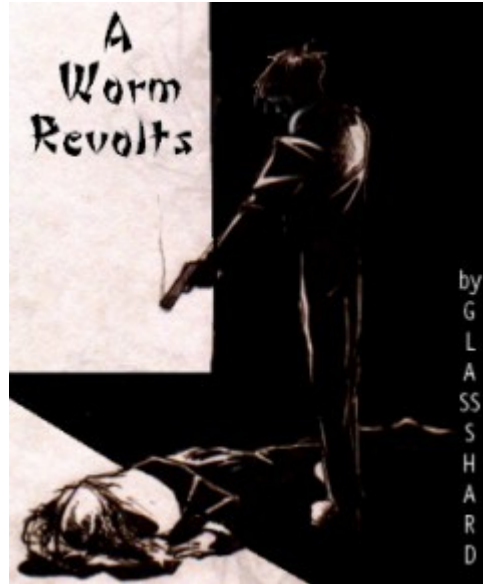


"A Worm Revolts"



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Gods, he felt dirty. A gritty, wet blackness permeated the air around him, infested each breath he took like invisible filthy hands desirous to taint his lungs. He wiped a trickle of sweat off his clammy forehead, then immediately rewrapped his right hand about the grip of his gun, clutching it hard and confident. That gun was like an extension of his arm.

"Yo Vincent, ya ready?"

"Yeah."

"The poor bastards oughta be walking out that door any time now."

"Yeah."

Two men stood with their backs flat against the brick wall of a dripping alley, the first, a heavy-set young guy with a shock of short red hair, gripped a shotgun firmly in two hands while his companion, a raven-haired teenager with a pale complexion and a distant look in his brown eyes, coolly gripped a shiny silver magnum .357 and watched the simple wooden door set in the wall with an expectant gaze. The air around them stank of sour milk and human filth. City smells.

"Five, I think. . ."

Vincent darted his eyes to his red-headed partner, lifting an eyebrow, but immediately turned back to the door.

"Five," the man repeated, licking his lips. "I think Zawa said five. Did he say five?" He blinked hard to clear the stinging sweat from his vision, shifting the shotgun around slightly in his hands. Vincent watched him expressionless.

"He said five, Mick."

"Yeah. You sure?"

"Yes."

Mick didn't seem to believe him for a second, his pale blue eyes looking from the blank door to his friend's apathetic face a few times uncertainly.

"Are you nervous?"

Vincent asked the question as though he didn't particularly care what the hell the answer was. Mick scowled, immediately straightening. "No!" he hissed, then winced and lowered his voice, "Dammit, of course not. You think this is the first time I've iced a few pricks in Zawa's name? I thought you knew me better than that, Vincent. No. . . ." Mick settled back further against the uncomfortable wall, "No, it's just. Aw hell, I don't know. I was watchin' the six o'clock news this evenin' fore I met ya at the hall and there was this story. Remember Johnny Wynn? Quit last year to go off and be with that chick from Junon?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, I guess it was before your time. Anyway, a few guys he screwed over while workin' for Zawa caught up with him. They slashed her throat, left her sitting up at their kitchen table for Johnny to come and see when he got home from

work. They were hiding off in their bedroom, three of them. They let ole John get a good look, then they put thirty bullets into him. Left their little baby screaming her head off in the cradle. 'Course, the news didn't know Johnny Wynn was a former yakuza or anything. They just reported it as a freak burglary gone bad. But I knew. I knew because they said that his right trigger finger'd been cut off and burned. Only the Manooks do that. And the Manooks hated Johnny."

"Manooks," Vincent said icily, "Superstitious idiots." Mick laughed nervously, gripping his shotgun tighter, eyeing the closed door desperately.

"Yeah, superstitious. Believin' in ghosts, thinking they can stop the ghosts of the guys they kill from hurting them in the afterlife by taking their trigger fingers. Retards, I swear. But Vincent. . . man, I dunno. . ."

Vincent leaned his weight on his left leg, breathing deeply of the putrid night air, trying not to gag on the pungent alley smell. "A friend of yours?" he asked noncommittally.

"Johnny? Yeah, we used to look out for each other."

"Sorry."

"Aw, don't worry about it," Mick tossed half a smile in Vincent's direction, then straightened his shoulders and stood determinedly against the wall, renewing his sweat-slicked hold on his weapon. "These pricks inside this cafe aren't even Manooks, just a coupla bastards thinkin' they can screw Zawa over on his rent." The red-headed young man sighed smally and blinked a few times, "I almost wish we were about to take out the bastards that did Johnny. I have half a mind to get a couple of the boys together and head out to Doroboo no Mori tomorrow night to find them, to make em see what happens when you mess with Zawa." Mick paused for a moment and looked to Vincent, wondering if the young man would volunteer to lend his gun to the effort. But Vincent didn't even meet his eye. He kept his attention fixed on the door. Sweat beaded out on his pale skin but it was only from the wretched heat, Mick saw no unease, no worry in his hooded brown eyes. As he gazed upon his partner though, there suddenly entered a look there that made Mick swallow hard: anticipation.

"Shuttup," Vincent said softly, "I hear something."

Mick strained his hearing, whipping his eyes about and pasting them firmly on the door in question. Behind it was a smallish cafe, a normal enough looking place that the little old ladies liked to frequent on Sunday afternoons. The main entrance was out front, nestled between two large, honest, unconcealing glass windows that allowed passer-bys to see inside; that view offered nothing but simple wooden tables and chairs, clean and pretty linens, a counter with baked goods and coffee pots that would fill the air inside with fragrant steam and pleasant smells. This little cafe was quite the charmer and rather famous in Wutai, despite its dubious location in one of the city's trashiest neighborhoods. Even this side exit that the two armed men stood outside had a pretty painted sign stuck upon it. *Bea's Bakery and Cafe*. Very cute. Very sweet. Very innocent. Very brilliant, Vincent thought to himself darkly.

The owner of the place really was this wrinkly old broad with a matronly smile and a kind word to everyone, Vincent knew her personally, she was a friend of his mother's. But the old woman's son on the other hand, well, Vincent knew him too. That was why he had absolutely no qualms about the fact that he was about to blow a few rounds into his head. The man was a snake, a bastard, an extortionist who used his elderly mother's old cafe as a center for operations, working out of the place's backroom even as Wutai's idiot cops drank coffee at the front counter, oblivious to him. And that was all fine, Vincent's boss, Tetsuo Zawa, didn't really give two craps about what the petty little fellow was doing. He wasn't about to cut into his profits with his small time gambling and loan sharking, no way. But now, it seemed he was getting ambitious. And Tetsuo Zawa was convinced no one in Wutai was allowed to be ambitious but him. So he had to go. And Vincent and Mick would be the ones to see him off. With a little help from a shotgun and a .357 Magnum of course.

"I think that's him," Mick whispered, trying to clear his mind and prepare himself for action. He glanced quickly to Vincent who nodded, eyes narrowed as he tried to make out the voice of their target, Tito Verne. Zawa had briefed the two of them the day before. He'd had Tito watched for a week now and had his patterns down. The man would be exiting the cafe through the side tonight, along with four of his goons, on their way to perform a hit of their own on a few deviant "customers". When Zawa's spies had informed their boss of that fact, it had sealed Tito's fate. No one died in Wutai unless Tetsuo Zawa had him killed, he wasn't about to let someone else muscle in on the fear his name commanded in the city, no way. Vincent knew full well in his mind that what would happen tonight was Tito's own fault.

"Gimme a minute, mate. . ."

A faint, gruff voice floated to the two waiting men's ears from behind the door. They heard footsteps die away back into the cafe, then the sound of a few men conversing lowly on just the other side of the wall. Mick looked to Vincent who nodded.

"Ya know, man," the red-haired gunman mumbled, his voice so soft Vincent had to strain to make out his words, "It ain't fair, Johnny was a good guy. I'm sick of seeing us taken out. God damned Manooks. . . don't they piss you off?"

"I think you need to shut up before they hear us," Vincent whispered, a stern look creeping into his eyes. Mick ignored him, blue gaze riveted on the door. He shook his head, knuckles whitening through his flesh as his grip on the shotgun tightened.

"I hate 'em, Vincent. You don't know, you only been workin' for Zawa a few months, you don't know yet what it's like. . . it gets worse, you know. The more people you kill, the more other people want you dead. And you ain't ever safe. Like Johnny, ya know? He thought he could settle down with that chick, hide from the Manooks and all the rest, but he couldn't. They ferreted him out, and reminded him real good of his past. There ain't no where you can hide from what you've done Vincent, not once you've started down this path. God dammit, it's hot."

Mick stuck a twitching finger between the collar of his t-shirt and his throat, hoping the humid, dirty air would cool him, but it only made the running perspiration there even stickier. He breathed hard, blinking sweat from his eyes, watching the door with slightly trembling shoulders as images rushed into his mind. Johnny's face, that sweet girl he'd married, their little baby. He'd gone over to his place a few weeks earlier, a humble little apartment down by the pagoda. It was nice, stark but nice, and they'd had a few beers, talked about old times.

"You just don't get it, Vincent. . . "Mick muttered, "You can't hide. There ain't no where you can hide. Except maybe in a wooden box. A coffin. You go there and they can't get you anymore. But who wants to be there, eh? Dammit. . . " Vincent eyed his partner curiously, not even bothering to shush him. There was something in Mick's eyes that the young man had to almost respect; it was an emotion he couldn't relate to, couldn't even begin to understand, but he marked it for its intensity and was able to appreciate it for that. "Fuck those Manooks. . . "Mick spat, moving the cool steel of the shotgun's muzzle up close to his feverish cheek, letting the metal meet his flesh and then shivering at the sensation, "I'm going to kill every last one of them. I asked Zawa last night, after you left, I asked him to lend me a few of the boys, let us go over there, clean up real quick and easy. He wouldn't do it though. No, no, he said it was too risky. Heh. How can he say that, eh? Johnny was a hell of a yakuza, one of the best gunmen he had, one o' the most loyal, woulda taken a bullet for any of us. And Zawa's gonna just let the pricks that did him in walk off? Dammit, Vincent, how fair is that? You know why, don't you? Well, I know why. It's cause we're worms. Everyone of us. Me, and Keen, and Johnny. And you too, Vincent, don't forget it. We're worms and Zawa's king. You may be a hell of an assassin, his current golden boy, but you'll always be a worm. To him and to everyone in Wutai. And when some lucky bastard finally blows you a third eye, ain't no one gonna run to avenge you. No one avenges a worm. You see? You see what I'm talking about?"

Vincent looked him briefly in his pale blue eyes, eyes lit with something akin to insanity, then glanced towards the door. He held a hand up to Mick, silencing anything else the incensed man was going to say, then gestured towards the door, a controlled, cold look on his face. Mick turned, brandishing his shotgun, holding it convulsively. The gruff man's voice had returned. It addressed someone inside harshly, scolding him for something or other. Many muffled voices then, talking, laughing, jeering, not knowing that they would so soon be dead. Vincent tensed, hearing them grow louder as they approached the door. In the humid, still air, the grating of a sticky doorknob being turned drifted to the two men's ears. Its rotation completed, there was a crack, a muffled groan as the seldom-used side door parted from the frame just a slit, golden light slicing the dank alley air, then slowly it opened until nearly a foot away from the wall.

Then it stopped.

"Tito, you're going to get my medicine while you're out right? You have to hurry, the chemist closes at ten, alright? I have to have my pills."

"Yeah, yeah, ma."

Vincent could see a man's thick, gloved hand poised on the doorknob, leaning on it slightly as it stood half-opened. He raised his gun out level before him at head-height, narrowing his eyes coolly, clearing his mind, focusing his concentration on the task at hand. The disgusting leech-like night air encompassed his body, sucking at his flesh, infinite damp warm tongues licking at him sickeningly. He could feel uncomfortable hot sweat trickling down the clammy skin of his back, sticking against the fabric of his black shirt and making him shiver in discomfort.

"God, it's disgusting out here. . . "the gruff voice mumbled, opening the door fully and stepping out onto the front step, "Ya feel that god damned humidity rushin' in 'ere? Jeez, it's only just may and already it's like a friggin' sauna."

"Move ta Icicle Inn, Tito."

"Can it, Shard. C'mon, let's get this over with."

"Don't forget my medicine, sweetheart."

"Sure, ma."

Vincent pressed back into the shadows of the alley, melding with them, the perfect black of his clothes and hair transforming him into living darkness. Zawa called him his "Little Raven". Though Vincent hated the nickname, it was fitting. Mick fidgeted at his side but was silent as Tito stepped from the building, four burly men on his heels. In a fraction of a second, Vincent looked his target over; young, cocky, brown hair, black eyes, dark complexion, massive build. His right hand was in the pocket of his flowing green trench coat, the side of which bulged in a strange way. Doubtless a gun. Vincent calculated these things rapidly, finger twitching on the trigger as he prepared to fire.

"Burn in hell, you fuckers!!"

It happened before Vincent even had time to think. Screaming bloody fury, insane grief in his blue eyes, Mick threw himself from the shadows and began firing violently towards the group of five, filling two of the men with buckshot before

they could even draw their guns. Cursing, Vincent leapt after him, raising his pistol and planting a bullet firmly between a third man's eyes. The back of the guy's head ripped away and his body flew backwards, leaving a spray of red against the dull dirty brick of the alley. Tito gulped, seeing the two assassins darting towards him, guns blazing, cold indifference in one man's face, rage and madness in the other's. He wasn't sure which scared him more. Glock now firm in his grip, he dove behind a thick green trash bin just as Vincent had fired off a few rounds into where his head had been and Mick had released a shell that would have hit his midsection. Instead it hit Tito's right-hand man Shard, sending him to the littered ground where he lay twitching, fingers moving uselessly over the grip of his never fired pistol. Tito glanced to his dying friend anxiously, then looked around the side of the bin, bullets hitting the steel with a sharp ping. He saw the black-haired assassin suddenly swear violently as he ran out of ammo, crouching down defensively and digging around in his coat for a fresh clip. Mick stood at his side for a moment, shotgun half-raised, looking down at the four dead bodies with a confused look on his sweaty face. Tito frowned, shaking his head to rid his eyes of the perspiration running down into them, then lifted his gun.

"Yo Vincent, "Mick said softly, shivering as a cruel, stray breeze ran over his damp neck, "Didn't Zawa say there'd be five?"

Vincent looked up as he snapped the fresh clip into his Magnum, then stood, head jerking around to take in the sights of the alley. A sudden silver flash assaulted his brown eyes, and then the pale knuckles of a hand wrapped around a gun made him throw himself to the ground and cry out a warning to Mick as sizzling white bullets suddenly screamed towards them. Vincent watched, expression amazingly calm, his eyes like two bright pools, as Mick flew backwards beneath the impact of two merciless rounds. Not even waiting for his partner to hit the ground, Vincent flew to his feet and raised his own gun towards Tito, who'd exposed himself to fire the shot. Their gazes met for a fraction of a second, two upraised guns between them. But it was Vincent who fired first. Tito died with a strange expression on his face. Shock, fear, and a look of inevitability.

After the noise of the shots had echoed away, the alley was strangely silent. Pipes dripped in the background, car engines roared in the distance. The lilting strains of Vaughn Williams' *Lark Ascending* drifted to Vincent's ears from above, one of the seedy neighborhood's more cultured thugs must have fallen asleep with their radio on and a window open. He stood for a moment, listening to the soft sound, the gentle melody, the sudden swelling of strings. So beautiful amidst all this. The noise of a groan at his feet disrupted the music suddenly and he looked down to see one of Tito's men flopping about like a beached fish. A single bullet finished his struggles. Wiping sweat and flecks of blood from his forehead, Vincent shoved the music from his mind and surveyed the dark alley, walking around the bodies, making sure his job had been completed. He noticed the cafe door had been shut and knew the old woman was likely inside with her ear to the phone, summoning every pig in Wutai. Pocketing his warm gun, Vincent turned briskly for the exit of the alley, strands of his short black hair sticking to his neck.

"Vincent. . ." Hearing his name, he turned abruptly about, the hint of a frown on his thin, pale lips. He'd been hoping to avoid any sort of big final farewell with Mick. He hardly knew the man.

"Just assumed I was dead, eh?" Mick asked as Vincent approached him slowly. He lay on his back, an ever-widening pool of crimson spread about his chest, his red hair redder with blood. "Cold bastard. . . heh, but don't worry."

Vincent frowned for real now, crossing his arms and eyeing his surroundings a little nervously, sure he'd hear sirens at any moment. "Don't worry about what?" he asked petulantly.

With a faint smile, Mick stared beyond his partner and towards the dirty dark-gray sky. A washed-out moon shone feebly from behind the scrim of clouds, casting a pale white light that saddened the night instead of brightening it. "Don't worry," he said again, "Don't worry about avenging me. Heh. Remember. No one avenges a worm."

Closing his blue eyes, Mick softly died. Vincent turned around to face the alley exit again. He shut his vision and breathed the filthy city air, tried to calm himself by listening to the reassuring city noises and the last dancing strains of the music as it died away into silence. And then, after he'd pushed things from his mind that he customarily kept shoved away, Vincent donned a pair of sunglasses and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Immediately a black caddy pulled up and stopped abruptly before him, a door swinging outwards and nearly clipping him in the shin. Without a word of greeting, Vincent stepped inside and shut the car door behind him. The caddy sped away, leaving the alley and its occupants to the all-consuming night.

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Zawa's office fit Zawa, Vincent had always thought so. It was situated in the back of a pool hall on Mikan Street, a pool hall that had every appearance of being an average, seedy pool hall, but everyone in Wutai knew that it was about as much a pool hall as the Honey Bee Inn was a motel. Inside, beyond the tables and the bar, behind an unmarked door, Tetsuo Zawa ruled the city with a stern fist. Stern enough to keep the gil flowing into his bank account, but just loose

enough to keep Mayor Kisaragi from taking interest enough in his activities to truly harm him. Vincent stood before Zawa's massive desk, a scratched, beat-up old antique that Wutai feared. That desk held more significance than the Grim Reaper's sickle or Atropos' shears. Countless people's fates had been decided over it. Vincent thought the thing was rather ugly. It was more ornately carved than most cathedrals. And in serious need of polishing.

"So, my little raven, Mickey fell to Tito, eh? A great loss, he'll be missed. You must go and tell the news to his sister, I think she lives somewhere downtown. But another day, another day. For now, tell me all that you overheard before the actual shooting. Every detail."

Vincent complied, reciting the petty conversation his sharp hearing had picked up just before the five men had opened the door to the cafe and he and Mick had blown them away. As he spoke, Zawa eyed him intensely in that unnerving way that he had and Vincent felt like a kid being drilled. Still, he kept his cool and gave the report smoothly, professionally, as though he'd been a hired assassin for Zawa's yakuza for years and not months as was the case. When he'd finished, including the part where Mick had snapped, his boss nodded sagely, steepling his fingers before his face and sucking on a cigarette.

"He took Johnny's death harder than I'd thought. Ah well, he was a loose cannon, that one, I always thought so. I took him up off the street because I thought I could harness that stifled insanity. And in a way, I suppose I did. He managed to take three of the enemy down with him, eh? Heh heh, poor Mickey. I'll say a prayer for him tonight. You say a prayer too, little raven. Another little orphan out of his misery."

Unsure of what to say, Vincent only nodded. Zawa eyed him for a moment, briefly running over the man's stats in his mind; eighteen years old, expert marksman, remorseless, stealthy, loyal as a puppy. One of Zawa's current favorite assassins. Of course such rankings meant nothing in Wutai. Vincent could die the next day and he'd quickly find a new young gunman to place on a pedestal.

"I've told Mr. Hia to double your check," Zawa said, a smile stretched across his smoke-concealed face, "I think you deserve it. Mickey's share, you know. He won't be needing it. Tell me, how do you feel taking money from a dead man?"

"I. . ." Vincent stuttered, blinking slowly, unsure how to answer, "I don't feel anything at all particularly, sir."

Zawa apparently found this answer funny as hell. He burst out into a stream of chuckles, each rolling over the next messily from his red lips. Vincent winced at the horrible sound. "Dammit, my little raven, you don't feel anything at all, do you? What an appropriate answer. I want to know though, do you *feel*, youngster? Do you have any remorse for anything at all? I do wonder. . . heh heh. You could almost be a Turk, you compose yourself so well. You've heard of the Turks of Shinra, haven't you, young raven? An amazingly efficient organization. Each member is a walking, talking robot, committed to their duties, committed to the task to be completed more so than anything else. Shinra really has himself a force to be reckoned with in those Turks. They hide under a title, let's see, what is it. . . ah, the Department of Administrative Research. They're called that out of mere convenience though, less threatening to the ears and imagination. I've been reading up on them, making sure that that fuck of a fat president doesn't send any of them to Wutai. I don't need any extraneous noses butting into business here. Perhaps I should take you and start my own little group of Turks, what do you think?"

Again, a question that Vincent had trouble answering with a "yes" or a "no". Such questions seemed Zawa's specialty. Feeling daring, he decided to attempt a conversation with the most powerful man in the city. "I've heard of the Turks, sir," he began hesitantly, "They walk Midgar and demand respect with their very presence. They have reputations, sir, people know who they are by their suits, their attitudes."

"I admire them for their efficiency, you admire them for the respect they receive. Hmm. Don't you feel you are respected now?"

Vincent sighed smally, so smally that Zawa didn't catch it. "Yes, sir."

The yakuza boss stared at his employee for almost a full two minutes, scrutinizing his expression, sniggering every so often to himself. After what seemed an eternity, Zawa snapped himself out of his reverie and swiveled around in his chair to face the rear wall of his office. A huge painting of a naked woman was hung there. Vincent knew full well what his boss did inside the room when it was empty and the door was locked.

"No, little raven, perhaps I'll leave the Turks to Shinra. I don't think he knows what he's getting into. The employees can't begin to carry more weight than the employer. The people should fear the name Tetsuo Zawa, not, not. . . I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Vincent Valentine, sir."

"Ah, that's right. We can't have people fearing Vincent Valentine and not me. 'Twould disrupt the balance. There's an order to things. A hierarchy. You understand, don't you?"

Vincent stared at Zawa, his arms rigid at his sides, his mouth a tight line. "Worms and Kings, sir."

"Yes, that's right," Zawa nodded, breaking into a wide grin, "Very perceptive. Heh." The two men stared at each other for a moment longer and the office air grew still, expectant. Zawa broke the brief staring contest by flicking the spent butt of his cigarette into a nearby trashcan and gracefully going through the procedure of lighting another one. Vincent

watched him soberly. His boss was acting strange tonight, saying things he didn't usually say. Customarily it was all business, all protocol, but tonight something seemed to be troubling him. His behavior was making Vincent nervous as hell but he hid his unease well, sticking a hand in the pocket of his slacks and breathing shallow to avoid the stifling cigarette smoke. Zawa ignored him for a little bit, absorbing himself in his cigarette and in the headlines of a newspaper spread out before him on his desk. Vincent ran his eyes over the bold headline: "Jeffrey Manook buys out Toshitomo Industries. Hundreds of jobs lost." Zawa glanced up and saw his employee reading the article, keen eyes narrowed into black slits to make out the finer text.

"You've heard of this?" the man asked him and Vincent looked suddenly startled, but quickly composed himself. He shook his head, black strands falling before his vision. "Manook found dirt on our good friend Mr. Toshitomo a few weeks back. He used it to convince the man to sell him the steelworks over on the east edge of town. Do you know why this is bad news for us, little raven?" Zawa eyed Vincent intensely and the young man fairly squirmed.

"No, sir."

Taking a luxurious drag off his cigarette, the yakuza boss smiled broadly, menace in his beady eyes. "Toshitomo was my own little slut. The dirt that Manook got on him was dirt I'd had for years. He was a pimp twenty years ago, one of Wutai's most successful. But his wife doesn't know this, see? He cleaned up, became a steel tycoon and got hitched to a pretty little thing from the aristocracy. If his past was discovered, she'd leave him, take their kids, and he'd fall out of favor with Kisaragi, lose his government contract, go bankrupt. One fragile flick at the ace of spades in the card house and the whole bloody castle would come crumbling down around Toshitomo's head. He knew it. For fucking years I kept him on a leash with it and he was my inside informant to the house of Godo. When the pigs raided the docks last spring, Toshitomo was the one who informed me ahead of time, giving us the opportunity to clear out of the warehouses. That saved our ass. My little raven, Manook has that leash I'd kept so tightly entwined about Toshitomo's neck in his own hot, sweaty little hand now. And he's using the information in such a short-sighted way. Using it simply to get him to sell his company for dirt cheap so Manook can make a little extra cash. That's not tactics, that's greed and incompetence. It's a waste. A god damned waste. I hate waste, raven, more than anything. Well, almost anything. I hate traitors most of all."

Vincent kept his calm brown eyes fixed straight on his boss, refusing to turn away though Zawa now cast such a scrutinizing gaze upon him that it could have burnt a hole straight through his head.

"Someone leaked Toshitomo's past. Do you want to know how I'm sure of this? After discovering his dirty little secrets myself years ago, I had every trace of his old life smeared away. I must have had a dozen old whores killed, burnt down an entire neighborhood in old North East. I went to a hell of a lot of trouble to make the fact that Toshitomo was an ex-pimp very exclusive information. But somehow, Manook got a hold of it. And he could have only done so from someone working for me."

"I'm sorry, sir, but what are you leading up to?"

Zawa chuckled softly, sure he saw apprehension in his young employee's pale features. "Don't get defensive, little raven. You're but a common hit man, I'm well aware of that. You've only been here a few months, hardly time enough to acquire such privileged information. But I want you to keep your eyes open, your ears open. Find the son of bitch who's caused me this aggravation. Then come to me and tell me his name. So I can carve it in his forehead."

"Yes, sir," Vincent replied curtly, exhaling in relief. There was a bead of sweat trickling down the back of his neck, winding its way through the stray hairs and tickling him unbearably. Still, he was glad Zawa couldn't see it. The yakuza boss sat back in his seat, his swiveling chair creaking softly in the still atmosphere. He turned back to the painting behind his desk and stared at it for a minute thoughtfully.

"That is all."

Vincent blinked a few times then turned to go, crossing the office to the door with muted steps.

"Oh, and little raven, enjoy dead Mickey's money. In this line of work, enjoyment is for the living, enjoyment is the reward given after you've survived another day. Treat yourself to a fine cigar, a bottle of cognac. Reward the instincts that keep you alive. Perhaps Mickey didn't treat his well enough. Perhaps that is why his enjoyment is over now. Hmph. Evening to you."

Vincent opened the door and quickly stepped outside as Zawa launched into a fit of laughter, laughter mixed with the raspy sounds of a smoker's cough. And the imperialistic chuckles of a man sure he was as omnipotent as a god. After he'd calmed himself enough to think straight, he picked up the phone on the corner of his desk and punched in a few numbers. "Mars. . ." he began once someone on the other end had picked up, "Have Vincent Valentine followed."

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Mr. Hia handed the black-haired young man a fat check, a frown souring his wrinkled features. Vincent took it with an equally sour frown which immediately turned into a shocked grimace upon seeing how many zeroes were scrawled after

the initial five.

"Are you sure this is right?" he asked, rubbing at the back of his head in disbelief. Mr. Hia harumphed and nodded.

"Why don't you just rub it in, you cocky young bastard," the old man snapped, turning around and plopping back down at his desk. He dug about in a pile of papers scattered there, searching for something, then made a small sound of triumph as he dug a dirty yellow post-it note out and tossed it to Vincent. The young gunman snatched at the floating paper and shoved his check securely in his front pants pocket. "Message came for you while you were out," Mr. Hia explained impatiently, turning down to his desktop and beginning to scrawl the daily expenses out in the books. He was Zawa's accountant and it was a consuming sort of job. "I've told you punks not to give this number out. Don't you have a phone of your own, Valentine?"

Vincent glanced at the paper. A phone number and that was all. He shoved it away then turned to Mr. Hia. "You have a bad attitude," he remarked, and left the room with a sniff.

The front of the pool hall was a frightening place. It was frequented mainly by Zawa's yakuza, other customers were usually persuaded to leave. Most wouldn't even walk past the front of it, any pool hall with a body count seemed an unhealthy place to get too close to. It was dimly lit inside, the faint yellow light that did filter from the lanterns was absorbed by the black-painted walls or obscured by the thick clouds of cigarette and reefer smoke. Vincent entered the place cautiously, a hand stuck inside his jacket, close to his gun. By rights he was perfectly allowed to be there, but he still felt ill at ease the way so many of his "co-workers" looked at him sometimes. Features lit by the soft yellow candlelight, he made his way to the bar and took a seat at the very end, propping himself delicately upon a ripped stool. He tucked his feet up under him and leaned his elbows on the counter, ordering a quick shot of scotch from the beefy bartender once he'd condescended to glance his way.

"Hey! Vincent! I been looking everywhere for you, man!"

Vincent didn't move his head, only turned his eyes in their sockets to see the source of the young fellow addressing him now. Blonde hair, green eyes, dark complexion covered with a three day growth of beard, Keen was probably his only real friend in the yakuza. Vincent offered a small smile as he sat down beside him and ordered a beer.

"So, how'd it go, eh?" Keen looked at his morose friend with eager eyes, a grin on his rather handsome face.

"It was interesting, if nothing else," Vincent replied, fingering his shot glass, "Mick is dead."

"Oh." Keen's grin fell and he leaned heavily on the bar, green eyes losing a fraction of their sparkle. "Tell me about it."

"He flipped out. He was talking about that Johnny Wynn fellow, the one that got shot up, then he went berserk and leapt out without signaling me, ruining our advantage. We managed to do the job alright, but Tito Verne took him out in the process. It was funny though, Keen. It seemed to me that Mick saw Tito raising that gun, he could have avoided it. Perhaps, he could have even gotten off a shot before him. But Mick just stood there, watching that hand cannon coming around to steal his life away. I don't get it. Crazy idiot."

Vincent gulped his drink irritably and Keen popped open his bottle of beer with a practiced flip of his wrist. "He get a chance to say anything about it?"

Vincent looked up in mild surprise at the question, then shrugged.

"He was babbling about, about worms or some bunk. He never was the sanest guy in Wutai."

"You don't seem too worked up over it, man." Keen half-shut his eyes wearily, his heavy head sinking between his shoulders as a yawn wracked his frame. "But then, I'm forgetting who I'm talking to. I doubt you'd bother to bat your eyes if someone set your hair on fire." Vincent shrugged as Keen laughed at him, downing the last of his scotch and then getting up abruptly from his stool. "Aw, man, I'm just screwing with ya, don't get offended and leave. Nothing worse'n drinking alone on a Saturday night, er, morning."

Vincent shook his head slightly, then walked towards the door leading outside, saying quietly, "Keen, we need to talk." The words sobered Keen right up. He plopped a few gil on the bar and followed Vincent out of the pool hall, throwing a wave or two to the few men inside whom he knew. Once outside, he saw his friend walking quickly down the deserted dirty sidewalk away from the place, his hands stuck in the pockets of the black jacket he always wore. His narrow shoulders were drawn up and his eyes were cast to the ground, his entire form illuminated by the pale white moonlight trying its damndest to squeeze through the clouds. Keen jogged up to walk beside him, resuming his grinning.

"What's up?" he asked, nose wrinkling distastefully as the full force of the humidity struck him dead on. Vincent was silent a moment, some thought heavy on his mind, and then he sighed quietly, looking up briefly at his friend. "It's getting dangerous, Keen," he whispered, eyes deadly serious.

"Dangerous?" Keen answered back, his voice just as low, his eyes suddenly darting all about their empty surroundings. It was something like three in the morning and the streets were vacant, the sidewalks clear of people, but Keen knew the very walls had ears. He himself had overheard a lot of sacred information in his days. He knew that complete safety from prying ears was a myth. "It's always been dangerous, Vincent. Why you bringin' it up now? I told you, goddammit, not to worry about it. Not to say anything, not to do anything, not to even frigging think anything. This. . . this is all my situation, my business. Let me deal with it. Nothing to do with you."

Keen kicked at a crumbled coke can lying forlorn on the sidewalk. It shot away before him with a terrible racket that made the two men wince. Vincent eyed the ground as he walked, all emotion cleared from his face. "Zawa is getting suspicious." Keen looked up but Vincent wouldn't meet his gaze, "He's asked me to keep my eyes open. He told me to report anything I found to him immediately."

"And will you?" Keen ran a hand through his sweat-matted blonde hair, keeping his green eyes fixed dead on his friend's face. Vincent shrugged.

"Of course not. I swore to you that what you told me would be sacred. Not for an instant, Keen, not for a fraction of second did I ever even consider telling Zawa that. . . that you did what you did. I just wanted to warn you though that not every man working under Tetsuo Zawa is as loyal to you as I. Watch your back."

"I know to watch my back," Keen grumbled, "Dammit, of course I know that. Don't you think I've been fuckin' sweating like a pig in a slaughterhouse ever since I made that call to Manook? I sleep with my gun on now, did you know that?"

Vincent shook his head but didn't reply. He couldn't feel pity for his friend. Keen had brought it on himself. He'd given Manook the information on Toshitomo, he'd played the role of a traitor and a backstabber to Zawa, and if such a thing was ever discovered, Keen would pay the reckoning in blood. And Vincent couldn't pity him. In his calculating mind, Keen's sufferings were his own fault. Just as Tito Verne's had been. "I hope he appreciates this. . ." Keen muttered, walking a little faster down the sidewalk, making Vincent double his pace to keep up.

"You're saving his life, I'm sure he does."

Keen chuckled, throwing a wink to his friend. "I've saved my father's life more times than I can count, Vincent, and he's yet to buy me a thank-you card. I should stop hoping that he'll ever begin to realize the sort of crap I've had to drag myself through to keep men from putting bullets in his brain. Gods, of all the people for him to fall into debt with, he had to welch out on Jeffrey Manook. Do you think Manook knew? Do you think that's why he let my father fall so far into debt with him? Almost two million gil, Vincent, two million. The standard limit is 500 K, then Manook's men take you out if you can't pay. It's that simple. But for some reason they let my old man fall four times deeper. Do you think he knew?"

"What, that you were his son and you worked for Zawa?" Vincent half shut his eyes wearily, black strands of hair falling in his face, "I'm sure he knew quite well, Keen. Manook isn't stupid."

"No, the prick's not stupid. Vicious, but not stupid. S'funny, y'know. I went to Zawa, asking him if he'd ever be taking Manook out. His entire organization is growing larger every month. Him buying out Toshitomo only adds to it. But Zawa's so cocky, so damned sure of himself. He won't even bother with Manook. I wonder if he'll bother now, now he's gotten his hands on that steel company. Now that Zawa's own employee played the part of a traitor just to keep his old man alive."

"Watch it, Keen," Vincent said sharply, "Don't ever say that out loud."

"Yeah, you're right. If I can make it through the year, I'll have enough money to relocate pops and myself to Kalm. I've always wanted to live in Kalm. You ever been there?"

"No."

"That's right, you've never been out of Wutai, have you? You should see Kalm some time, Vincent. The entire town exists in a tint of blue. Every little house is a work of art. There's no slums, no dirty alleys, no killing feverishly in the hopes that one day you won't have to kill anymore. Kalm is beautiful. And I'm going to live there one day."

Vincent nearly smiled at his friend's enthusiasm, yet anxiety settled heavy in his heart. If Zawa discovered that Keen had leaked the information on Toshitomo's past to Manook, he'd have the man blinded, castrated, and cooked alive. It didn't matter that Keen's actions had been performed out of a love for his father and not a lust for money. Treachery was treachery no matter what light it was viewed in.

Keen halted suddenly outside of a beat up old apartment building standing featureless and grey against the dark empty streets. "Welp, here's your place. What's the plan for tomorrow, you wanna go to Eddie's, he's throwing a party. Good opportunity to get laid, throw back a few."

Vincent shrugged, pulling his keys from his pocket and tossing them back and forth in his hands. "Actually, I have some work to do tomorrow." Keen shot his friend a knowing look, grinning savagely.

"I don't know why I even ask you, Vincent, I don't know when I'll ever realize it's a waste of breath trying to get you out and get you to have a good time. You need to lighten up, man. You're about the gloomiest SOB I know. I'm the one with my neck always on the line over my dad and I never stop smiling. But you, you're sitting pretty, you're Zawa's golden boy and pulling in fifty thousand dollar paychecks. Yet you never goddamn seem to be happy."

"If you're trying to boost my ego you're doing a terrible job."

Groaning, Keen clapped Vincent roughly on the back then took off whistling down the street. Though he joked about it, he really was tired of always getting the brush-off from his friend. Hell, he wasn't even sure if Vincent was his friend, he never wanted to spend any time with him, or go out anywhere, or even frigging speak more than two sentences at a time to him. He preferred to either work or sit hibernating in his apartment. Keen wished he'd learn how to cut loose, learn how to start acting like a real pal. There was something in the man's eyes that made Keen want to see him happy, really happy, if only once. He just had to figure out how to make that happen.

Vincent watched his friend go with unease in his eyes, then turned and entered his apartment building. It was dark inside, dark and featureless and gray except for the scatterings of drunks and transients spread out in the hallway. One was throwing his meager dinner of cheap whiskey up against the wall and Vincent sidestepped the widening puddle with a disgusted sneer of his lip. The hall was encrusted in such filth, both the human sort and the regular kind; caked trash and year old bottles of beer, black mildew formed around the dead husks of vermin and shoved in the corners. Vincent could have afforded something better, especially with the bulging check in his pocket, but he didn't care enough to move. He'd lived in that apartment for three years and any ambition he'd ever had to leave it had flown away. Besides, he didn't usually notice his surroundings. He spent most of his time in his head anyways. Though that wasn't the cleanest of locations either, it beat out the filthy old building easily.

Vincent entered his dark, cramped apartment and flung his jacket and keys on the scratched kitchen table. He hated being home, the place was like a tomb. Three rooms with one window. The light it shone in during the day was barely enough to read by and at night it was perfect black. It used to be that Vincent never turned the lights on, he couldn't afford it, but now, even though he made enough working for Zawa that such a simple thing as light was no longer a luxury, he was used to the darkness. In fact, anything else made him uncomfortable.

Sighing, he flung himself on the mattress he used as a bed and lay there for a moment, staring through the air, going through the events of the day. He filed everything away neatly in his mind; the bodies of Tito's men laying bloody and twitching on the ground, Zawa's praise and Zawa's request and Zawa's money, Keen's indifference, and then Mick's last words.

"Worms. . . " Vincent breathed aloud, moving an arm back behind his head, "I'm not a worm. I'm the best damned assassin in this stinking city. I am not a worm."

Wutai was a mecca of garbage, a nice place to visit but a terrible place to live. An even worse place to grow up in. Vincent had had nearly nineteen years to figure that out. The city was structured in a hierarchy that even Midgar would've envied. There was the fathead house of Kisaragi, the rulers of the little kingdom, and then of course the scattered "aristocracy", those families rich enough in gil and breeding to influence Godo whenever their petty wants called for it. Everyone else was a peasant. The peasants worked and slaved and died in the seedy parts of town, in the North East, in the Doroboo no Mori, the dark places that the aristocracy whispered of to each other but that people like Vincent knew as home.

"But I'm not a worm. . . "

Breathing deep of the stale apartment air, Vincent turned his head to look out the tiny window. It was hardly discernible from the rest of the wall, the building right next to his was only a foot away and stifled most illumination from outside. Still, a small amount of starlight filtered down from above. It was something, at least, that broke the monotony of the inky blackness. He could of course just flick his desk lamp on, but something tonight made him want to avoid harshness, made him want to hide away from things. He didn't know what it was, just some stupid feeling, this hindrance of a sixth sense that he got sometimes about things. So he remained sprawled on his bed, staring off at nothing, Mick's words occasionally floating into his mind and screwing with his thoughts for reasons he couldn't even comprehend.

An hour or two passed and when the phone rang Vincent wasn't sure if he'd been asleep or not. He sat up suddenly, blinking hard, looking around for the little red light that bleeped on his phone when it rang. He groped about in the dark for a second and finally held the receiver in his hand.

"Hullo?"

"Vincent?"

"Yeah, who's this?"

He ran a hand over his face, yawning wide, trying to wake himself up. With the lights off and the room black it was as though his eyes weren't even open.

"It's Arthur, how ya doing?"

"Arthur. . . " Vincent ran the name through his mind and then suddenly straightened, instantly awake, "Uncle Arthur? Oh, hey there. How are you doing?"

"I've been trying to get a hold of you for the last twenty-four hours, son. Don't you ever answer your phone?"

"I work a lot, sir."

"I left a message at that emergency number you gave me. Didn't you get it?"

Vincent suddenly remembered the little yellow post-it note that Mr. Hia had thrown at him and sighed. "Yes, I'm sorry. I forgot to call back. What's the matter? Is everything all right?"

There was a pause on the other end, a pause long enough to allow a million horrible possibilities to form in Vincent's mind. He'd never heard his uncle sound so upset. He was usually a pretty lively guy and since it had been nearly five months since they'd last spoken, Vincent figured he should have sounded somewhat happier to talk to him.

"Vincent. . . " his uncle began, his tone soft and strained, "There's been an accident."

"Go on."

"Your father and mother were on their way to their lawyers. Nothing serious, your dad was looking to file a suit against a few former clients. Well, something happened and. . . and there was an accident."

"Are they all right?"

"No, son. They took your mom to the hospital. . . but she only lasted a short time."

Arthur waited for a response, listening to his nephew's breathing on the other end.

"They're dead, Vincent. They're gone."

There was a long silence on both sides of the connection then. Arthur stayed quiet, letting the sobering news sink into his nephew's senses, while tears came into his own eyes, tears he'd thought were spent. But then he'd had a feeling they'd come again once he had to tell his sister's only child that she and his father were dead. He waited for a long time, waited for Vincent to give some sign that he understood.

"When's the funeral?" he finally asked in a calm, quiet voice.

"This all happened on Friday, so it's tomorrow. At Marlbury Fields."

"Alright then. Thank you for calling me, sir. I'll see you in the morning."

And Vincent hung the phone up before his uncle could get another word out.

~*~

Mars was a big guy. He had to walk sideways through most doors to avoid scraping the hell out of his shoulders. He sat now in a chair before Tetsuo Zawa, with his feet propped up on the man's awe-inspiring desk. Every so often he gave his tobacco a chew and raked a hand across a few mosquito bites on his chest then moved up to rub at his stubbly chin. Zawa had his back to him and was staring up at that painting of the naked chick. Mars looked up at it too but didn't find her particularly hot. Bad hair.

"So, Mr. Zawa, what do you want me and the crew to do next?"

Zawa stood silent for a few moments, deep in contemplation, a thin line of cigarette smoke rising up from his head and disappearing into the black ceiling of his dim office. He turned slowly around and depressed the play button on a tape player laying on his desk. After a few grainy moments of tape fuzz, it began to play.

". . . Gods, of all the people for him to fall into debt with, he had to welch out on Jeffrey Manook. Do you think Manook knew? Do you think that's why he let my father fall so far into debt with him? Almost two million gil, Vincent, two million. The standard limit is 500 K, then Manook's men take you out if you can't pay. It's that simple. But for some reason they let my old man fall four times deeper. Do you think he knew?"

"What, that you were his son and you worked for Zawa? I'm sure he knew quite well, Keen. Manook isn't stupid."

"No, the prick's not stupid. Vicious, but not stupid. S'funny, y'know. I went to Zawa, asking him if he'd ever be taking Manook out. His entire organization is growing larger every month. Him buying out Toshitomo only adds to it. But Zawa's so cocky, so damned sure of himself. He won't even bother with Manook. I wonder if he'll bother now, now he's gotten his hands on that steel company. Now that Zawa's own employee played the part of a traitor just to keep his old man alive."

"Watch it, Keen, don't ever say that out loud."

"Yeah, you're right. If I can make it through the year, I'll have enough money to relocate pops and myself to Kalm. I've always wanted to live in Kalm. You ever--?"

Zawa stopped the tape abruptly, jamming the button with a petulant figure. He had a look on his face so icily furious it made Mars shiver. The beefy man squirmed in his seat, then gingerly took his feet from his boss's desk, planting them firmly on the floor. Zawa sucked deep of his cigarette, releasing a delicate cloud of blue smoke into the air. His black eyes glimmered.

"Keen Vera, that's his name?" the yakuza boss asked lowly.

"Yeah, from North East. Works with Berno in the IA. He'd have access to the Toshitomo information. I'm pissed at myself for not realizing it was him before. It makes sense, it would have to be someone from IA, no one else knew."

"All to save his daddy. . . "Zawa said in something like disbelief, "Rather low of Manook, eh? As Keen said, he had to have known the man worked for me. He milked his father dry, then threatened to kill him if Keen didn't come up with the money. And of course he couldn't come up with two million gil so he had no other choice but to find . . . an alternative method of payment. Tricky, tricky." Zawa chuckled darkly, lowering himself into his deckchair and swiveling slowly back and forth, a hand to his chin, stroking it thoughtfully. The way he was acting, Mars thought that maybe Zawa would feel compassionate for Keen and let him off, seeing as how he his actions were done only to aid his father. It would have been a first for Tetsuo Zawa, compassion wasn't exactly his defining characteristic, but Mars thought that it would be perfectly understandable. He knew he'd do the same if in Zawa's shoes.

"So what'll it be, sir?" the beefy man asked hesitantly. Zawa stared at the painting a moment longer, licking his lips in thought.

"Well, they have to die, obviously," Zawa began, speaking matter-of-factly.

"Say the word, Mr. Zawa, and they'll be dead in ten minutes."

"Don't be ridiculous, I can go down the street and kill a couple of tourists if I want to. But they didn't fuck with me like Keen Vera did. No, Mars, we have to do something a little more interesting. Something that Manook'll see and remember. Something I can take a Polaroid of and send to him. Let him hang it on his fridge."

"I can have Nengasai go at them with a piece of paper and a lemon if you want. But sir, Valentine too?"

At the mention of the name, Zawa nearly cringed, feeling a dangerous anger mounting in his chest. He pressed a button on the tape player again and listened to a snippet of the conversation, listening especially close to the sound of Vincent's voice. His fists closed around the edge of his desk, gripping it so tightly he left indentations in the soft wood. There was his number one assassin, helping someone plot against him. Gods, it made him want to tear the man apart with his bare hands. He'd stood right there and looked him square in the eye, saying he knew nothing of the Manook/Toshitomo deal. A lying, treacherous snake. Zawa would have his head for it.

"Sweet-faced little bastard. . . "he hissed. Mars looked upon him warily. "For some reason this Keen fellow doesn't irritate me nearly as terrible as my little raven. I feel I should pluck and cook that bird myself. Yet. . . " Zawa turned away and rubbed a few fat fingers against his forehead, as though there was a pain there, "I don't want him punished, not really. He's only a child. Yet. . . god dammit! Follow me, Mars. And call some of the boys. Call Nengasai."

"Yes, sir."

Zawa stalked forth from behind his desk and headed towards the door, Mars on his heels with his cellphone out and already pressed against his thick lips. The yakuza boss gave a clock on the wall a glance as he thundered past it. It was late as hell. But that was good. Predators came out at night.

~*~

Wutai sweated. The sticky, humid breeze that had blown through the city the entire night now subsided, letting the full force of the summer heat blare its fury onto the sidewalks. The streetlights seemed hazy shining through such hot wetness; they shimmered and wavered like candles in a zephyr. The unmarked buildings of Vincent's dirty neighborhood stood like faceless soldiers in a lineup of dead men, awaiting coroners that would never come to give them identities and lay them to rest. Mosquitoes buzzed restlessly, flies settled and resettled on the heaps of garbage piled around the buildings while two stray dogs, their coats matted with so much mud it seemed they didn't even have fur anymore, fought over a few pizza crusts, whining and snapping at each other's faces.

Inside one of the buildings, on the third floor, laying half naked diagonally across his mattress, Vincent Valentine stared into the darkness. A thick sweat stood out on his bare chest and brow, ran cold down the sides of his face, matted his fine black hair against his scalp. His beautiful brown eyes looked at nothing, wide and unfocused as a turmoil of thoughts ran behind them. The phone had rung almost ten times before they blinked softly and Vincent shook his head, eyeing the flashing red button on the console in something like fear. It could be his uncle again and Vincent just didn't want to bother. His insides felt too numb to deal with his own grief much less anyone else's. Not a flicker of emotion had crossed his pale face since hearing the news of his parents' deaths and this bothered him more than if he'd suddenly burst into tears.

The phone kept ringing and Vincent pushed his thoughts aside, his fears too, and picked up the receiver.

"What?"

"Hey, Vincent, you weren't asleep were you?"

It was Keen. Vincent ran a hand over his dripping face, flinging sweat away disgustedly, then rested his head against the wall, shutting his eyes.

"No, Keen, what is it?"

"You sound weird, are you all right?"

"Yeah, just tired."

"I didn't think you'd be asleep, you don't usually pass out until dawn. I thought you'd wanna come over and order a pizza. Something's screwy with my cable and I have free porn, how tight is that?"

"You're screwed up."

"Hey, I'm going to take advantage of this while it lasts. You game?"

Vincent leaned back heavily, taking a deep breath. He was hungry. And he was tired of sitting in the dark thinking about his parents. "Yeah, I'll be over in a minute. Pineapple and ham on the pizza, alright?"

"Yeah, on your half maybe. Later."

The connection went dead with a click and Vincent tossed the receiver back on the console, rising from his mattress with a popping spine. He stepped into the bathroom and cleaned himself off, drawing a sinkful of water and immersing his head into it. Glancing in the dirty mirror he saw he looked like hell. His eyes were more bloodshot than normal and his skin

was ghostly, especially against the strands of snake-like black hair sticking against it. He reached a shaking hand out and laid it on his reflection, the cool, smooth surface of the mirror feeling good against his feverish fingers. He almost couldn't believe such a spectre as he existed.

After drying himself off and tossing on some clothes, Vincent walked the three steps from his bathroom to his front door, grabbing his jacket on the way. Something felt weird in its pocket, smacking him in the hip as he tried to throw the garment over his arm. At first he thought maybe he'd left a spare clip of ammo or something in it but as he reached inside the pocket, his fingers closed around a very flat, inch-wide tablet. One side was all over with circuitry. The other side was a round speaker, the size of a five gil coin. Vincent turned the tiny object over and over in his hand, a frown slowly spreading across his fine features.

"A bug."

Throwing his jacket aside, he immediately dropped the device to the floor and smashed it to pieces beneath his shoe. Then he checked his Magnum and tucked it into his pants, walking quickly to his closet and pulling out a trench coat. He pulled it on calmly, flipping the collar down and loading the pockets with ammo. Finally, moving cool but quick, he withdrew a Barrett M82A1 rifle from the darker confines, gave it a once over with expert hands, and tucked it into his coat.

Without a word of banter, without a single glance at his room, he was suddenly out the door and creeping downstairs.

Face a mask of emotionless stone, Vincent exited his apartment building from the side, coming out in one of Wutai's innumerable allies. Dark wetness spread to his left and right, humidity smacking him roughly upside the head, sending the sweat soaking through his clothes. Melding with the shadows, he made his way towards the street, stepping softly to avoid rippling the puddles of anonymous liquid laying pooled in the cracked pavement. The street before his building was deserted, silent, just as it should be at four in the morning. He stood stock still just inside the confines of the alley shadows, looking out with narrowed eyes, one hand fingering the handle of his gun. The night buzzed all around him, pressed in on him. He didn't have any idea what he was looking for, what he expected to see. That is he didn't until he actually saw it.

A sleek black Cadillac, amazingly enough the same that had picked him up after he'd offed Tito Verne and his men earlier that evening. It glided down the street like a silent black panther, its windows tinted, its occupants unknown. It slid to an arrogant halt just across the street from his building and Vincent watched it in sickened anticipation. It remained parked there for a long time and the man began to tire of standing after a while, the sweat rolling off and dampening every part of him till it felt like he'd never be dry and comfortable again. Just when he thought he could bear it no longer, the left passenger window slid down halfway and he was able to see inside somewhat. With the limited light and the distance between them, Vincent couldn't make too much out. But he saw clearly the back of the driver's head. White hair. He recognized him as a guy named Smith, Zawa's own chauffeur. Was Zawa there himself? Had he come personally to shoot down his little raven?

Vincent pulled out his rifle, raising the scope to his eye. Through the cross hairs he saw someone raising something of his own out of the window of the caddy. A goddamned rocket launcher. They had it pointed right at his apartment window. Thinking fast and licking his lips, Vincent aimed for the barely visible top of the driver's head and pulled the trigger, just as the man inside the car did the same. All in the same instant, the world turned to hell. The top of Smith's head was peeled off like the cap of a beer bottle, flying forward and splattering on the front windshield in a spray of thick red. At the same time, a plume of smoke poured out the barrel of the rocket launcher followed by a stream of sparks that lit the night brilliantly. In the glow, through the magnification of the scope, Vincent saw Mars, Zawa's personal bodyguard behind the weapon. Before he had time to even mutter an oath of surprise, the missile shot out of the launcher and screamed towards the building, striking with an impact that shattered the night and threatened to send every star in heaven raining down around his head. But Vincent didn't wait around for the shower. Returning his rifle to his coat, he took off running at full speed, an explosion of cement, glass, and steel raging around him. The entire apartment building burned and the wretched occupants streamed out the doors, screaming and swearing and shaking their fists as their faces were lit up red by the roar of the new fire.

Vincent only hazarded a quick glance at the black smoke billowing up from his former home. It stood stark and ugly against the dark blue sky, lit orange in places by the blaze. So Zawa knows, he thought to himself numbly, Zawa knows because of me and that damned wire.

He had to get to Keen.

In the distance he heard the screech of tires and redoubled his efforts, shooting down the sidewalks of the dark neighborhood like an uncaged demon. He had his Magnum gripped in his hand, it was a blur of silver as he pumped his arms and ran. Streetlights, mailboxes, payphones and the mocking, gaping faces of buildings flashed by him as he steered his way to old North East. He had to get to Keen.

Selfish, Vincent, selfish. I don't know why you turned out this way. Your mother and I gave you everything, so much more than we ever had. The best clothes, the best school, everything anyone could ever want. And what did we ask in return?

Only that you grow up and make something of yourself. I don't understand you. We don't understand you. Why can't you act like a human being? Like a son of the aristocracy?

It was a spiel he'd gotten from his father a lot when he was younger. He was selfish. He was starting to believe that now. *It would take so little to make us happy. I've had to work my entire life to gain acceptance by the Kisaragi. And now it's starting to get a little easier. With their influence, the jobs are rolling in. But to keep that we need to get you in there! Go to Godo, Vincent, join the army! He can get you in as an officer! That's all your mother and I have ever asked of you. Please, don't be selfish, do this for us. . .*

As he ran the noise of the fire died away. Glancing back he saw the skies lit up a brilliant red and the perfect black of the smoke blotted out the light of heaven. The night sky was so gorgeous, a tapestry of blue velvet punched at intervals by the divine white light of stars. But the fire roared up into it, and hell overpowered heaven, taking control of the sky. Vincent didn't know if the Cadillac was following him or not. He had no clue if he'd been seen when he'd taken out the driver. He only knew that his short span of employment for Tetsuo Zawa was over. And so was his life.

They would kill him, Vincent had no doubts about that. Even if he hadn't just blown off Zawa's chauffeur's head, he was still a traitor who'd withheld information, who'd known of Keen's betrayal and not acted on it. The judge's signature was on his death warrant. His neck was in the noose. He wondered briefly when they'd planted the bug on him and how long he'd had the device in his pocket. It didn't really matter. Wondering was useless. There was nothing to do now but wait for that bullet that would still his heart. It was a queer thought, that. The fact that there was a bullet, or a knife somewhere right then that would soon kill him. An emotionless piece of metal now sitting on a shelf, or in someone's pocket or waiting in the chamber of a gun. A queerer thought was the fact that Vincent was now seemingly seeking it out. He was running to Keen's.

A wooden sign flashed by his eyes, a battered board nailed into a brick wall. Old North East, it read in cracked and running paint. Some idiot had written "Abandon all hope, Ye who enter here" beneath the name. Looking over his shoulder, Vincent saw the fire was only a dim orange glow in the sky now, a nearly invisible imperfection in the blue. Everything he owned, every measly possession, was burning in the blaze. The only pictures he had of his parents were curling and turning to ash amidst the inferno. But it didn't matter. He was going to die anyway. No one escaped the wrath of Zawa, no one. And he was going to die.

Keen's apartment building loomed in the distance, a grey featureless structure just like every other one in old North East. The windows of the top two floors were hidden by boards, mildew ran black down its sides, it was a generally ugly piece of architecture. Vincent slowed his gait as he approached it, breathing hard, blinking sweat from his eyes. His right hand moved to grip the cold steel of his gun. He ran his fingers over the pebbled handle texture, taking a deep breath through his nose. His head was pounding for no apparent reason. Ducking into an alley only a block down from the building, he leaned heavily against the wall there, trying to catch his breath, trying to get the ache in his head to subside. He listened to the noises all around him; distant cars, distant sirens, distant shouts came from the far away fire. A dog barked in a nearby yard, a radio blared jazz a few buildings down. It was almost peaceful out. Almost dawn.

Why was he here? He could duck out, buy passage to out of the city, take advantage of his early discovery of the wire. Instead he was about to enter the wasps' nest to save a friend who was probably already dead and whom he couldn't deliver from his inevitable fate anyways. Was it for loyalty? Was that it? Gods, he didn't know. Keen deserved all this. Vincent himself deserved it for not revealing to Zawa what he knew. Why then was he here? Why?

He supposed it was because he had no where else to be.

He would face his fate dead on. And spit in the devil's eye. He didn't mind dying. He minded the possibility that he'd have to face his parents again in the here after. They'd scold him for wasting the life they'd worked so hard to give him. But oh well. He supposed they'd gotten themselves killed just to spite him, perhaps knowing somehow that his own time alive was drawing to a close. They couldn't let their son escape that easily. They'd go ahead of him and warm up the fires of hell. Movements careful and muffled, his form like a living, breathing shadow, Vincent stepped slowly from the alley, his hand wrapped about the reassuring handle of his Magnum. It all seemed now like a simple matter of how many people he would take with him to meet his folks.

It was a quick walk down the sidewalk to the apartment building. Vincent noticed one of Zawa's caddy's parked out front. They'd even stuck a coin in the meter. A quick inspection showed the car to be empty, so Vincent knelt down and neatly slashed the tires. As he was rising from his stoop, the glimmer of another vehicle parked a few blocks down, hidden in the shadows between two buildings, caught his eye. The black Cadillac from before. It must have taken a different way there and not passed Vincent up. This just wasn't working out well. They'd know he was coming.

"This is suicide. . ." he mumbled to himself, gripping the handle of his gun tighter. But for some reason, it didn't matter. The thought of fleeing right then was disgusting, it made him want to retch. He had no idea why, but he immediately began making for the front door of Keen's apartment building. He opened the sticky door slowly, pistol arm held out rigid before him.

Keen's building was infinitely nicer than his. Parts of old North East were rather upper-middle class in character and this

neighborhood was of that disposition. The white walls of the hallway were freshly painted, the aroma of it tickled his nose. There wasn't the scuttle and scurry of rats and roaches that he was used to hearing, nor were there the occasional screams and gunshots. It was nice inside. A baby cried in the distance. The sound made his eyes open wide. A family lived there. Moving his booted feet soundlessly over the newly-polished planks of the floor, Vincent walked the length of the hall towards the stairwell at the very end. He paused once there, and listened intently again to the night. Silence. Peace. But they were lies, he knew for a fact that Zawa's men were there. Vincent saw his hands trembling around his gun and scolded himself. Damned coward, he cursed mentally, A Shinra Turk wouldn't be nervous. A Shinra Turk would put all personal issues aside and concentrate solely on the job at hand. Worrying about dying is a personal issue. Stop thinking about it already.

The door to the stairwell opened without a sound and Vincent leapt inside, brandishing his gun in all directions, nearly blinded by the sudden light that met his eyes. Once he was certain it was safe to do so, he calmed down. The cold, echoing stairwell was empty. The lights were on, were obviously left on all night, but there was no one there. However he kept his guard up as he ascended, eyes narrowed ferociously.

The second floor of the apartment building was every bit as nice as the first. And every bit as empty. Where were the hit men? Where the hell was Keen? If he was going to die, he wanted to hurry and get it over with, the anticipation was giving him a headache. Features beginning to give away his irritation, Vincent walked rather quickly down the hallway towards Keen's room at the very end. He was itching to shoot something.

Click.

The noise was very loud in the still air. It was sharp, metallic, lethal. It was the sound of a gun being cocked. Vincent threw himself to the ground just as a flurry of rounds whizzed over his head. They were being fired from an open doorway only ten feet away, the flash of a pistol going off revealed the gunman's location easily. Vincent rolled forward, returning a few shots of his own, knowing he'd feel hot lead in his flesh any instant. There was no cover and no where to go. He'd failed so soon.

"Vincent!"

Keen's voice bellowed his name like a prayer and he hazarded a single look towards its source. Keen had opened the apartment door right beside him just a fraction of an inch and had his eye pressed against the crack. He threw the door opened wide and Vincent flung himself inside, a snapping mad line of bullets nipping at his heels. Keen closed the door with a crash and sealed the deadbolt, backing away from it and swallowing hard. Looking uncharacteristically perturbed, Vincent picked himself off the carpet of the apartment he now found himself in and looked around, breathing quickly, immediately reloading his gun.

"I'm sorry, but I never got around to ordering that pizza."

Keen grinned weakly, clapping his friend on the back. Vincent shot him an uninterpretable stare then shrugged, clicking the clip of ammo neatly into place.

"They had me bugged," he remarked, walking quickly towards the nearest window and looking out. Keen nodded, taking the room's other window.

"I heard an explosion, got up and looked outside. I saw them pulling up. Zawa, Nengasai, and two others. I figured unless they'd heard I had free porn and wanted in on the action, they were here to kill me. So I appropriated Mr. Norton's apartment here and waited for the bastards to come up the stairs, hoping to surprise 'em. But they wanted me to see 'em first, I'm sure of it. I don't know why but they did or they wouldn't have been so sloppy with their entrance. Anyway, they came up here with a couple of frigging sub machine guns so I knew I had no chance of cracking open the door there and popping shots off at them with my piddly little 10mm. They've been in my place, waiting to make their move. And then you showed up. Are you okay?"

Vincent nodded, eyeing the shut door in apprehension.

"That explosion came from my apartment. They blew it up. I managed to get out in time and then made my way here. I got Smith but it was Mars, you know, that big guy with the scars, who took my place out. They're here too, I saw their car."

"But why are *you* here, Vincent?" Keen asked the question softly, looking at his friend in the dim moonlight. Vincent shifted uncomfortably, fidgeting with his gun.

"That's a stupid question, Keen. You know why."

"I'm not sure I do. Since the day I met you four months ago, you've acted as though you didn't give a damn for anyone, not even yourself. Why then are you here tonight? You could have headed straight for the docks after fleeing Mars. But you came here, into the heart of the madness. What's up?"

Vincent turned and looked outside, into the dirty, humid sky. The stars winked at him weakly, asking the same question. What was up with Vincent Valentine?

"You're a comrade," he answered stiffly, "I watch your back, you watch mine."

"There's another word for that you know," Keen said lowly, "It's called a friend."

Vincent shrugged, uncomfortable with the conversation. He didn't like having so much attention on himself. "Whatever

you want to label it, Keen, "he said dismissively, "If it makes you feel better to hear it, then fine. I'm here because you're my friend. Probably the only one of Zawa's bastards who's every condescended to talk with me."

"Heh, you're human after all. I suspected as much, "Keen said with a brief smile, "Friends for real now then? You'll tell me about yourself? Actually listen to me when I talk?"

"I always did listen. And I looked out for you, I warned you this evening about Zawa. Don't say I haven't acted like a friend."

"You haven't acted like a friend. You've acted like a comrade. Ha, don't worry, Vincent. It seems to me you haven't spent a very large portion of your life concentrating on learning how to be friendly. I'll have to teach you a trick or two. It isn't hard once you get started."

"I wouldn't worry too much about the lessons. I doubt there's much time for them."

"Hmph." Keen looked to the door, shifting his gun around in his hands. It seemed clear outside the windows, but they *were* on the second floor. The apartment door protecting them from the hallway however was nothing but flimsy particle board. He was surprised Zawa hadn't blasted his way inside already.

"Do we wait here for them to make their move?" Vincent asked coolly. Keen shrugged, helpless, and leaned back against the wall.

"We can't afford to play anyway but defensively. I want to stay alive long enough to go to Eddie's party tomorrow. And you're coming."

Vincent didn't even bother arguing such an absurd statement. He felt strange, waiting there for death, for life, for whatever would happen. Waiting there with a friend. Gods, it was weird to use that word. But it seemed the mystery had been solved. He'd come here to help a friend. A strange thing for him to admit to himself but it was true. He just hadn't recognized such an unselfish act. He shot a quick glance to Keen. The man looked rather calm, standing there with his arms folded across his chest, jiggling his gun and staring stoically at the door.

"I hope my old man appreciates this. . . "he mumbled, smiling slightly. Then, though the situation was dire and uncertain, their fates all but sealed, for the first time in a few months, Vincent laughed.

~*~

"Mr. Zawa, sir, Valentine is here."

At the words, Zawa frowned so hard his eyes squeezed shut.

"Did my little raven fly into Keen's nest then? That is unfortunate."

Mars cleared his throat, wishing his boss would cut it with the metaphors. "Yes, sir."

Zawa stood from the swivel chair he'd been perched in and began pacing the length of Keen's small apartment. The lights were off, the only illumination was a blue-tinted one from the television, where a really bad porno flick had been left on to play itself out. Mars' eye kept straying towards it. Arms crossed close around his chest, Zawa gave his employee a disgusted glance. And then he sighed, a soft, almost sad sigh that made Mars look up, curious.

"Sir?"

"I wanted him dead, Mars, "Zawa said viciously, turned around to face the man, nearly snarling his words, "I wanted him dead quick, easy, no fuss. Why couldn't you manage that?"

"He must've known we were comin'!" Mars stuttered, taking a step back, "I didn't think it was such a great idea planting the bug in the pocket of his fuckin' coat but you didn't give me very much time to arrange anything else, sir."

For a moment, Zawa looked like he'd rip the man's head clean from his neck and dunk it in a trashcan. But the storm clouds suddenly parted and his features calmed. "You're right, of course, Mars, I apologize. Still, this only. . . complicates things."

Mars scratched at his hairline then stuck his hands in his pockets, examining Zawa's profile once his boss had turned to stare off into the empty air. His gaze lingered there, brows furrowing together in confusion. His boss was acting really weird about this whole thing. Could it be that he felt more than just professionally betrayed by Valentine's actions? Could this sadness in his voice be from a feeling of personal betrayal? Gods above, that was bizarre. Mars didn't know much about Vincent Valentine but he did know just from talking with some of the boys down at the pool hall that evening that he'd only been with the organization a few months and kept more or less to himself. Word was that Zawa fancied him, gave him choice assignments as though to test his mettle, but had the yakuza boss really put that much stock into the man?

"Sir?" he began hesitantly, "What made you call me earlier? What made you think Valentine knew?"

Zawa didn't answer for a moment.

"He said he felt respected working for me, Mars. And I knew he was lying. I felt the contempt in his voice. God dammit, why couldn't you have just killed him?"

This answer didn't help Mars in figuring his boss out at all. But it didn't really matter, he shoved his questions from his mind and blinked a few times, trying to settle into action mode.

"Well, sir, we do have Keen Vera isolated as you planned. Since you insist upon carrying this out tonight, we should be able to take him out quickly and quietly without incriminating ourselves. I have boys posted at the exits of the building and then a sniper across the street. Pitiful residents here are too scared to come outta their apartments. They heard the gunshots and know enough to leave it alone. We're only waiting on your word, sir."

Zawa picked a framed photograph up from Keen's desk and ran his eyes over it, licking his lips. "This is father," he said to Mars and tossed the picture to him, "He'll die tomorrow. We'll take care of all this thoroughly, I don't want any loose ends hanging around that my fingernails can get snagged on. We plug the leak from the inside and then we go for Manook. This all ends. That smug bastard already took Toshitomo from me, he won't have anything else. I won't let him get a hold of Wutai. I've been boss of this god-forsaken city for twenty years, it isn't going to end because of one man's pathetic past. This is such a fucking blow. I'd like to tear Keen Vera's head off, he's lost me my most important informant and placed him into the hands of the only man who can even come close to threatening me in this city."

"Yes, Mr. Zawa," Mars replied stoically, quickly removing the photo from the frame and sticking it in his pocket. He nabbed Keen's address book too.

"Perhaps I should be thankful," Zawa muttered, crossing his arms and eyeing the door, "Maybe this is what I needed to make me realize that Manook is a threat." Sighing quietly, he suddenly withdrew a pistol from his jacket and checked the ammo. "But that's thought fodder for tomorrow. Right now we take care of the traitors. Eh, Nengasai?"

The man spoken to was short, skinny, and had been sitting in the shadows, perched upon the arm of the couch. He stood and stepped forward, nodding to his boss, blue eyes glittering through skin that seemed too yellow. "That's right, Mr. Zawa," he answered, adjusting his hold on the black bag in his hand, "Traitors."

"Do you have any suggestions?"

Nengasai pushed his long, wiry black hair back behind his ears and shrugged. "I'm not creative, sir. I only do what is told of me."

"Perhaps that is why I am ruler of this city," Zawa said with a mirthless chuckle, "I am the creative one. Traitors should be made to suffer. Treachery is a crime, is worse than murder, worse than torture. It's born of cowardice, deceit, and hypocrisy. I hate traitors."

Zawa eyed his gun viciously, twisting the weapon in his hand, allowing it to glimmer beautifully in the flickering tv light. "Perhaps my little raven wouldn't have made such a fine Turk after all," he said softly, "He's come back to help a friend. Such personal trifles have no place in this world. You have to be cold, you have to be hard. You must protect yourself above anyone else. Hmph. Keen could have used such advice. They both could have. Come along, Mars, Nengasai. Let's get this over with."

Mars eyed his boss as he stepped from the apartment, puzzled at his solemnity. It isn't so terrible, Zawa, he thought darkly, You could just not kill them if the thought of doing so makes you feel so down. Traitors, yeah, but they both had their reasons: Family and friendship. Seems nothin' is sacred in Wutai.

Mars followed Zawa out of the room and into the hallway. After a moment or two, Nengasai crept from the concealing shadows, clutching his shiny leather black bag convulsively, then ran quickly after them like an eager little boy. The man loved his work.

~*~

"Vincent."

"Hmm?"

"Do you wanna go to Kalm with me?"

The apartment was quiet, dark. Each man still stood cautious guard at the windows, guns drawn, nerves on edge. The attack could come at any time. Every second that passed without a move from Zawa and his men was a miracle. Vincent looked at Keen, expressionless.

"Yeah," he said, "Sounds good."

"I figure if we get outta here, we can go nab my old man and take off. Never look back. Be nice to get outta this stink hole."

Vincent nodded, not really listening. He was peering off into the blackness outside the window, scanning the roofs of the building's around them, looking for threats. Keen was more a paper pusher than a skilled gunman, the thought of snipers hadn't even occurred to him. However, it was nearly all Vincent could think about.

"I have an aunt that lives in Kalm," Keen went on, oblivious, "My pop's sister. She still sends me five gil on my birthday and Christmas. Still thinks I'm a nine year old, I guess. Nice old lady though, she's always telling my old man he can go

retire up there with her anytime he's ready. I was thinking we could stay with her for a while, till we get some money together, ya know?"

Keen looked to his friend for confirmation but Vincent was focusing on something else, something drifting in the air, muffled and soft. *Footsteps*. Keen noticed he'd turned around to stare at the door and jerked his own head about and swallowed hard. The footsteps, the owner's feet clapped in dress shoes that clacked against the hard wood flooring of the hallway outside, stopped just before the door. A suit jacket rustled, then two more pairs of feet approached and stopped. There was sudden silence. Vincent and Keen looked at each other, guns raised.

"Gentlemen."

It was Zawa's voice. Pleasant and business-like in tone.

"I'm sure you both know why I'm here. It was brought to my attention tonight that Mr. Keen Vera has leaked very valuable information on a certain client of mine to Mr. Jeffrey Manook." Zawa kept his voice low, almost a whisper. The other tenants in the apartment building were cowering in their rooms, listening to every word and he knew it. Nengasai had cut the phone cords and his presence was enough to keep the men and women inside and out of his way. Yet he kept his words quiet, to avoid giving the listening people any incriminating evidence as to just who he was.

"I run a business, gentlemen. You are both my employees. However you have lied to me, you have betrayed me, and you have attempted to undermine me. So now, as your superior, I must terminate your employment in my organization. Mr. Vera, I understand quite well why you've done what you've done and I'm sure you expect me to believe you had no choice in the matter. However, you did have a choice. There is always a choice. And you made the wrong one. Now you have to pay for your actions. Little raven, I was setting you up for great things. You had so much potential. Skilled and heartless. You could have been the best. But you've acted unprofessionally and revealed a weakness. There is no room in the yakuza for weakness." There was steel in Zawa's voice, each word like a blade. The empty hallway echoed around him, the bare floor and walls making his whispers into shouts.

"I'm sure you've anticipated what's coming next." Zawa half-lowered his eyelids, staring at the blank door before him with an unwavering stare. "One of you will die in this room, one of you will come with me. Mr. Nengasai is here, waiting to escort that man into death. However the road he leads him down shall be a long one. An example needs to be made to Manook. A graphic example of what happens to men who cross me."

Behind the door, inside the apartment, Vincent and Keen's faces were frozen. Nengasai. Everyone who worked for Zawa knew that name. It was like a curse too horrible to utter. To die in Nengasai's hands was to die a thousand deaths, each more horrible, more tortuous than the last. Vincent snapped himself out of the reverie the name had put him into. He'd listened to Zawa's self-indulgent speech emotionlessly until the end. His brain was still humming, trying to find a way they could escape the situation. But Nengasai. . . those three syllables were more a death sentence than anything else he'd heard.

Outside, Zawa gave Mars a glance. The beefy man was listening intently to a small speaker attached to his right ear. He whispered a few inaudible words into the microphone that sprang down around his face from it, then nodded to his boss. Which one? he mouthed silently. Zawa closed his eyes, sighing quietly. After a moment, he held up one hand with his middle and forefingers raised. They made a V.

~*~

Keen stared at nothing. The blackness all around him seemed to seep into his eyes, into his brain, freezing his thoughts, his actions as though he was already dead. The sudden silence from behind the door had him sweating. Licking his lips, fingers trembling around the handle of his gun, he shot a quick glance over towards Vincent. The man seemed so calm, so peaceful. Why? How was he able to keep so cool when they were going to die?

He doesn't care what happens because he's done his best to help you. If nothing else, he can die in peace.

The inner voice answered him so matter-of-fact that Keen blinked twice, suddenly turning around as though something had called to him. Ignoring the words, he remained still, on his knees, staring at Vincent. His friend finally looked at him, shrugging. And then Keen lunged.

"Watch out!"

The sniper fired only seconds after Mars gave him the order. Vincent's dark head had been almost perfectly framed in the window, an amateurish mistake but one the gunman didn't mind at all. He cursed loudly, making Mars wince on the other end of the earpiece as Keen suddenly leapt up and knocked his target aside. They were both out of his view before he could reload.

Vincent swore as his friend knocked into him, realizing what was happening with a painful snap. Keen gave a strangled cry as a bullet ripped into his back. He collapsed on top of his friend, gasping as waves of pain tore through him.

"Keen!"

Though bursts of shouting had suddenly broken out on the other side of the apartment door, Vincent ignored them, panic pushing into his brown eyes. He tore off his coat and pressed the black fabric into the his friend's wound, pushing hard, trying to keep all the warm life from spilling out onto the carpet.

"You idiot!" he hissed, pressing hard, making Keen cry out, "You damned stupid idiot! Why did you do that?"

Gritting his teeth, clenching his fists, Keen shook his head and gasped. "I don't know," he sputtered, "I don't know. Vincent, forget about me and run. Just get. . . just get the hell outta here before Zawa comes."

Vincent frowned deeply as the blood soaked through his balled up coat and dampened his hands. He redoubled the garment and pressed harder, blind and desperate in his attempt to keep his friend alive.

"Mr. Zawa, Takashi said Vera was hit," Mars reported, pressing the earpiece close as the sniper spoke, "Fuck this, sir. Let's ice 'em both before anything else goes wrong."

Mars looked at his boss expectantly while Nengasai shuffled in the background. Zawa stared at the blank door, the wood only an inch or two from his face. A growl ripped from his throat.

"Fine then, my little raven," he rumbled darkly, "I give up trying to spare you the pain of this. If you wish to suffer alongside your friend, so be it. Nengasai, it seems you'll have two traitors to play with."

Vincent heard the low words. He stared at Keen and shook his head fiercely, hands still pressed on the ever dampening coat. "They're not going to get you, Keen," he muttered, eyes moving from the door to his friend's face, "They're not going to."

"It doesn't matter, Vincent. . ."

Keen's voice was soft, his blue eyes clear. He threw his friend a reassuring grin. "Neither of us matter. We're just two of many." He looked away, hand straying towards his bullet wound. "This is my fault, this is all my fault. I never should have told you what I did. That was selfish of me. I just thought that maybe you'd open up a bit if I trusted you with that kinda secret. I thought I was putting myself in danger telling it to ya. But no, it was friggin' selfish of me. I was putting you in danger."

"I'm glad you told me," Vincent answered, listening to guns being drawn on the other side of the door, "I'm glad I came back here, glad I didn't run for the docks like a coward. I'm just sorry I was such a failure."

"Mick was right. . ." He looked down as Keen whispered the words, a ghostly smile flitting across his lips. "It's really amazing how much clearer everything becomes when you have a bullet hole in you. What you told me Mick said, he was right. Johnny, Mick, Tito Verne, you, me, Smith, Mars, Manook, everyone. We're all worms. Dammit, Vincent, why's it gotta be like that?" Keen's breathing quickened as he heard Zawa bark orders to Mars. He heard Nengasai's sadistic giggling and began to physically tremble. "I wanted to live in Kalm," he whispered, "I wanted to take my father there."

"Go there now, Keen."

He looked up and saw Vincent on his knees, bloody hands wrapped around the grip of his Magnum. The gun was in his face, unwavering. "I won't let Nengasai get you," he said calmly, cocking the weapon with his thumb, "I can give you that. Get out of this god damned city, away from the hierarchy."

Keen watched the gun barrel quietly. Then he refocused his vision and looked up into Vincent's stoic face, straight into his eyes. He smiled. And his life ended in a loud shot and a flash of red.

"We're not worms. You can be anything you want to be now, Keen. Go anywhere you want. And I'll avenge what you were, whatever it was. Because we're not that insignificant, we can't be. We're all kings because we can all grant freedom. Freedom at the cost of a single bullet. You're free, Keen. And I'll avenge you."

Vincent stood suddenly, pistol in one hand, his rifle in the other. He backed into the furthest corner of the room, allowing his black-garbed body to melt into the shadows. His wild hair fell over his face but he could feel his pale throat exposed to the light. He would grow his hair out longer with his jacket and his overcoat ruined. He would make himself a more efficient killer. Gunshots resounded in the air as Zawa and Mars blew away the locks on the apartment door. The wood splintered, bullets blew holes in the walls. Chips of the door flew forward into his face, cut into his brow but he didn't feel them, didn't flinch. His hands only closed further around his weapons, knuckles whitening, veins sticking up stark through his pale skin. Keen lay there on the floor, still, quiet. Vincent looked at him calmly, so at peace with it all he felt nearly sleepy. Eighteen years was long enough, wasn't it? Who wanted to live longer than eighteen years? Who wanted to be a worm all his life, controlled by kings? Better to die young in a desperate attempt to fight back against tyranny than to live a long, subservient life under another man's boot heel.

A heavy foot kicked into the apartment door, sending the bullet-riddled slab of wood rocketing forward to crash into the opposite wall. After a moment, Mars stepped into the room, an assault rifle poised in his hands. Vincent watched him, looked right into his eyes. In the corners of his vision, he saw Nengasai and Zawa just behind him. Nengasai twirled a small stiletto. The yakuza boss popped a fresh clip into his gun.

"My little raven. . ." he muttered, pushing Mars aside, squinting to see Vincent's form through the shadows he'd cloaked himself in, "Sayonara."

He stood with his gun aimed squarely at Vincent's head for a moment and merely stared, arm wavering. As though he

couldn't quite bring himself to do the deed, when he did fire, the shot was off, hitting the man squarely in his left shoulder. Vincent staggered backwards beneath the blow, spitting curses, yet he stayed on his feet and raised his own two weapons, not a single tremble in his arms.

"No, Mr. Zawa," he said quietly, "I'm not your 'little raven'. My name is Vincent Valentine. I was a worm. You were the master. Well the king is dead now. Long live the king."

Gunshots and smoke choked the stifling air of the apartment. Outside, oblivious to it all, the sun began to rise on another day. The humans below could classify themselves any way they wanted. When all was said and done, the sun was lord over them all.

~*~

The room throbbed under the grief it held. Arthur thought the setup of the place was rather nice, though the room was tacky as hell. Wood-paneled walls, carpet the same shade of green as three day old vomit, and a nasty, tomb-like musty smell, as though the place wasn't exposed to the lungs of the living that often. Yet, how nice could he expect a funeral parlor to be? If it was too pleasant, visitors might start getting the urge to come back too soon.

Thirty or so mourners crowded the small viewing room. Closed double coffins dominated one half, people crying and conversing took up the other. Arthur and his wife moved among them, consoling some, making casual chat with others. They'd been closest to the dead couple so they felt it was their place to keep the funeral-goers entertained. It was wearying work. Arthur would have preferred to curl up in one of the stalls in the bathroom, stick his head in the flap of his jacket and cry uncontrollably.

"Did you ever get a hold of him?" Arthur looked over his shoulder. He'd been taking a breather at the rear of the room, leaning hard against the back wall and trying to keep his eyes from straying towards the two coffins. One of his dead brother-in-law's business partners stared back at him sourly. He nodded his head.

"I called their son last night. He said he'd be here."

"Good. I wonder if he knows how in debt his parents were. They can't just die and escape it, someone has to pay."

"Do you really think this is the place to approach him about it?" Arthur asked, leaning close to the man's unpleasant face. The deceased couple had been quite wealthy at one time, had nearly wormed their way into the aristocracy. But because of their son, they'd fallen from grace. Vincent had insulted young mayor Godo Kisaragi to his face, right before refusing to join the city's army. In an attempt to win back Kisaragi's favor, his parents had disowned him, threw him from home at the age of fifteen, but Godo wasn't about to forgive such a travesty. The couple had lived these last three years in agony, watching business trickle away, watching their bank accounts drain. But they hadn't been able to accept it. They'd maintained their extravagant lifestyle, keeping up an egotistical front, as though nothing had happened, as though they hadn't been snubbed, forgotten, and left as the dogs of society. Someone had to pay for those delusions now. The debts didn't die with the debtors.

"What does he do?"

"What?" Arthur pulled himself out of his thoughts and looked questioningly at the man.

"I said what does he do now? Their son?"

Arthur shrugged, sticking his hands in the pockets of his dress slacks, "I'm not sure. He was always a good marksman, that's why Mayor Godo wanted him so badly for the army. I think he does something with guns now. I don't know how he supports himself, he's never once come to me for money though I've offered it a million times. He has a lot of his parents' stubborn pride. He'd starve before he took a handout."

"His parents were idiots." The businessman leaned back against the same wall as Arthur and surveyed the mourners with hooded eyes. This whole funeral atmosphere was making him uncomfortable. Yet he knew it was the best place to confront the dead couples' son. The man had heard he was a hard fellow to get a hold of. He'd been living on his own since he was fifteen, he was doubtlessly good at disappearing into the city when he didn't want to be bothered. And with the size of his parent's debt, he'd probably be attempting to do just such a thing very soon.

An hour passed slowly as the man leaned against the wall. Grieving people came and went, he must have watched fifty different ways to wear the color black flit past his eyes. Arthur had moved off again after a moment to take up his hosting. Time passed and he'd yet to see the young man he was waiting for. The room grew hot and cramped as more people shoved into it. The actual funeral was going to start soon. Out of the corner of his eye he saw two of the funeral parlor's employees waiting in the hall to begin transporting the coffins outside. He ran his gaze over the things. They looked extravagant enough but they were cheap, as cheap as the old clothes the man and woman inside of them were wearing. Their life insurance had barely covered the cost of all this.

"I'm sorry, but I don't think he's going to show."

The man turned around and saw Arthur suddenly. His wife was at his side, her eyes puffy and exhausted. "He must have

gotten held up somewhere. Or maybe he decided they didn't deserve his presence. Not after what they did. But that's not like Vincent. I just don't know."

"Well, I suppose that's that, "the man said irritably, pushing himself up from the wall, "Do you have a number where I could reach him?"

"Yeah, sure."

Arthur pulled his wallet out and dug around in it, looking for that inch wide rectangle of notebook paper he kept all his numbers on. He felt a sudden tugging at the cuff of his jacket and shrugged it off petulantly. His wife tugged again and gave a little noise of surprise. "What is it?" he finally asked, snapping his tattered old wallet closed and glancing up. Her face was drawn and ghostly. Swallowing hard, he looked off to where she was gesturing. The businessman followed his gaze.

"Who the hell is that?" he asked, his lip curling up in disgust and unease.

"That's. . . "Arthur took half a step forward but froze as some emotion suddenly made him shiver. "That's their son, sir. That's Vincent."

Vincent entered the funeral parlor on unsteady feet. He didn't know where he was. He'd just started walking after leaving that apartment building. He'd thrown his spent weapons away in an alley and just started walking. Three different bullet holes emptied dark blood into his clothes. A knife slash was hidden in his scalp, red dripping off the ends of his hair. But it didn't hurt. Nothing really did. Everything was dark, everything was cold. The tips of his bare fingers trembled.

The bunched mourners parted before him as though he carried a plague, whispering among themselves, pointing out the trail of glistening crimson he left on the lacquered wooden floor as he walked. Vincent couldn't really hear them, the reverberations of all the shooting still echoed in his ears. The screaming still echoed there. He'd done things to Zawa and his men that he didn't even like to think about. He'd bashed the yakuza boss's head in with the butt of his rifle, hitting him again and again and again until he'd dropped the gun from sheer exhaustion. His actions were fuzzy to think upon now, like a black nightmare. He was awake now, wasn't he?

Awake, yeah. But still in a room of death.

The two coffins loomed huge in his sight. He kept walking towards them, knowing what they were, who was inside. People flanked his vision. But what were they? Just worms. He knew now the god awful truth. A far away voice called his name but he ignored it. Something else called much much louder.

He put a bloody hand on his father's coffin once he stood before it. The red smeared on the perfect white. Strange, he didn't feel sad that the old man was dead. Maybe just envious. How easy it must be to leave behind all your troubles for a wooden box. To sleep while time rolls on with all its struggle, all its strife on the outside of such warm walls. Well, his father and mother could have that shit, he didn't need it. He'd just killed a king, he didn't need protection from anything. He'd defied the reaper, he'd defied the touch of three bullets. Vincent could nearly feel the lead rolling around inside of him. It didn't hurt, he told himself it didn't hurt. Nothing did. Not the death of his parents, not the death of his one friend, everything was outside, nothing could get in. Behind his eyes it was icy cold and the hurt couldn't hope to melt it. That was fine with him. You couldn't hurt ice.

The sudden touch of a hand on his shoulder sent a shiver through him, yet he didn't turn around.

"Vincent, son, what's wrong? What the hell happened to ya?"

"Nothing. Nothing happened. I'm sorry I'm late." Arthur nearly gibbered at the words. He forcibly turned his nephew around and looked into his brown eyes, shocked by the deadness he saw there. "Go home, "he whispered, "If you're in trouble, call me later, all right?"

Vincent took his hand from the coffin and let it fall lifelessly to his side. "I'm going to Midgar, "he said softly, "I'm leaving today."

Arthur didn't know what to say. He stepped back and let Vincent push his way past him towards the exit of the wood-paneled room. The young man saw now that the entire place was like a coffin. Yet he felt no security behind these walls because he wasn't alone. There were these worms all around him. These insignificant people with their insignificant lives. His parents were dead but they hadn't mattered. No one mattered but the kings. The ones who granted freedom at the cost of a bullet.

The businessman watched the dead couple's son trudge by and tried to make himself approach the man. Vincent's legs even gave out for a moment and he fell to his knees, breathing hard and holding his wounded chest, right in front of him, yet he couldn't bring himself to utter a word. The businessman only watched him slowly pick himself up and continue on his way. As he left the room, it was as though a shroud of death had been lifted off the group of mourners, though the deaths they were mourning were still very much present, wrapped up in those warm wooden boxes.

The air outside the funeral home was choked with humidity. The morning was bright and luminous and hurt his eyes. Vincent pulled on a pair of shades and made his way for the docks. He wondered if President Shinra could make him a king.