shoulders where there was still that horrible burning, as though someone had gone at him with a hot iron. Though it hurt, it did something towards keeping him warm so he did his best to ignore it.

"Cloud. . ."

"Jenova. . .?" he whispered upon hearing that voice again. He hated the name, it brought him nothing but hurt, but it had also promised a release from all of this. Maybe if he could find her, he could go home, or maybe end his struggles once and for all. Hugging his sides, he took a shaky step forward, jaw tensed against the cold, blonde hairs ticking the back of his neck as the cruel winds lashed him. His leather jacket, torn, bloody, little more than a scrap of black covering his frame, flapped and rustled loud in the quiet of the cave air. It slapped at his sides like bat's wings, and he winced with every report. Weary eyes squinting to make something, anything out through the blackness before him, Cloud gave a little cry as he tripped over an uneven spot in the ground and fell forward onto his knees, darting his hands out to break his fall. His

palms slapped against an oozing liquid on the rocks and the slippery stuff made him fall further forward, arms splaying out as he grappled for something solid to grab onto. He pushed himself backwards, then quickly to his feet, trembling, wiping his hands on his pants and swallowing hard, almost unable to catch his breath. The silence pressed in on him then, broken only by his own gasps for air and the beating of his panicked heart. He took a few hurried steps forward, desperate to get away, but he felt the unnamed substance squishing beneath the soles of his boots as he moved, a horrible sound that made him shiver.

"Why's. . . why's it so dark in here?" Cloud demanded, renewing his hold on his sides, "I can't see you." He tried to make his voice imposing but instead every shiver in his heart came out in his words, making him sound like a lost and frightened little boy.

"Dark. . ? Is it dark. . ? The dark is better. It is easier for you that way."

"Easier my ass," Cloud spat, cringing as things burst beneath his shoes, the bottom of his pants dampening. The feel of that anonymous slime was making him paranoid. He practically ran forward, wishing to be rid of it. He stumbled, fought not to fall again, sure that he'd sink into a complete mindless panic if he had to touch the stuff he was walking through.

"If you wish to see. . ."

"Don't screw with me, Jenova," Cloud pleaded, swallowing hard, "Just stop it."

Without another word wasted, some of the blackness began to retreat, almost like a demon's presence draining away before his eyes. Cloud slowed his advance, breath catching in his throat as shapes came into focus before him. Boulders, toppled columns of stone. . . this was where their last battle had been. Only changed now. . . blackened, as though it all were sculpted from coal. The atmosphere brightened a bit, a purplish glow emanating from somewhere up ahead, beyond a grouping of bulbous boulders. The haze of violet intensified, that same beautiful glow he'd seen before, and Cloud approached it slowly, his heart roaring in his ears. Walls of black loomed upwards around him like prison bars, and they made him just as claustrophobic. Gritting his teeth and steeling his courage, he looked downwards and saw that the substance he'd been sloshing through was some sort of thick, purplish slime. It coated the floors around him and seemed strangely familiar, pulsating with a very faint power, veins of darker color snaking through it all and slapping at his boots, as though they'd very dearly love to flay him to pieces.

"You approach so hesitantly, Cloud. . ." Jenova called in the gentlest of voices. The sound slithered, "Aren't I what you've been seeking during your insane little journey? The end. . . it is very close. And I thank you for making it so. Don't be so frightened, you've been a good little son and your mother would never berate you for your very obedient and very useful behavior."

Laughter tinkled in the air, laced with something akin to insanity, something more accurately described as consciencelessness unloosed. Yet Cloud moved forward despite it, faint tears brimming in his eyes. That violet grew larger in his vision, a blot in the dimness of the oozing chamber. Something inside screamed for him to turn around and run but he couldn't make himself do anything but approach that light, mind so exhausted after days worth of torture and anguish that he honestly could find no reason he shouldn't go through with it, place the crown on the devil that he'd created with his own two blood-stained hands. It was too late to stop, to turn around, to say he was done with it. He'd gone too far and there were still so many murderers left. And he was too too tired to kill the rest of them by himself. Or to confront again those who'd try to stop him. Barret, Vincent, Cid, Reno. . . Tifa.

"You have one more thing I want, Cloud. . . one more thing. . . come closer and then you're free, I promise."

The oozing slime beneath his feet grew thicker, nearly six inches or so of complete disgusting-ness that engulfed his boots in putrid filth. Pods of purple burst, sending flecks of dark liquid onto his pant legs. He shuddered against the sensation, eyes narrowed against the sudden brightness of the light. He was only a few feet or so away from the boulder formation obscuring the source of it. A sudden stench of decay filled his nostrils, his head snapping back in repulsion. Yet he dragged his feet forward, the taste of freedom heavy on his tongue, tears obscuring his vision at the thought that maybe the pain of it all could so soon be over. How wonderful that would be. . .

He reached a hand out to touch the massive rock now before him. It also was coated with the slick residue, his numb fingers sliding off. Shaking in fear and anticipation, he moved around the side of it, blinking away the blinding brightness, the hint of a despairing smile on his lips. And suddenly there she was. Just where they'd left her after thirteen years.

"Jenova. . ?" Cloud muttered in disbelief, immediately backing away as nausea flared up in the pit of his stomach, "Is this it then? Your voice and your power and this is it?"

Jenova's reformed remains lay in a heap nearly ten feet tall, leaning heavily against the side of the immense slab of granite that had been obscuring her form to him moments before. Most of her seemed a network of veins and unsettled tissue that jiggled and pussed with her subtle movements, coated all over with that purplish residue but glowing up bright

crimson from beneath. Her shape was mainly circular with jutting formations of flesh and bone breaking the surface at odd angles, tentacle-like limbs of varying sizes slapping at the sour air like wild locks of hair in the breeze. There was something akin to a face embedded near the center of her structure, features crude and half-formed, nothing overly discernible but a foot wide slit for a mouth, toothless, below two yellow, glinting, horrifyingly intelligent looking eyes. A tail stretched away behind her into the unlit darkness and a few razor-clawed arms pressed against the uneven ground, keeping her propped up. They scrabbled at the air with surprising strength, sending the pebbles laying on the ground scattering, clacking against Cloud's boots as he stared in horrified fascination.

"Am I not what you were expecting?"

Her mouth didn't move with her voice, it instead echoed from somewhere deep inside her form, still that lilting, beautiful strain of sound that would be so gorgeous if Cloud were to close his eyes against the actual thing it was coming out of.

"Is this all. . . is this all there is to you?" Cloud whispered, chest burning so hard he gasped for air, clutching at himself with hooked fingers. He put a hand out to steady himself but couldn't get a hold of the slimy stones so he collapsed backwards weakly, still staring up at the creature.

"Oh no. . . there's much more to me than this, my love. You know that."

She slurped forward a bit, propelling herself with a push of her tail and claws, moving along the ground laboriously, faint laughter erupting from her insides. Cloud tried to back off, crawling away on his hands and knees but a tentacle darted out from amidst the swirling bunch at Jenova's base and wrapped around and around his neck, getting a firm grip. In a panic, he spluttered and choked, grabbing at the disgusting limb and gasped, "No! I don't want anything t'do with you! Let go! Let me go, you sack of shit!"

Her grip tightened with his words, another limb shooting out and wrapping around his right wrist as he fought to be free, desperate for something firm to grab onto. But everything was covered with that putrid ooze, his freezing fingers slipping over it all and stinging knuckles hitting hard rock and splitting painfully though they immediately healed. With a cry of fury, the monster wrenched Cloud around with incredible strength and slammed him against the boulder she'd been leaning against, his back hitting the filth-covered stone with a splash. She slid him upwards, still pinned against the rock, his lips turning blue as the tentacle tightened around his throat. More limbs darted out and pinned his other hand, his waist and knees until he was hung up there helpless, weak with lack of oxygen.

"Let go of you?" Jenova laughed, those sunken yellow eyes boring into his own. She tightened her grip until she heard bones snapping and her prisoner grunted in pain, tears squeezing from his eyes, "You say such a thing after you sought me out? After you went through so much torture to get here? I'm your salvation, dear Cloud. Everyone on this wretched Planet. . . they hate you. I will kill them all, you too, and spare you the pain of the knowledge of their hatred. Think about it, you human wretch. . . think about what you've done. . . the people you've killed in your false quest for false revenge. False! Do you hear, you pathetic shell of a man! You fool! You sentimental, easily manipulated fool! All of you humans are so easy to control! You all have a weakness, something to be used against you and you practically advertise it. Hojo's greed, Lucrecia's lust for knowledge, Vincent's love, Sephiroth's lack of love, and your laughable idolization of your children. You're all like primitive machines, a certain touch of the gears and you crumble into a mass of broken parts. There's not a single one of you that is truly worth anything. There's no reason for me to spare a single one of you. . . "

Cloud fought for breath, his body convulsing in attempts to be free of the constraining hold. That gorgeous voice mocked him, jabbed him, cut into his brain and those yellow eyes consumed his darkening vision. " . . . what. . . ?" he gasped weakly, ". . . you're right. . . that's why I c-came t'you. . . you're right. . . b-blow it all apart. . . "

Jenova laughed to herself, another tentacle springing forward to caress the side of Cloud's face almost lovingly. "I nearly wish I could say that your telling me that impresses me, Cloud. But it does not. You speak out of grief and the purest of rages. But even that isn't anything to be admired. Your pain is false, untrue, a lie of mine and Hojo's and Chieko's. How funny it is that because you believed that your two children were dead, you carried out actions that will so soon result in their actual deaths. Their's and everyone else's. You've murdered your race, you stupid fool, you've killed them all. One man. Quite amazing."

"You're j-just tryin' t'hurt me more, "Cloud sobbed, balling his fists and beating against the wall feebly, "Tryin' t'make. . . me th-think they're not dead, build up that hope. . . I won't buy it, I'm not so gullible anymore!"

Jenova's two vicious eyes examined his dirty face, her tentacle tracing over her own J marking his features. "My signature. . . "she murmured thoughtfully, "Remarkable how skilled I am. It amazes even me on occasion. I shouldn't grow so arrogant though, sculpting members of your pathetic race is an almost childishly easy task. You have come so far though, Cloud Strife. . . a lifetime's led up to this moment, hasn't it? It wasn't all my doing, but your own race's as well, Hojo's, Sephiroth's, an entire Planet's. They've beat you all you're life, every one of them. . . "

"No. . . " Cloud's voice was faint, eyes closed against the sight of the monster shoved so close to him, "No, n-not all of them. Never Tifa. . . never."

Jenova laughed again, pushing Cloud's limp body as hard as she dared into the wall behind him, almost angry, reveling in his moans of pain. She'd waited so long to inflict real pain with her own physical body. She'd killed many, tortured many, but never with her own claws and her own audible voice. Always that projected aura, or through the cells of her servants. Having a victim here before her, even if that victim was in essence her saviour and her pet, was a long awaited treat. Yet she knew she couldn't lose herself in this new fun, there was ever so much more awaiting her on that condemned Planet above her head. So much to destroy and to wreak her vengeance upon for long long years of suffering and imprisonment.

"Tifa. . . "Jenova breathed, moving closer to Cloud's face, the stench of her uncovered flesh filling every shallow breath the man managed to take, "Maybe you're right. Maybe she did care for you, but not anymore, not after what you've become. How could anyone love a man with such bloody hands and such a mind full of contradictions and chaos? It would be something like loving an atom bomb. You hold the potential to destroy everything with the simple push of the appropriate button. And that's exactly what you've proven these past days. You've destroyed more than Sephiroth ever even managed to. That monster you hunted in indignation. . . you're more "evil" than he ever managed to be. And your logic is so skewed. Two meaningless little lives worth more than an entire Planet full? More twisted human thinking. Do you understand how worthless you are? How dangerous? Not just you, dearest Cloud, but every one of you sniveling humans. You're simply a prime example of humanity, a "hero", the Planet's pet for so long just because you exemplified what it considers most important. Ironic now that I've twisted you into my perfect weapon using what made you the Planet's perfect weapon: love. Love."

"Leave me . . . alone. . . " Cloud's voice was a faded moan, his head slumping to one side, rows of tears rolling down his face and striking the bloated tentacle around his throat despondently. Jenova loosened her grip just a touch, bringing one of her clawed arms forward and severing her little blonde pet's black leather jacket delicately. The garment fell away and floated to the floor.

"You've never wanted anything more, have you?" Jenova whispered, running her claw over his bare chest, "Just to be left alone. But you never got it. The one thing you wanted, it would not have cost anyone anything yet you never received your precious peace. A short, thirteen year respite fraught with nightmares, but that was all. A period of calm to intensify the storm to come. I understand, Cloud, I truly understand your rage. Because I'm one of the things that put it there. But now I want it back."

The violet light illuminating the space grew stronger, losing its color and turning white. Cloud sensed it through his closed eyes and opened them weakly, able to see nothing but that white and those expectant, yellow eyes, staring at him and waiting for something. After a moment, he gave it to her.

A long loud scream.

His chest was on fire. The burning that had been there before was nothing compared to this, this was a full inferno of anguish that felt it was ripping him apart. It only lasted for a moment but even after it had died down a bit, Cloud found he hadn't even the strength to lift his head and hung lifelessly from Jenova's grasp, pressed into the wall like a trembling portrait of a man. Through lowered eyelashes, his chin slumped against the tentacle around his neck, he saw his own pale chest and a line of dull ugly purple snaking from his throat to his abs; the summation of every dark Jenova cell he'd been cursed with fifteen odd years before, sucked from his limbs, his mind, his body and concentrated into his torso. Where they were easily accessible.

"That's all it was, "Jenova said matter-of-factly, her claw raised to cut him open and retrieve her cells, "Remarkable, isn't it? I'm nearly whole, very very near, but I need more of my physical being to be as powerful as I desire. What you possess may not seem like much, but it is more than enough. You wanted it over, Cloud? My resurrection shall be your last act. And as a reward, I'll cut your throat for you. That "ending" you so desired. You can then haunt the LifeStream for an eternity with your screams of pain and regret and keep my other dead son company. Leave the rest of the killing up to me. That is what you want, correct? Yes, I doubt you want anything more."

"There's something he wants much more than that, you fucking bitch."

The voice was angry and it soared from the darkness like birdsong. Jenova's yellow eyes rolled over looking for it just in time to see the business end of a hard, steel-toed boot.

"Cloud wants to go home!!"

Tifa landed from her attack with a graceful twirl and Jenova's bulk flew backwards in a spray of purple sludge and a scream of fury. The looming, unstable structure of her physical being fell over sideways and slid in the slick residue, tentacles flailing like whips, snapping in the air, her clawed arms grabbing at it all and coming up with nothing. She hit the wall behind her with a wet smack and lost her grip on Cloud who crumpled to the ground and lay there unmoving.

As Jenova screeched and struggled to stand, Tifa darted to her husband's side and threw herself there, dragging him out of the confining space behind the boulders and back towards the cave entrance. The slickness of the floor and the oozing slime aided her efforts and Tifa managed to get him almost halfway to the exit and sprawled against the base of the wall before Jenova was in a standing position again. Balling her fists, Tifa took up defensive crouch over Cloud as the monster approached, dragging her bulk with flicking tentacles and five razor-sharp arms.

"Give him to me, woman. . ." Jenova hissed, not mincing words. Tifa backed up closer to Cloud, pushing him into the wall, struggling to keep her footing on the slippery ground. Her answer was simple.

"Go to hell."

"I'll send you there first, "Jenova murmured, regaining her composure somewhat and piercing Tifa with her yellow gaze, "I didn't know you'd be so foolish as to come alone. Though I knew you'd come, Tifa. You're as predictable as the rest of them. A band of gold and a few words and the fuse is lit. Where are your children, woman? Are your children safe?"

"You don't even think about them! "Tifa demanded, raising her fists, "Evil like you has no right. No right to be on this Planet hurting good people. I'll kill you for what you've done to us! I'll tear you limb from limb from limb with my bare hands."

Jenova stood before Tifa, balancing her sloppily formed body precariously, and gestured to Cloud with a claw, eyes on the woman. "Would you honestly fight and die for something so worthless?" she questioned imperially, "He isn't what he was, he's a murderer and a madman. Let me have him, Tifa, and I can erase his crimes. Yours too. Your entire races'."

"He isn't any of those things, "Tifa denied, shaking her head violently, "He's only Cloud and that's all he's ever had to be for me to give him my soul. If he's evil, I'll be evil with him because he did what he did out of love. Stupid, mixed-up crazy love but that's just Cloud, he doesn't know any better. If loving too much is evil, I'm a murderer too. I'd probably destroy the Planet if it meant I could save him."

Jenova lashed out at her with a wickedly serrated claw and Tifa darted out of the way, the appendage meeting nothing but the wall. She darted forward quickly and jabbed the creature in one of its eyes, then an uppercut and a series of kicks that knocked her backwards. One of Jenova's flailing tentacles darted out suddenly and swiped at her ankles, knocking Tifa to the ground as the monster fell away.

"Human scum!" Jenova screeched, the insult reverberating off the walls of the cave, "I'll tear you into morsels and burn each in its own fire for this disrespect!!"

Power, dark and lethal and needing no name, surged over the monster's form and Tifa shrank back, even the field around it painful to her skin. On the floor, she scrambled backwards and found herself inadvertently tangled in Cloud's arms. The panic on her face softened as she realized his eyes were open and watching her, full of tears. She slumped against him, entangling herself further in his embrace as Jenova loomed tall, screaming with the anger of every devil in hell.

"Cloud. . ."

Jenova's presence, the flickering illumination of her power that coated everything in the cave, it all faded away and all Tifa saw was Cloud. And it made her cry in honest happiness to realize that he was seeing her. He reached a hand up and laid it against the side of her face, rubbing his thumb over the line of dirty tears snaking down from her eye, then pulled her close, engulfing her in his freezing limbs and pressing her face into his shoulder as they both lay collapsed on the unforgiving ground. She hugged him violently, her fingers grappling at his cold, bare back, wishing for nothing more than to warm him, or to freeze just like him so she'd know how he felt. Tifa closed her eyes and cried into his shoulder, working one hand up into his hair, wanting to sink into his body.

"It doesn't matter what happens, "she whispered into his ear, "Because right now, we at least got this."

She felt him laughing weakly, his rapid warm breaths in her hair, and he held her tighter in reckless abandon. Cloud felt something tugging her away from him suddenly and tightened his grip in blind desperation, gritting his teeth at the weakness of his limbs.

"Get off of him. . ." Jenova growled, "Get away, you meaningless little fool. . ."

Tifa gave a cry as a snaking purple tentacle wrapped itself around her waist, tightening mercilessly and pulling her from Cloud despite both of their protests. With a sickening feeling in her stomach, she felt herself lifted from the ground as though it were nothing, and with a sharp flick of Jenova's thick limb, a swirling of her vision and a sharp pain in her shoulders, Tifa was flung into the opposite wall. She slid down the length of it and hit the floor with a painful snap. For a moment she just lay there, blinking quickly, trying to push herself up but slipping on the slimy rocks clumsily.

"You leave her alone, "Cloud demanded, struggling to get to his feet himself, standing bent over double once he did, "Tifa. . . she just doesn't know what she's doing, doesn't know about these things, and she's that much more perfect because of it. Leave her alone and do with me what you want, that's why I came here. Just. . . just do whatever you need

to."

"No, Cloud!" Tifa screamed, "You don't need to do this! There's no reason!"

He gave a sharp yell as Jenova lunged, limbs raised and dark desires in her eyes. She pinned him again against the wall, her strength unimaginable despite her grotesque appearance and wavering stance. Blinded by tears and her own rage, Tifa was suddenly on her feet and battering at her sides mercilessly, but Jenova lashed out with a cruel claw, swiping at her throat and would have taken her head off if Cloud hadn't grabbed her arm and held it tight. "I said you leave her alone!" he demanded, fist closing around the monster's flesh. He shook the limb even as a tentacle slammed his head against the wall, blackness creeping into the corners of his vision.

"Just be silent now, Cloud," Jenova commanded, shaking her limb free from his grasp, then using her control over his mind to render him suddenly unconscious. As an afterthought, she embedded a foot long spike extending from one of her wrists through his shoulder. He grunted, clenching his teeth even in his sleep, as she twisted the claw into the wound and deep into the rock behind it. With a shake and a snap, the arm disconnected from her body like a bee's sting and was left in her victim, effectively pinning him to the wall like a paper doll to a bulletin board. Her cells' vessel safe for now and out of harm's way, the monster turned around to confront Tifa, the rest of her claws raised to finish the interfering human insect for good.

"You are like an ant fighting God!" she roared, advancing as dark magic crackled over her lop-sided frame, "And like a vengeful god should, I'll smite you down and all your kin, mortal woman!"

Tifa backed up, glancing to Cloud and paling, but drawing strength from the sight of him. "No," she returned, her voice cool with her anger, "You're a self-righteous, power-hungry whore who'll go to any ends to get what you want. I've had friends like you. I never kept them for long. Because with people, beings, whatever like you, it always ends the same way: you're conquered by your own greed or your own selfishness. You'll make a mistake, Jenova. Kill me now, it won't matter, my friends will stop you. Kill them and others will rise up to fight. There's no way you can win this war you've started, no way. If you had half a brain in that disgusting sack of slime that you call a body, you'd realize that, free Cloud, and get the hell off of our Planet."

"I would have said 'sack of shit' as opposed to 'sack of slime', Tifa, but well spoken nonetheless."

Back pressed to the wall, Tifa looked for the source of the sudden, soft, composed voice echoing out of the gloom but saw nothing save a flash of black, a white grin, then orange and yellow flashes accompanied by deafening blasts as shot after shot was fired from the darkness, landing with powerful thuds in Jenova's body, sending the creature stumbling back and nearly off the ground. The bullets kept up their furious advance, snapping from the black and pummeling the creature endlessly, pushing Jenova back almost twenty feet and into the rear wall of the oozing purple cave. She left a trail of dark blood on the floor as she slid and Tifa watched the butchering in fascination, peering into the dark to see the gunman. Behind the line of white-hot rounds blasting from the blackness, Vincent suddenly stepped into her vision, holding an uzi, pacing forward with measured steps and firing away at the bulk of Jenova until his clip ran empty. When it did, he quickly pressed a switch, the spent clip clattered to the ground and he eagerly clicked in another, pulling a lever back and emptying those off too, until they both were nearly deaf from the sounds of the shots.

"Vincent..!" Tifa gasped once he'd quit his firing and slung the uzi back over his shoulder, bringing out an assault rifle and fingering the trigger thoughtfully, blazing crimson eyes boring into the quivering mass of veiny purple huddled bleeding against the rear wall. When it didn't move and he was satisfied, he turned to Tifa and smiled warmly, glad to see she was alright.

"But I thought you were trapped as Chaos?" she demanded, stepping forward, trying to compose herself and failing miserably. She just barely caught herself from falling forward onto her knees in relief, "What's happened? How'd you get down here? Oh, thank God, you came. . . I don't know what I would have done. But how. . ? I don't understand."

"Don't worry about the details, they're neither important or interesting," Vincent dismissed with a grin, right before collapsing backwards into the wall. Tifa ran forward to help him but he waved her off with his claw, leaning heavily on his gun. "Go see to Cloud. I'm fine, really." She looked hesitant for a moment, but then gave the warmest, most grateful smile he'd ever had the privilege of having aimed his way, and turned around, approaching her husband, steps immediately slowing in fear. Vincent looked beyond her shoulder and saw why.

"Can you help me get him down?" she whispered, a hand nervously wrapped around her side, fingers drumming her own back, "Oh baby, what has she done to you. . ?" Tifa ran her fingers over his chest, brushing the horrible line of distorted flesh running down his stomach, fingers coming away red with the blood from his shoulder wound. Vincent approached from behind, claw scraping metallic and eerie against the rock walls as he leaned on them. He stopped beside his friend's suspended form, reached up and pulled out Jenova's pointed barb with a grunt, flinging the thing away in distaste, then fell to the ground with Cloud's bloodied body on top of him when he came away from the wall.

"Heavier than he looks," he grunted and Tifa knelt down to separate the two. She flipped Cloud onto his back and Vincent shoved himself up to help her.

"He'll be okay," he mumbled, feeling for a pulse before he even realized that was hardly a concern, "The concentration of healing mako is so strong within him he's almost impervious to injury."

"What did Hojo do to him?" Tifa whispered, not really heeding Vincent's reassurances, instead stripping off her jacket and pressing it into his shoulder passionately, "No, no, it doesn't matter, he'll be okay. . . you'll be okay too, right?"

Vincent ignored the shooting pains in his body and nodded his head. "Of course," he smiled, "I think we're approaching the end of this mess, Tifa, I really do. I think it's all going to be all right."

"Thank god. . ." Tifa cried, laying her head down on Cloud's chest, her soft brown hair cascading over him. She rubbed his face, just grateful for the opportunity to be able to touch him, forgetting Vincent was even there. She pulled his ring from her pocket and slipped it back onto his finger, her hands trembling. "I've been so worried, it's like I haven't been breathing at all, just so so scared that I would never get to do this again," she sobbed, running her fingers through his hair, "Everything's been so evil and wrong, old dead things coming back to haunt us all. It's been hell, Cloud, it's been hell. . ."

Vincent frowned and stood stiffly, letting them have each other and feeling like an intruder. He stood there for a while, absorbing his surroundings, adjusting his hearing and taking it all in. Using his powers was painful for a reason he didn't understand. It hurt his head and left him breathless so he abandoned the effort, listening to Tifa's sobs, Cloud's shallow breaths and the nearby dripping of puss and blood out of the thing crouched in the rear of the cave with his normal human senses.

"Stay back here, Tifa. . ." he commanded quietly and she looked up, blinking away tears and nodded as he raised his heavy rifle. With muted steps, he made his way over the slick putrid floor of the dimly illuminated chamber, his own breathing not as steady as he would have liked. Hojo's little chemicals were still doing a number on his insides, though Chaos was silent. If there even was a Chaos anymore. He just didn't know and it wasn't something he cared to fixate on.

Dark, dark crimson blood splattered beneath his feet, blood so dark it was almost black, emitting a smell so foul it made him dizzy. At the end of the trail, Jenova's softly slurping form lay crumpled, blasted to shreds by his bullets, tentacles flopping about as though desirous to find a neck to snap or lungs to rip apart. Vincent approached cautiously, rifle poised before him, eyes cool as he gazed the thing dead on. He'd heard its dark voice and darker intents blasting in his mind for days, for weeks, even seen that lie of a form it manifested into in his dreams, that beautiful woman with the kind smile. Who'd have realized there was nothing else behind it but this? That thing they'd battled thirteen years before really was Jenova. . . that disgusting circle of flesh and veins and tentacles. A circle. . . he now thought in dark, bitter bemusement. Because death dominated life's circle, he realized, A life began in oblivion and it ended oblivion. That living done in between was laughably finite and short. A person's life was a volume or two of events, girded by Death's black marble bookends on either end. And Jenova knew it. Or Jenova's creator had known it and decided to sculpt his creation to reveal the fact.

"Don't bother playing 'possum," he sneered to the mass of tissue at his feet. He aimed his rifle downwards, hair hanging in his face with his one blazing red eye burning through into the gloom. "You cannot fool me, monster, not me. You told me your entire scheme and your entire purpose. And I haven't forgotten. The things you had Chaos do. . . I haven't forgotten those either. You'll pay for every life you took, a bullet for each, maybe ten bullets for each, a thousand. An eternity of searing pain to remind you of your evil."

"Vincent, don't. . ." Tifa pleaded. He snapped around to look at her in surprise as she continued, "You can't kill her anyway, we should leave, while we can. Take Cloud and get to the surface, I'm sure the others are there. . ."

"What do you mean, Tifa?" Vincent asked lowly, looking back to the silent quivering mass on the ground, "I mean. . . I'm going to rip this demon apart, send her back to hell. She-- she can't be allowed to do these things to people anymore, it isn't right! She'll ruin the world, she's shown me images of her destruction. She's put on plays for me in my nightmares of what she's done to other worlds that have crossed her. No remorse, nothing, just blind lust for pain and suffering. Like Chaos. Like all evil, sin, black bloody evil. I has to stop some time. It can't be allowed to rampage and hurt for an eternity."

Vincent put his rifle to his eye, his common sense screaming at him but his craving for justice screaming louder. He couldn't kill Jenova though, he knew better than anyone how true that was. Jenova was another element was all. An unfair one, but an unavoidable one. And he and every other miserable human bastard could scabble as desperately as they desired, they'd never be able to obliterate the Planet's counter. He dropped the rifle to his side with a frustrated snarl, defeated by his own mind before he could even fire a single useless round.

Gritting his teeth in fury, he stared it down, daring the monster to even flinch. The infinity of Death laying huddled at his feet. . . it was a screwed up sort of thought, but there it was, in blaring, 24 bit color. And it wasn't even talking to him. It didn't even acknowledge the presence of the man it had been torturing for the past few days. He glared at the closed

yellow eyes, bent closer, holding onto his grinding insides, fighting down the pain of her cells, of Hojo's "cure", of all the things tearing at him to no end. He peered into that depth of oozing flesh and looked for a reason why, demanding to know who'd began it, who'd felt the need to balance life with death at all. Why should life have a counter? Why shouldn't life reign free, what was wrong with that? Why counter it? Why??

"What do you mean 'Why?', you miserable wretch?"

Her eyes opened slowly, and consumed Vincent with their intensity. He raised his rifle as quickly as his hurt arms would allow, aiming the barrel coldly into her face, swallowing hard as sweat rolled down his brow. His bare finger grazed the trigger, stroking it desirously, but he couldn't pull it. He couldn't pull it. . .

"Keep struggling, Vincent. . . "Jenova cooed, eyes wide open and body alert now, "It's more fulfilling when you struggle."

He gathered his will and tried his damndest, more than willing to take her advice. One trigger, one frigging finger! He could do that, couldn't he? But no, he had no control of anything, it was like he was Chaos again but worse because it was his own disobedient human flesh mocking him. He thought he heard a low rolling growl in his mind and panicked, even as Jenova advanced.

"Vincent!"

He heard Tifa behind him, heard the fear in her voice though he couldn't turn around to see her. There was only that disgusting dripping face in his, and her control over him, cruel and cold.

"Stay back, Tifa!" he ordered firmly, trying to keep his voice calm, "Stay with Cloud. . . no! leave, run! Go get the others--!"

He would have continued but was suddenly confronted by a storm of whipping limbs, smacking his rifle away and wrapping around his head and legs, suffocating him cruelly as they lifted him from the ground like a toy. He struggled against them but the grip was too strong and too furious. And when their owner began to speak, it hurt too much to bother.

"My other. . . "she laughed, flinging him around, "I miss my other. Where's Chaos, Vincent? Your much more impressive alter-ego? This particular personality you're hiding behind now is frustratingly sentimental and pathetic and human. Where's the Turk-inspired demon, my blackened little murderer?"

"Dead!" Vincent spat between growls as he attempted to loosen her hold, "Mercifully dead though death was too good for that devilish bastard. His very creator killed him, Hojo turned against you, Jenova. Even he was human enough to defy you in the end."

The monster laughed long and loud, squeezing tighter and making her captive splutter for air. He cringed at her wicked, rolling laughs. "You trust my eldest child, Vincent? Hojo would never do that to me, I engulfed his personality with my own and stifled his possibility for free will long before I ever even turned by attention to Sephiroth. What lies did he feed you?" Jenova wondered but then was silent, scanning Vincent's mind. She laughed again as she found what she was looking for, darting a claw forward and goring it into her prisoner's side in unfeeling pleasure. "No, it cannot be dead, "she said matter-of-fact, "Maybe just stifled for a while. It can't be dead because you're still alive. Still painfully alive and full of my cells. I can sense them in your body, can't you? More than you ever had before, thanks to Hojo's engineering. You keep them for a while longer, alright? Keep them during whatever life you have left to you, let them burn your body as they've burnt your soul for the past forty years. . ."

"Drop him!"

Tifa had Vincent's rifle pointed straight at Jenova's bulk, her eyes snapping in rage. She fired a shot off into her and dark blood splattered the cave wall. The monster turned its attention to the woman briefly, yellow eyes smiling. "The human has a toy, "she murmured, "I suppose I'd better comply."

With something like a sneer, Jenova flung Vincent away, then slithered forward towards them, limbs flailing. She would have dearly loved to use her power to simply blast these humans into soot and bones but with Cloud so near she didn't dare. She couldn't destroy pieces of herself in the process. One of her power's downfalls was its enormity. It was nearly impossible to concentrate, so with the battlefield being the close quarters of the cave, she was reduced to physical attacks and manipulation. Not that the evil creature was overly concerned with that. Slow murder was much more fun, especially after years of depravity.

Tifa didn't lower the rifle, only prepared to empty the other chamber off, but Jenova stood unflinching before it, unnerving her slightly. She glanced quickly around to make sure Cloud was still all right, then began backing off towards the exit, weapon yet raised.

"Are you thinking at all?" Jenova asked mockingly as she backed away, "Or are you now so bogged in mindless fear and

panic that your brain's been consumed by your pitiful human heart? What are you going to do with that weapon? Just scurry away now, Tifa, just run and leave these two pathetic unfortunates to me."

"Screw you," Tifa said absently, eyes darting to the door, "We're leaving together or no one leaves, right, Vincent?"

Jenova chuckled softly, a sound laced with vicious growls, then her bulk seemed to relax as a sudden groaning and swearing filled the air. Tifa heard it and whipped about, thinking it sounded like her friend.

"Vincent. . .?" she breathed in disbelief.

"I-- I. . ." he stuttered but couldn't go much further before falling into gasps for air. He lay on the slick purple floor, arms wrapped around his sides, legs kicking helplessly against agony. His uninjured red eye opened wide and looked to Tifa in desperation, sweat running down and stinging his vision. "I d- don't understand!" he muttered, "Th- that letter. . . Hojo, he. . . he. . ." The attempts at speech died away into a sharp yell, a shout of pain and then a gurgle as blood bubbled up over his lips. Tifa paled and backed away, dread in her throat at what she was watching. She turned and bolted towards Cloud, kneeling at his side, as Jenova cackled.

"Stop it!" she demanded, looking to Jenova, huddling closer to Cloud, a comfort even if he couldn't be awake to hold her. "Leave them both alone! Please! Please!"

"This is just the beginning!" Jenova screamed, power rushing over her. She focused her energy on Vincent, smiling in dark satisfaction as he suffered. "You trusted Hojo, you fool?! All that time to learn to never trust him yet you did so anyway?! What was it you trusted? The remnants of his humanity? His seemingly sincere desire to be done with the events of forty years ago? You are truly pitiful. Be Chaos, be that destroyer of the world and its occupants that I so love! Destroy the Planet with me before I let you die, Vincent! Be Chaos again, be Chaos forever, be Chaos until anything that was Vincent Valentine, that loved or lost is consumed by blood!"

He felt the crunch of bones reshaping, the sting as fangs punctured through his lips, awash in blood all over, sticky warmth that pooled around him, tears squeezing from his right eye as he gasped to know why.

Tifa watched in horror, but that horror turned immediately to surprise as something large, red, and furry knocked into her harshly, slamming her away from Cloud. She gave a cry and looked up to see Chieko standing there on four trembling legs and breathing hard. Tifa shot to her feet as the monster doubled back around and reached a large hoary head down to Cloud, grasping him tightly in her jaws.

"No! No, don't take him again!" She beat at the massive cat's side, then grabbed for the forgotten rifle, Jenova's laughs and Vincent's cries ringing in her ears. Her hands closed around it and she turned in time to get a blunt paw smashed into the side of her head. The world faded slowly to gray, white sparkles of light shooting into her eyes and she crumpled to the ground, fighting to stay conscious as Chieko gave a sniff and turned away.

"Hello, Chieko. . ." Jenova murmured as the fiery-furred creature approached, head bowed, Cloud hanging limp and helpless from her poisonous silver jaws.

"Mother. . ." she breathed, laying the man at her feet. She swallowed hard, then backed away, terrified. A tentacle slithered out to caress her furry face and wipe the faint tears from her brown mako eyes. Chieko couldn't think of anything to say now that she was confronting this abomination. She felt numb as stone.

Jenova's dripping form stood there for a few moments, taking the carnage and the destruction in with glinting wicked eyes as Chieko watched the ground, Tifa lay moaning and Cloud muttered soft curses as he began to awaken from her power. In the midst of the gorgeous sounds of suffering, like a warm blanket, one fact enshrouded the monster: she'd won.

She wasn't particularly surprised.

"No. . . n-- no, it isn't over yet. . ." Vincent gurgled through blood, writhing in the slow fires of transformation, "It'll. . . never be over. Nothin' you can d- do can kill us all. . . I'll see you dead, Jenova, no-- no matter what it takes. . ."

"Shut up and scream," Jenova commanded coldly, "You're a bore as a human, Vincent, you're much more interesting as a devil." The monster's laughter echoed against the high walls of the cavern, a sound whose chill rivaled the air, revealing her smugness, her confidence, and her power. Chieko backed off a bit, tail flickering, long leathery wings sliding over each other in unease as Jenova lunged higher in stature, claws coming forward and snapping in the air harshly, sending flicks of blood through the dark in a light, warm shower. Tifa felt sprays pattering against her cheeks and forced her eyes open, staring forward in helplessness at the hellish scene. Her breath stuck sharply in her throat as Jenova took one of her foot long, serrated claws and slashed Chieko across the shoulder, a light wound that made the animal cringe though she obediently stood her ground.

"You don't have many cells, Chieko," Jenova whispered conversationally, reaching forward, eyes gleaming like two small suns in her crudely-shaped face. Chieko's brown gaze rolled over nervously as the creature's face drew so near she could smell her mother's putrid stench. Slurping a bit in anticipation, Jenova's toothless mouth moved closer to the wound

she'd inflicted and she eyed the thick blood dribbling down her deluded servant's forelegs hungrily.

"M- mother. . . "Chieko muttered in dread, "What. . what're you doing?"

"You came to me, I might as well relieve you of your burden, dearest." With a little cry of joy, she clamped her mouth down like a vampire's over the gushing wound in the animal's shoulder and tasted the power of her own cells re-entering her being after the longest of times.

"What the hell. . ?"

In tears, Tifa scabbled to get away as Chieko collapsed onto the ground, Jenova rising with a dripping slit of a mouth to turn her gaze to Cloud, running her glinting eyes over his form in anticipation. Tifa just didn't know what to think. She didn't know whether to coax Jenova on to reclaim her evil from his body, or to cry protests and run forward, because her doing so would mean she'd be practically unstoppable. Mouth opening and closing, cold hollow fear filling her chest and making it hard to breathe, Tifa turned to Vincent out of desperation and was sickened to see a misshapen monster, half-man/half-demon struggling on the ground, both forms fighting for control. Evil, ugliness, corruption everywhere. And she alone in this chamber of horrors.

"I've been trapped in this hellish cave for thirteen years, "Jenova spat, addressing Tifa, sensing her terror, "Because of you bastardy human worms. Trapped after only just liberated from that icy Northern hell of two millennia. Without my destruction, the scale is wrongly bent. I shall fix that unbalance and prevent another. I'll obliterate you all. And this cheating Planet you so love to protect."

Tifa screamed as the monster reared back and raised a clawed arm high into the freezing air, her entire quivering bulk oozing with the movement. Cloud lay splayed before her, eyes only half-open, confusion etched in his pale face. He turned his head to look for Tifa, vision too blurred to even see what was coming at him from above.

"CLOUD!!!"

Jenova's strike was accurate and deep. A red slice over the dark purple on her puppet's chest that practically cut him in half. Cloud cried out in torture as Tifa cried in desperate anguish and Jenova lunged, laughing in her beautiful voice as her leech mouth engulfed the wound. Cloud went blissfully unconscious almost immediately, leaving Jenova to do as she would. And she did. With sickening pleasure, she reclaimed her cells.

The cave pulsed with black energy; a black, colorless light that stole the air and froze the rock, froze the purple ooze on the walls and floors into a disgusting icy slush that cut Tifa's elbows as she fought to push herself to her feet. Jenova rose from Cloud with streaks of bright blood covering her front, dripping wet and glaring red from her mouth. Her flesh already seemed firmer but the improvement didn't last as with something like a smile in her vicious features, her form rippled and swam before Tifa's horrified eyes and began to reshape into Jenova's truest form, that which she hadn't worn for over two thousand years. Blinding white replaced the dim glow of the black and Tifa fell backwards in disbelief, the atmosphere so full of crackling energy it stole the oxygen from her lungs and sent her to her knees, dizzy and terrified. She put an arm up to her eyes, struggling to see Cloud's limp body immersed in that power and that glow, then bolted forward as all of it, Cloud and Jenova and the energy, began to ascend.

"You got what you wanted, you unconscionable monster!!!" Tifa screamed, smearing tears from her eyes and shaking her fists, "Let him go and go kill the world by yourself! I don't care! Just stop doing it in Cloud's name! Leave him with me! Please! Please!!!"

Jenova's light-obscured form rose imperially, Cloud suspended a bit above her, unconscious, unmoving, and dripping blood. The Planet's counter laughed in overjoyed satisfaction, the reverberations swirling in the air and assaulting her ears. With a burst of power, she immediately tore the ceiling of the cave away, rocks crashing into the floor and Tifa ran towards the cavern entrance and ducked in the doorway, gloved fingers clutching the wall as the entire space shook and bucked and roared. She shouted Cloud's name but the word was lost in the raucous symphony of destruction. Her eyes strained upwards, blinded by the glow, blinded by the power, and all she could see was white. . . oblivion.

"It all shall fall! An entire world! An entire race!!!"

Jenova screamed in her ecstasy, ascending into the heavens above, giddy, raving. Vincent saw the sight with his demon-red eye and cursed himself as a failure. Tifa watched it and slammed her fists into the wall in fury and helplessness. They both grew terrified as Jenova finished her ranting.

"After an eternity of imprisonment, I shall correct the imbalance! I, in all my power shall correct it! Lone Death, lone Glory and Destruction! Welcome to the end, you sniveling human insects!! Welcome to Armageddon!!!"

Onward to Part Ten: Beauty, Terror, and Closing the Door

Now aren't you glad Part 10's up for you to read? Wouldn't you be biting your fingernails off right about now if it wasn't? ^_^ Email me if you feel the urge, otherwise, go finish this sucker up. . .